

Interpreting the Female Providers in Qiuci from the Murals in the Kizil Grottoes

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ABSTRACT

The murals in the Kizil Grottoes are a witness to the two-way interaction between China and ancient India, ancient Persia, ancient Greece, and ancient Rome along the Silk Road during the Han and Tang dynasties. This exchange gradually formed the current appearance of the murals in the Kizil Grottoes. To interpret the female donors in the murals of the Kizil Grottoes, it is not only necessary to take a single mural as the starting point, but also to grasp the relationship between the mural and the cave from a macro perspective. By comparing the images, inscriptions, and historical documents on which the images are based, a more scientific and accurate explanation of the mural images can be obtained. Therefore, this article aims to use some female providers in the murals of the Kizil Grottoes as the starting point to provide a simple classification and overview of the mural images of female providers, explore the identity characteristics and humanistic pursuits behind women in Qiuci from a female perspective, and appreciate the artistic crystallization of female provider images under the combination of ancient Qiuci Chinese painters' skills and creativity.

Keywords: Kizil Grottoes murals, Qiuci females, Image of female providers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Qiuci (now around Kuqa), located at a key point on the Silk Road, is a prosperous town. The grottoes are the crown of Xinjiang, and the Kizil Grottoes undoubtedly occupy an important position. It is not only a necessary place for the exchange between the East and the West, but also the political center of the Tang Dynasty government's rule over the Western Regions and the convergence point of Chinese and Western economic and cultural integration. The Kizil Grottoes are located in Kizil Township, Baicheng County, Aksu Prefecture, Xinjiang. It is backed by the cliffs of Mingwutag Mountain and faces Queletag Mountain across the river. There are 349 existing grottoes, which archaeologists have divided into four zones based on their geographical location. Currently, there are 269 numbered grottoes and nearly 10,000 square meters of preserved murals. It is known as the "Second Dunhuang of China" and the "Ocean of

Buddhist Stories", and is an important cultural treasure on the Silk Road. [1]^{p114} In this article, the author selects some female providers murals in the Kizil Grottoes as the research object. From the perspective of the mural images themselves, based on the ancient history and culture of Qiuci, and combined with the mural inscriptions, the author conducts a comparative analysis. Finally, the author analyzes the female provider images artistically in different periods, and scientifically and accurately interprets the selected female donor mural images to interpret Qiuci females.

2. INITIAL STAGE (3RD TO 4TH CENTURY): BEING QUIET, ELEGANT, AND WISE

In the initial stage of the Kizil Grottoes, images of female providers had already appeared in the murals, mostly depicted at the bottom of the stone walls. ("Figure 1")



Figure 1 "Maitreya Bodhisattva and Heavenly Palace Music Performers" Cave 77, upper part of the outer wall of the left corridor.

a Image source: Mural Art in Xinjiang.

The proportion of the characters was small and mostly kneeling, reflecting that at that time, the status of female caretakers in the overall depiction of the murals was still relatively low. [2]^{p57} In the later stage of the initial stage, the emergence of the great statue caves marked the rapid development of Buddhist art in Qiuci. The representative great statue caves in the initial stage include 77, 47, and 48 caves (occupying 1/3 of the entire great statue caves in Kizil). The excavation and popularity of the great statue caves are related to the superior economic conditions, prosperous culture, and status of Qiuci as a major city in the Western Regions. The "Shui Jing Zhu" cites the "Shi Shi's Records of the Western Regions" to record: "There is a mountain two hundred li north to Quci. There are light and fire in the night, and smoke in the day. People acquire the anthracites in this mountain, and smelt the iron of this mountain to provide the use of thirty-six countries." [3]^{p56}

Cave 77 is the earliest large statue cave in the Kizil Grottoes. Most of the main chamber has collapsed, leaving only the left and right corridors and the rear chamber. The female providers are depicted on the upper outer wall of the left corridor. The painting "Maitreya Bodhisattva and Heavenly Palace Music Performers" depicts the scene of Maitreya Bodhisattva "leading the people in sky" playing music in a "beautiful scenery and wonderful music". This form was later named "heavenly palace music performers", which was an early form of celestial palace music performers and became the foundation for their diverse development.

The overall composition of the mural image is symmetrical, with a suitable density layout. The upper part features a honeysuckle decoration with a circular rafter head drawn below. The lower part of the image is a railing platform, symbolizing the

architecture of the heavenly palace. The forms of music performers vary greatly, with unique features such as holding musical instruments, offering dances, holding flower plates to scatter flowers, offering pendants, and holding lotus flowers for offerings. The interplay of movement and stillness creates a rhythmic and orderly beauty in the entire folk music image, with female folk music depicted on the far left.

The mural of the female providers' costume in Cave 77 of Kizil features typical Qiuci costumes on the exterior of the characters. The female music performer on the left wears floral accessories on her head, tied her hair with a bead belt, and two thick and long braids are draped over her shoulders according to the changes in the character's form. She wears oval bead belt earrings, necklaces, arm bracelets, etc., and two strands of curly hair are draped over her shoulders, with her eyes looking to the left. She wears a tight-fitting corset with exposed shoulders and waist. The corset is light and transparent, and the waistline is also highlighted more clearly, showing off the graceful figure. The color is blended in light gray, revealing the full breasts of the Qiuci woman. The thin waist contour is hooked with light yellow thread, reproducing the slender and graceful figure of the woman. The shoulders and silk straps are light green, running from top to bottom, adding a sense of simplicity and elegance to the picture. She extends her right arm downwards, holding a parrot in her hand, and tilts her left hand to her side, placing it in a "c" shape on her chest, painted it vividly. This has rich summarization ability and realistic mural art achievements, which are widely displayed in various aspects of the Kizil Grottoes mural images. ("Figure 2", "Figure 3")



Figure 2 "Maitreya Bodhisattva and Heavenly Palace Music Performers"(Partial) Cave 77, upper part of the outer wall of the left corridor.

a Image source: Mural Art in Xinjiang, China, Volume 1 Kizil Grottoes Murals/Compiled by the Xinjiang Mural Art Editorial Committee, China Urumqi: Xinjiang Fine Arts Photography Publishing House, 2015 edition, page36.

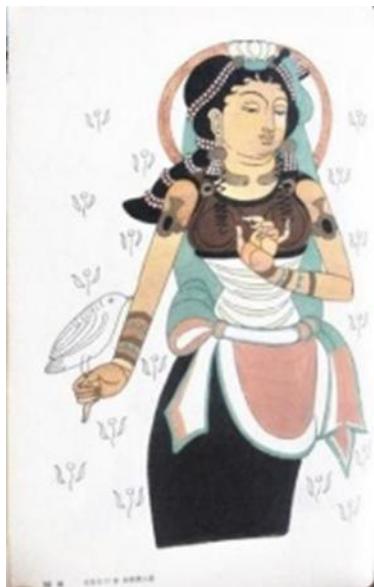


Figure 3 "Female Providers' Attire" (painted by Zhang Aihong), Cave 77, page 34.

a Image source: A Selection of the Murals in Kizil Grottoes: Garments painted by Zhang Aihong, Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2006 version.

The appearance of mural images of female providers during this period reflects to some extent the superior economic conditions and prosperous culture of Qiuci, which has elevated the social status of women in Qiuci. Their aesthetic tendencies dare to showcase the beauty of women's "curvaceous figures", conveying the bold charm and wise vitality of the Qiuci female group. The image of the female provider in the artist's works

has obvious heroic attributes. Using the Buddhist worldview and epistemology analysis, everything in the world is judged as "wisdom". Through this analysis, it is concluded that the ultimate emptiness of all things in the world is "wisdom", showing a calm, peaceful, and serene state after being filtered and precipitated by the flourishing culture. [5]³⁵

3. DEVELOPMENT STAGE (LATE 4TH TO 5TH CENTURY): BEING PURE, ELEGANT, AND INTROVERTED

The most important achievement during the development period is the formation of the central pillar cave. The mural paintings in the development stage are a typical form of art in the Qiuci Grottoes. Based on the performance of the mural paintings in the initial stage, the depiction of the murals is standardized and formed in all aspects, becoming increasingly mature. In addition, the musical and dance images that emerged in the development stage have expanded and increased in scale with the changes in the caves, and the styles of expression have become more diverse.

The two mural works in "Figure 4" are continuous, with rich content, simple composition, and clever layout. The columns are listed in the Buddha and heavenly palace music performers, which continues and sublimates the expression form of heavenly palace music performers in its early stage. On the concave convex shaped railing symbolizing the heavenly palace, the Buddha resides in the center. To the right of the Buddha is the Śakro devānām indrah, followed by a slingshot shaped bamboo basket, a dancing pendant, a flute performer, a prop holder, and a music performer holding a hanging object. On the left side of the Buddha are Brahma, a celestial person playing the horizontal flute, a celestial person twisting the waist and swinging the hips, a celestial person striking the waist drum, a celestial person holding objects for nourishment, and a celestial person dancing flower ropes. Some of the music performers look at each other from the side, with different expressions. The overall attire of the music performers simple and elegant, with images often using stone blue and reddish brown. The status of ancient women was lowly, but in the offerings of the Kizil murals, it seems unclear.



Figure 4 “Buddha and Heavenly Palace Music Performers” Cave 76, Upper Section of Right Wall in Main Chamber, Collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Berlin, Germany.

a Image source: Mural Art in Xinjiang, China, Volume 1 Kizil Grottoes Murals/Compiled by the Xinjiang Mural Art Editorial Committee, China Urumqi: Xinjiang Fine Arts Photography Publishing House, 2015 edition, pages 160-161.



Figure 5 “Buddha and Heavenly Palace Music Performers”(Part) Cave 76, Upper Section of Right Wall in Main Chamber, Collection of the Museum of India Art, Berlin, Germany.

a Image source: Mural Art in Xinjiang, China, Volume 1 Kizil Grottoes Murals/Compiled by the Xinjiang Mural Art Editorial Committee, China Urumqi: Xinjiang Fine Arts Photography Publishing House, 2015.8 edition, pages 164-165.

In “Figure 5”, on the left side of the picture, of this pair performers, the female performer plays the panpipes, holding large panpipes with both hands. Her eyes are slightly closed, and her head is tilted to the right, exuding a state of immersion in beautiful music. The contrast between the panpipes highlights the female's "S" shape and curvaceous beauty. On the right of the picture, there is a female performer with a bow shaped flute in her left armpit, a head with beads and flower temples, and a tight corset. Her posture is graceful, similar to the makeup of young female providers, but more delicate, highlighting the texture differences of the lines.

On the left side of the picture, the female performer is dressed in a light green outwear,

elegant and fresh, with a large garland on her head. Her left hand is on her hips, and her right hand is holding a silk cloth high. She looks back and communicates with the male geisha who plays waist drums through music and dance. The entire picture depicts the classic moment of music and dance blending vividly. On the right side of the picture, a woman is wearing a brown long coat with a white round neck. The overall color tone is calm and elegant. The artist also uses ink lines to outline the contours of the woman's breasts, revealing a full chest, flower temples on her head, and flowing silk, adding decorative fun to the picture. With a smile on her face, the performer looks back and makes her more charming, fully expressing the slender and graceful figure of women. The dynamic beauty of

agility, firm breasts are a symbol of healthy beauty, and the head light behind represents the noble identity of women. The softness of the female body and the expression of the character's charm are presented in this mural work, which is exquisite and unparalleled. The hair is elegant, and graceful.

Qiuci artists incorporate exaggerated shapes and colors into their creations, thus forming Qiuci's unique creative style, which endows Qiuci murals with decorative beauty, brings strong visual shock to viewers, and makes female offerings diverse and

rich in form. Whether in hair accessories or clothing, they give people a gentle and elegant aesthetic feeling. In addition, the Qiuci region is renowned for its flourishing music, and Xuanzang's "Records of the Western Regions of the Great Tang Dynasty" praised Qiuci as "skilled in orchestral music and particularly skilled in various countries". Historical records of Qiuci music are also considerable, leading to the continuous expansion of the number of musicians in the development period. [9]^{p34}("Figure 6")



Figure 6 "Buddha and Heavenly Palace Music Performers"(Part) Cave 76, Upper Section of Right Wall in Main Chamber, Collection of the Museum of Asia Art, Berlin, Germany.

a Image source: Mural Art in Xinjiang, China, Volume 1 Kizil Grottoes Murals/Compiled by the Xinjiang Mural Art Editorial Committee, China Urumqi: Xinjiang Fine Arts Photography Publishing House, 2015 edition, pages 168-169.

4. PROSPEROUS STAGE (6TH TO 7TH CENTURY): BEING GORGEOUS, ELEGANT, AND GRACEFUL

During the prosperous stage, grotto temples were scattered throughout Qiuci, and grottoes entered the peak stage of cave opening. More than 50% of the existing grottoes in Kizil were excavated during this period, highlighting the strong national strength, prosperous economy, and relatively stable society of ancient Qiuci during this stage. The mural themes and contents are more diverse, and the painting style inherits and develops the traditional Qiuci culture formed during the development period. The character forms have shown typical Qiuci style and have been fully developed.

There is still a part of the inscription left in Cave 205, which reads: Kuchi [mahā(de)[vyā

svara(m)pra[bh]ā... lkucimahar[a](ja)... interpreted as: portrait of Princess Svaya(m)pa(bh)a of Qiuci, portrait of the King of Qiuci... The female provider on the left is the name of Princess Svaya (m) pa (bh) a of Qiuci, whose name is located on the left side of the front wall. This mural is a well-preserved provider portrait of the King of Qiuci, Totika, and the Queen, Svayampabha. [8]^{p243}("Figure 7")



Figure 7 Front wall of the main chamber of Cave 205, "Provider Portrait of King Totika and Queen of Qiuci", collected by the Asian Art Museum in Berlin, Germany.

a Image source: Unmissable Kizil Cave-Temple Complex/ Miao Libui, Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Art Publishing House, 2003, p243.

In front of the king, there are two recommended monks, and behind him, the queen's face is calm and composed, with a relaxed and contented demeanor. Her clothing is luxurious and extravagant, with short hair hanging down and a mid-cut hairstyle. She wears a satin velvet hat on her head and a tight fitting, narrow sleeved, striped shirt on her upper body. She wears a lapel, half arm, short body brocade robe on her outer body, and a tassel around her neck. Her top is open necked and appears to have shoulder pads. She flips left and right, with half sleeves in a trumpet shape and a wide mouth. She wears a large dress with several different border patterns on her lower body and a long skirt with intricate patterns painted on it.

Cave 205 was funded and excavated by King Totika of Qiuci. The representative cave paintings of this prosperous period are particularly exquisite and were created by top-notch experts at that time. They are truly top-quality Qiuci murals, and compared to classic works from any region in the world, they are no less impressive. The brilliance of this mural artwork lies in its valuable exploration of the psychological portrayal of the characters and the subtle differences in their emotional levels. [9]^{p26} Artists combine unity and diversity through orderly arrangements, indicating that Kucha artists have made gratifying contributions in transforming foreign art forms, enriching the world's art treasure trove, making their faces fuller and rounder, with straight nose bridges close to their lips; The human body shape curve, also known as the "triple

bending method", is enhanced, and the character's clothing is more gorgeous, with further strong expression of clothing texture.

5. THE DECLINE STAGE (8TH TO 9TH CENTURY): BEING SIMPLE, QUAINT, AND STEADY

The subject matter of mural paintings during the decline period has decreased, and the painting techniques are generally persistent and rustic, with full and gentle colors, mainly earth red, white, and stone green. The character accessories are also relatively simple, with few lines in the picture, relying entirely on color block splicing. In ancient Eastern art, Chinese painting formed its own system, pursuing the beauty of lines and the decorative effect of colors in form. Kucha murals are one of this art form. As an art form of appreciation, Qiuci style murals provide people with a pleasant aesthetic enjoyment.

In the mural of the "Flying Apsaras Provider" in Cave 8 of the Kizil Grottoes, two flying figures are presented as a whole, one male and one female, with white and black skin tones, forming a contrasting relationship between gender and color. The female flying in the sky above is dressed in turtle shell clothing, with one hand on a tray and the other hand loose flowers, crossed feet, right leg leaning forward, left leg retreating, and shoulders covered in a light silk cloth. The figure's muscles are full and strong, and the black and white colors of the entire mural are striking. The Qiuci artists use the beautiful order of flowers as the background to highlight the simplicity of the character's clothing. The overall proportions of the characters are very realistic, with the same height as real people, and a head to body ratio of 1:6. This indicates that ancient Qiuci artists have a modern aesthetic value tendency and practice it in their daily creations. ("Figure 8", "Figure 9", "Figure 10")



Figure 8 "Flying Apsaras Provider" (Cave 8).

a Image source: A Selection of the Murals in Kizil Grottoes: Garments painted were introduced Stories Zhang Aihong, Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2006 version, p60.



Figure 9 "Flying Apsaras" (Cave 8).

a Image source: A Selection of the Murals in Kizil Grottoes: Garments painted were Costume Zhang Aihong, Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2006 version, p46.



Figure 10 "Flying Apsaras Provider" (Cave 8).

a Image source: Mural Art in Xinjiang, China, Volume 3 Kizil Grottoes Murals/Compiled by the Xinjiang Mural Art Editorial Committee, China Urumqi: Xinjiang Fine Arts Photography Publishing House, 2015 edition, page9.

During the decline stage, the traditional form of expression in Qiuci murals is the alternating light and dark. During this stage, most of the cave murals were warm toned, with a large use of vibrant colors such as ochre and red. Azurite and malachite were

only used for decoration, and aesthetic consciousness was also changing. The pursuit of reproducing reality became a pursuit of decorative beauty composed of flat surfaces. Painters also gained new inspiration in this mottled world of red and blue, deeply impressed by the art of these Qiuci grottoes. The female providers had strong and powerful bodies, reflecting a healthy beauty and indirectly expressing the aesthetic tendency of ancient Kucha artists.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, this article selects representative images of female providers from various periods in the Kizil Grottoes murals, and through the content of these images, people can experience the artistic visual effects expressed by ancient Qiuci artists and analyze the female ideological content presented in the murals. The visual representation of female providers may seem simple, but the content is profound. The artist combines unity and diversity through orderly arrangement, indicating the regrettable contribution of Kucha artists in transforming foreign art forms. The wonderful presentation of images of female providers is the crystallization of long-term exchange and mutual learning among various civilizations, and the Qiuci murals are the most dazzling part of them. In the study of female themed murals in the Kizil Grottoes, starting from a female perspective, the researchers explore and excavate the female characters in the ancient Qiuci society. It is a microcosm of an era, and we can calmly feel the images of female providers recorded by artists with brushes, all of which are telling the awakening of women's autonomy in Kucha country. Although they have gone through the changes of the times and people are different, the wall paintings of these female providers in the Kizil Grottoes murals, although located in the same architectural space, have different values and meanings in terms of position, function, and significance.

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