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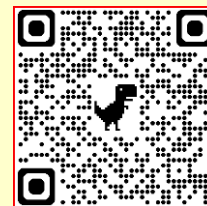
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A Study of the Sino-Western Syncretic Paradigm in Silk Road Civilization and Northern Qi Mortuary Murals

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the artistic paradigm of 'Sino-Western Syncretism' as manifested in the mortuary murals of the Northern Qi dynasty, situated within the broader context of Silk Road civilization. The study focuses on the state of exchange and fusion between the Central Plains culture and the civilizations of Central and West Asia along the Silk Road during the sixth century, aiming to elucidate the mechanisms of integration evident in the visual language, cultural symbols, and technical media of Northern Qi murals. Employing methodologies of iconographic analysis, spatial narrative theory, and cross-cultural comparison, this research analyzes the compositional structures, thematic content, and technical characteristics of the murals in conjunction with archaeological reports and both Chinese and international scholarly literature. The principal findings reveal that Northern Qi murals synthesize the traditional linear drawing techniques of the Central Plains with the Western region's method of chiaroscuro (concave-convex shading), integrate Han Chinese themes of feasting and processions with Central Asian elements such as pearl roundels and foreign attire, thereby forming a visual grammatical system characterized by a fusion of Hu and Han cultures. The innovation of this study lies in its pioneering effort to elevate the Northern Qi murals to the status of an artistic paradigm of 'Sino-Western Syncretism' and to demonstrate its significance within the context of global art history through an interdisciplinary approach.

KEY WORDS: Silk Road Civilization; Northern Qi Mortuary Murals; Sino-Western Syncretism; Visual Language; Iconography

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

1.1.1 The Historical Value of Silk Road Civilization

The Silk Road was not a single route but a complex network comprising the oasis routes, the Steppe Route, and the Maritime Silk Road. The sixth century, during which the Northern Qi dynasty existed, coincided with the flourishing of the Steppe Silk Road. Following the unification of the Mongolian plateau by the Turkic Khaganate, the silk-horse trade established with the Northern Qi

court facilitated the continuous eastward transmission of Western Asian metalworking techniques, Buddhist artistic styles, and Zoroastrian ritual culture via this corridor. For instance, the pearl roundel motifs adorning gilded bronze artifacts unearthed from the Northern Zhou tomb of An Jia in Xi'an (discovered in 1957) bear a striking resemblance to the decorative borders in the murals of the Northern Qi tomb of Xu Xianxiu, substantiating the correlation in the dissemination of material culture and artistic symbols along the Silk Road. Furthermore, the Silk Road functioned not merely as a

conduit for commodities, but also as a carrier for the transmission of cultural genes. The performing arts and painting techniques of the Western Regions, disseminated through the movement of artisans and performers, profoundly transformed the creative paradigms of Central Plains art.

1.1.2 The Academic Significance of Northern Qi Mortuary Murals

Although the Northern Qi dynasty lasted a mere 27 years (550-577 CE), its mortuary murals exhibit pivotal characteristics that bridge artistic traditions: they inherit the aesthetic of the 'lean and elegant' figural style prevalent in the Wei and Jin dynasties, while prefiguring the robust and vigorous artistic forms of the Sui and Tang. Among the high-status Northern Qi tombs excavated to date, the murals in the tomb of Lou Rui (Taiyuan, excavated 1979), the tomb of Xu Xianxiu (Taiyuan, excavated 2000), and the large tomb at Wanzhang (Ci County, excavated 1987) are the most comprehensively preserved. The murals in Lou Rui's tomb cover an area exceeding 200 square meters, encompassing themes such as processions, ceremonial guards, banquets, and mythological scenes. The depiction of figures in foreign attire and the Central Asian-style horse tack in the 'Scene of Mounted Procession' is regarded by scholars as a quintessential example of Sino-Western fusion. In Xu Xianxiu's tomb, the portrayal of Sogdian merchant caravans and Western Region musicians allows for a precise tracing of their cultural origins through details such as Persian-style pointed hats and Sogdian-style belted robes. These murals serve not only as a visual record of Northern Qi society but also as direct material evidence of the interaction between Silk Road civilizations and the culture of the Central Plains.

1.1.3 The Core Value of This Research

Current academic research on Northern Qi murals predominantly focuses on stylistic chronology or the verification of specific themes. For example, Su Bai's *Notes on a Visit to the Northern Qi Tomb of Lou Rui in Taiyuan*¹ merely mentions Western Region influences without systematically analyzing the specific pathways of this fusion. Conversely, Silk Road studies often emphasize trade and religion, with insufficient exploration of the micro-mechanisms of artistic fusion, such as how artisans adapted Western elements. The core value of this research lies in three main aspects: First, it pioneers an analytical framework of 'element identification – mechanism analysis – paradigm synthesis,' examining disparate Western elements within an integrated system of cultural fusion. Second, by comparing Northern Qi murals with contemporaneous wall paintings from the Western Regions (e.g. the Kizil Caves in Kucha) and the Southern dynasties (e.g. the Southern Dynasties tomb at Xishanqiao in Nanjing), it elucidates the unique role of the Northern Qi as a cultural hub on the eastern segment of the Silk Road. Third, it offers a historical reference for contemporary intercultural dialogue: the selective appropriation of Western elements by the Northern Qi provides historical insights into how to balance cultural importation with local innovation in the present day.

1.2 Literature Review (Current Research Status)

1.2.1 Research on Silk Road Civilization and the History & Culture of the Northern Qi

In domestic scholarship, Chen Yinke², in his *A Draft Essay on the Origins of Sui and Tang Institutions*, proposed that 'Northern Qi

¹ Su, B. (1981). *Notes on a Visit to the Northern Qi Tomb of Lou Rui in Taiyuan*. Cultural Relics, (5).

² Chen, Y. K. (1940). *A Draft Essay on the Origins of Sui and Tang Institutions*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Works Publishing House.

institutions were influenced by foreign acculturation,' although his work did not extend to the realm of art. Luo Feng's³ *Between Hu and Han: The 'Silk Road' and Historical Archaeology in the Northwest*, through an examination of Sogdian epitaphs and artifacts, verified the trade relations between the Northern Qi and Sogdiana, concluding that 'Sogdian merchants served as the core intermediaries for the transmission of Western cultures.'

In international research, the French scholar Étienne de la Vaissière⁴, in his *History of Sogdian Merchants*, mentioned that Jinyang (modern Taiyuan) in the Northern Qi dynasty was a significant base for Sogdian caravans, hypothesizing that 'Sogdian artisans may have participated in the creation of local mortuary murals.' The Japanese scholar Seiichi Mizuno⁵, in his *Records of Historical Sites in Shanxi*, compared the coloring techniques of Northern Qi murals with those of the Kucha cave temples, suggesting that 'the technique of li fen dui jin (applying raised paste and gold leaf) in Northern Qi murals originated from the Western Regions.'

Furthermore, archaeological discoveries provide material evidence for exchanges between the Northern Qi and the Western Regions. These include the Sassanian silver coins (from the reign of Peroz I, 531-579 CE) unearthed in 1999 from the tomb of Li Xizong in Zhanhuang, Hebei Province, and the Northern Qi Sogdian figurines discovered in 2003 in Datong, Shanxi Province.

1.2.2 Specialized Research on Northern Qi Mortuary Murals

Domestic specialized research has primarily focused on archaeological reports and art historical analysis. The Northern Qi Tomb of Lou Rui in Taiyuan [Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology. (2004). Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House] meticulously documents the excavation contexts and pictorial details of the murals, noting that 'the prominent nasal bridges and deep-set eyes of the ceremonial figures may originate from the Western Regions.' Yang Hong, in his *Half a Century of Art Archaeology*, characterizes the style of Northern Qi murals as a 'hybrid of Central Plains traditions and Western Regions styles,' yet refrains from an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms underlying this fusion.

International scholarship has predominantly emphasized iconographic comparison. The British scholar Jessica Rawson, in her *Art and Culture in Ancient China* [Rawson, J. (2002). Beijing: Science Press], compares the animal motifs found in Northern Qi murals with those on Persian textiles, arguing that 'the winged horse motif serves as a hallmark symbol of Persian cultural transmission eastward.' The German scholar Lothar Ledderose⁶, in his *Ten Thousand Things*, briefly touches upon the 'modular method of creation' observed in Northern Qi murals, suggesting a possible influence from Western Regions artisans, although this argument is not fully developed.

1.2.3 Research Gaps and Limitations

Existing scholarship exhibits three principal lacunae. First,

³ Luo, F. (2004). *Between Hu and Han: The 'Silk Road' and Historical Archaeology in the Northwest*. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House.

⁴ de la Vaissière, É. (2005). *Sogdian Traders: A History*. Leiden: Brill.

⁵ Mizuno, S. (1956). *A Study of the Buddhist Cave Temples at Tôrin, Shanxi [M]*. Kyoto: Kyoto University.

⁶ Ledderose, L. (2000). *Ten thousand things: Module and mass production in Chinese art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

fragmented research: studies have largely analyzed discrete elements—such as pearl roundels or foreign attire—in isolation, without integrating them into a systemic understanding of cultural fusion, thus failing to elucidate the overarching characteristics of the Sino-Western syncretic paradigm. Second, weak exploration of mechanisms: there is insufficient analysis concerning the reasons for fusion (e.g. political imperatives, economic drivers) and the processes of fusion (e.g. artisan collaboration, technical adaptation); for instance, the specific identities of Western Regions artisans who may have participated in creating Northern Qi murals remain unverified. Third, lack of interdisciplinary integration: art historical research often neglects relevant historical texts, such as the references to ‘Western Region Hu merchants presenting rare treasures’ in the ‘Biographies of Favorites’ chapter of *the Book of Northern Qi*⁷, while historical studies frequently lack in-depth iconographic analysis of the murals themselves. This disciplinary divide has resulted in a disconnection between textual evidence and pictorial representation.

1.3 Research Framework, Methodology, and Innovations

1.3.1 Research Framework (Figure 1)

This study establishes a ‘four-dimensional progressive’ research path, taking the dissemination of Silk Road civilization as the vertical axis (temporal dimension: the process of Western Regions elements being introduced and transformed) and Northern Qi mortuary murals as the horizontal axis (spatial dimension: variations in fusion characteristics across different tombs). The four dimensions are as follows: First Dimension (Element Identification): By comparing Western Regions artifacts with Northern Qi murals, distinct Western Regions elements will be identified and distinguished from indigenous derivative elements. Second Dimension (Fusion Manifestation): The integration of Western Regions elements with Central Plains traditions is analyzed at three levels: subject matter, technique, and decorative pattern. Third Dimension (Mechanism Analysis): Drawing on historical texts and archaeological data, the roles of political factors, economic drivers, and human agency in promoting fusion are investigated. Fourth Dimension (Paradigm Synthesis): The core characteristics of the Sino-Western syncretic paradigm in Northern Qi murals are distilled and compared with Sui and Tang dynasty murals to clarify their historical position.

⁷ Li, B. Y. (1972). *Book of Northern Qi*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

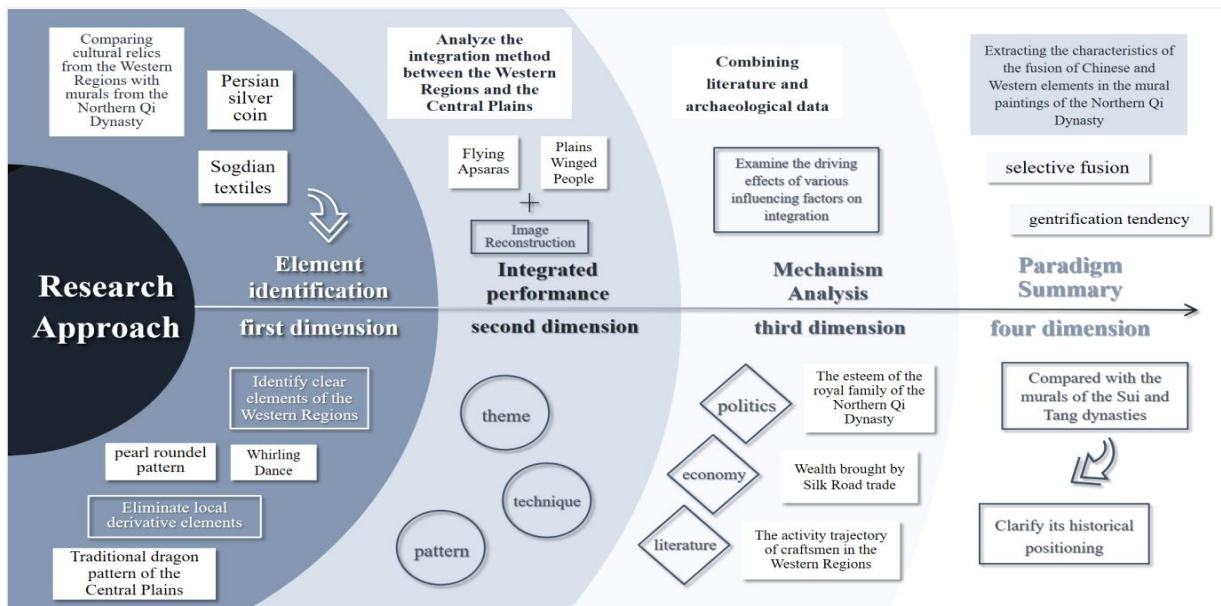


Figure 1 Research Approach

(Source: Author's creation)

1.3.2 Research Methodology (Figure 2)

Archaeological typology method: Animal patterns in Northern Qi murals are classified into three categories: Western Regions prototypes, modified types, and Central Plains-influenced types. The evolutionary trajectories of these patterns across different tombs are compared. For instance, the winged horse pattern in the Wanzhang Grand Tomb retains a Persian pearl roundel base, whereas in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb, the pearl roundel is replaced by Central Plains cloud motifs.

Iconographic analysis method: This approach interprets the cultural connotations of mural symbols. For example, the combination of fire altars and sun-moon symbols in the murals of the Xu Xianxiu Tomb, when analyzed in conjunction with the Zoroastrian scripture *Avesta*,

is identified as a simplified representation of a Zoroastrian ritual scene rather than mere decorative motifs.

Literature research method: This involves collating records of interactions between the Northern Qi Dynasty and the Western Regions from historical texts such as *Book of Northern Qi*, *Book of Zhou*, and *Zizhi Tongjian*. For example, *the Book of Northern Qi • Biography of Emperor Wenxuan* records that ‘In the fifth year of Tianbao (554 AD), the Turks sent envoys to pay tribute and present local products.’ By correlating this with depictions of Turks in contemporary murals, the impact of diplomatic activities on art is examined.

Interdisciplinary research method: This integrates the intermediary theory from cultural communication studies, stylistic analysis from art history, and social stratification theory from historiography to achieve a multi-dimensional interpretation.

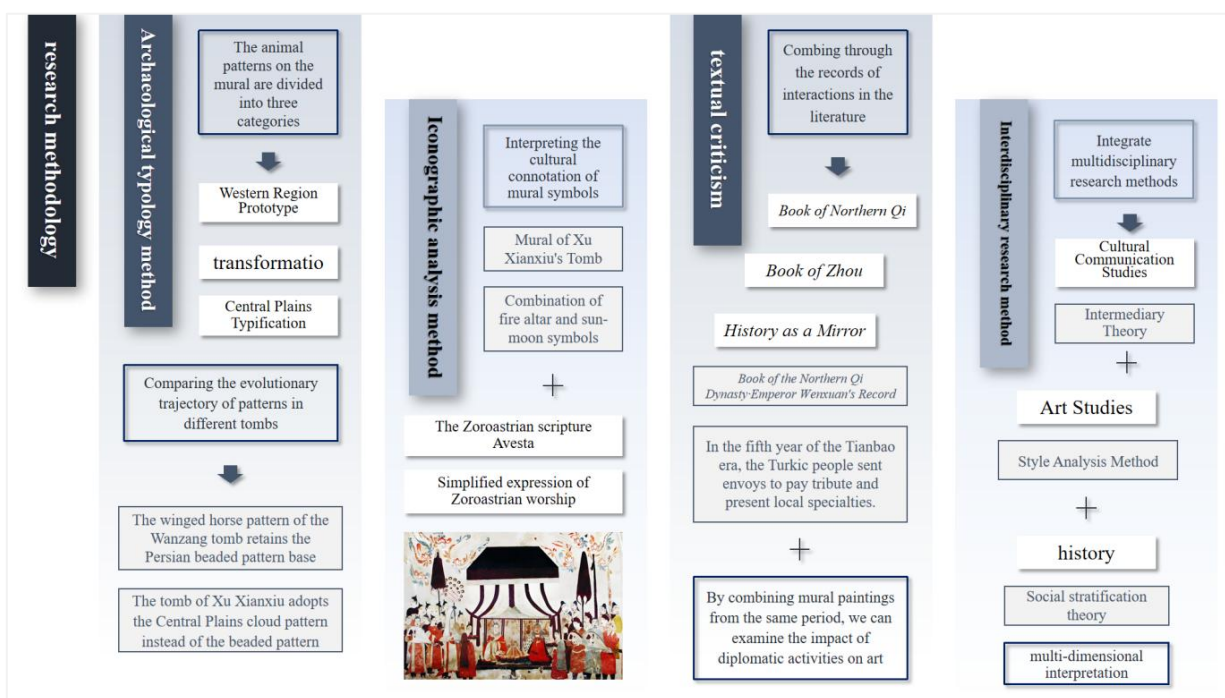


Figure 2 Research Method

(Source: Author's creation)

2. Innovative Points

The concept of the ‘Sino-Western integration paradigm in Northern Qi tomb murals’ is proposed for the first time, breaking through the limitations of previous fragmented research and establishing a systematic theoretical framework for integration.

A dual approach of ‘micro-element textual research + macro-mechanism analysis’ is adopted. For instance, by examining the detail of Persian silver coins worn at the waist of foreign merchants in the murals of the Xu Xianxiu Tomb, and corroborating it with the record in the *Book of Sui • Treatise on Food and Money*⁸ that ‘Northern Qi used Persian silver coins as circulating currency,’ the correlation between Silk Road trade and mural themes is empirically demonstrated.

The research perspective is shifted to the collaboration among craftsmen. By comparing the production techniques of Northern Qi murals with those of Western Regions grotto murals, the cooperative model between Western Regions craftsmen and Central Plains craftsmen is investigated, addressing the previous research gap that overly emphasized outcomes while neglecting processes.

2.1 The Context of Interaction Between the Northern Qi Dynasty and Silk Road Civilization

2.1.1 The Geopolitics of the Northern Qi and Silk Road Communications

2.1.2 Territorial Extent and Strategic Location of the Northern Qi Dynasty

The territory of the Northern Qi dynasty encompassed present-day Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi, northern Henan, and western Liaoning provinces. Its core administrative axis, the ‘Jinyang-Yecheng’ line, was strategically situated at the convergence of the Steppe Silk Road and the Oasis Silk Road. The Steppe Route descended southward from the Mongolian Plateau, entering the Central Plains via Jinyang (modern Taiyuan), while the Oasis Route extended eastward from the Hexi Corridor, reaching Yecheng (modern Linzhang, Hebei) via Luoyang. This dual Silk Road hub status enabled the Northern Qi to simultaneously absorb the nomadic cultures of the northern steppes and the oasis civilizations of the Western Regions.

For instance, the Northern Qi established the Sizhou Pasturage in Jinyang specifically for breeding fine horses imported from the Türkic Khaganate. The equine depictions in the Procession Scene (Figure 3) from the tomb of Lou Rui bear a striking resemblance to the ceramic horse figurines unearthed from Türkic burials, substantiating the cultural transmission route along the Steppe Silk Road. Furthermore, the Northern Qi implemented a strategy combining military protection with commercial regulation over the Silk Road: they established garrisons along the frontiers to guard against incursions by the Rouran and Türks, while simultaneously instituting ‘interstate markets’ (hushi) in Jinyang and Yecheng. These markets were officially supervised to manage trade with the Western Regions, thereby ensuring the stability and unimpeded flow of commerce along the Silk Road.



Figure 3 Equine Depiction in the Procession Scene from the Tomb of Lou Rui

(Source: Chinese Treasure Gallery)

2.1.3 Diplomatic and Trade Exchanges Between the Northern Qi and Western Regions

The Northern Qi's interactions with the Western Regions were mediated by the Türks and facilitated by the Sogdians. After unifying the northern steppe in 552, the Türkic Khaganate established marital and trade relations with the Northern Qi—Emperor Wucheng Gao Zhan married the Princess of Le'an to Muqan Qaghan of the Türks, while the Türks introduced Western Persian silver coins and glassware into the Northern Qi as betrothal gifts. Sassanian silver coins (from the reign of Khosrow I, 531–579) unearthed in 1981 from the Northern Qi tomb of Gao Run in Ci County feature the Persian king's portrait and cuneiform inscriptions on their surface; these have been verified as gifts presented by Türkic envoys. Sogdian merchant caravans were the core executors of trade between the Northern Qi and the Western Regions. The Sogdians, characterized by their profit-driven mobility, established commercial networks within Northern Qi territory stretching from Jinyang to Yecheng. The *Book of Zhou* records in the ‘Treatise on Foreign Peoples’ that ‘numerous Sogdians arrived in China, accumulating wealth through commerce’⁹. The depiction of Hu merchant camel caravans in the murals of Xu Xianxiu's tomb provides a visual representation of these trade activities. Trade commodities were predominantly luxury goods: the Western Regions exported to the Northern Qi glassware (such as the Persian blue glass bowl unearthed at Yecheng), gold and silver vessels (such as the gilded Hu-style ewer discovered in Jinyang), and aromatics (such as frankincense and myrrh); the Northern Qi exported to the Western Regions silk textiles (such as Qi wan fine silk) and porcelain (such as celadon lotus vessels). This bidirectional flow of luxury goods provided abundant thematic material for the mortuary murals of the Northern Qi aristocracy.

2.2 The Penetration of Silk Road Civilization into Northern Qi Society

2.2.1 Material Culture Dimension

Western Region artifacts had become a form of ‘symbolic consumption’ in the life of the Northern Qi aristocracy—functioning not merely as practical implements, but as emblems of status and identity. The Northern Qi imperial court's veneration of Western

⁸ Wei, Z., et al. (2010). *Book of Sui*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

⁹ Linghu, D. F., et al. (2022). *Book of Zhou*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

artifacts was particularly pronounced. *The Book of Northern Qi*¹⁰ records in the 'Biographies of Favorites' that 'He Shikai, enjoying the favor of Emperor Wucheng, once presented a Western seven-jeweled bed and an ivory mat'. This seven-jeweled bed (a bed inlaid with precious gems) finds its visual counterpart in the interior chamber scene depicted in the murals of Xu Xianxiu's tomb (Figure 4). Emperor Wenxuan (Gao Yang)'ordered artisans to imitate Western Hu-style vases.' The Northern Qi gilt Hu-style vase now housed in the Shanxi Museum, while derived from Persian prototypes, is adorned with traditional Central Plains dragon motifs, exemplifying material-level Sino-Western fusion.

The influence of Western artifacts on mural iconography was both direct and specific. In the Banquet Scene from the tomb of Lou Rui, the stemmed cups and long-necked flasks used by aristocrats stand in stark contrast to the traditional Central Asian ear-cups. In the dining scenes depicted in the murals of Xu Xianxiu's tomb, the servants hold roasting forks and wine ewers—both quintessential symbols of Western Region culinary culture. These motifs were not products of the artisans' imagination, but rather a faithful representation of the actual life led by the Northern Qi aristocracy.



Figure 4 Depiction of the Seven-Jeweled Bed in the Interior Chamber Scene from the Murals of the Tomb of Xu Xianxiu

(Source: Chinese Treasure Gallery)

2.2.2 Spiritual Culture Dimension

Buddhism and Zoroastrianism were the two major religions transmitted to the Northern Qi via the Silk Road, exerting a profound influence on the ideological core of mural creation. In terms of Buddhism, the Northern Qi represented the peak of Buddhist art in the Northern Dynasties. The Tianlong Mountain Grottoes in Jinyang and the Xiangtang Mountain Grottoes in Yecheng are both representative examples of Northern Qi Buddhist art, with their sculptural styles (such as the Buddha image with full shoulders and thick chest) and mural techniques (such as the shading method) deriving directly from the Western Regions' Kucha Caves. This influence extended to mortuary murals: although the flying figures (apsaras) in the murals of Lou Rui's tomb retain the winged characteristics of Central Plains feathered beings (yuren), the dynamics of their streamers and the shading techniques on their faces are completely consistent with those of the flying figures in the

Kizil Caves of Kucha (Figure 5). Regarding Zoroastrianism, the Northern Qi was a crucial period for its spread into the Central Plains. Sogdian merchant caravans brought Zoroastrian ritual culture to the Northern Qi, but undergoing localization adaptation, Zoroastrian elements in the murals mostly appear as implicit symbols. The fire altar and sun-moon motifs above the tomb gate of Xu Xianxiu's tomb are consistent in form with fire altars at Sogdian Zoroastrian ritual sites, while the sun and moon symbols correspond to Zoroastrian worship of light. The winged horse image in the murals of the Wanzhang Large Tomb served in Zoroastrian culture as the mount of the sun god, but Northern Qi artisans combined it with the Central Plains allegorical meaning of the 'dragon-horse spirit,' endowing it with a new function of guiding the tomb occupant to ascend to immortality.



Figure 5 Comparison of the Flying Figure (Apsara) from the Murals of the Tomb of Lou Rui (Left) and the Flying Figure from the Kizil Caves in Kucha (Right)

(Source: Chinese Treasure Gallery)

2.2.3 Personnel Mobility Dimension

Sogdian merchants, Western Regions artisans, and Buddhist monks were the three major disseminators of Silk Road civilization in the Northern Qi, whose activities directly influenced the fusion characteristics of the murals. Regarding Sogdian merchants, they were not only commodity traders but also cultural intermediaries—in the Sogdian settlements established in Jinyang and Yecheng, merchants brought Western textiles and mural samples into the Central Plains, providing reference materials for artisans. In the Northern Qi tomb of Yu Hong discovered in Taiyuan in 1999, the reliefs on the stone sarcophagus depicting Hu merchant caravans and Western Region music and dance scenes are highly similar in theme to the murals of Xu Xianxiu's tomb, confirming the influence of Sogdian culture on Northern Qi murals. Regarding Western Regions artisans, the Northern Qi imperial court recruited Western artisans to participate in artistic creation. *The Book of Northern Qi* records in the 'Biographies of Artisans' that 'there was a Western Regions monk named Narendrayāśas, skilled in painting, who was summoned to Yecheng to paint for the palace'. Although it is not explicitly stated whether he participated in creating mortuary murals, the *li fen dui jin* technique (using adhesive mixed with powder to build up lines, then applying gold leaf) seen in the murals of Lou Rui's tomb is absent in traditional Central Plains painting but common in Persian textiles and Western Regions cave murals, suggesting it was introduced by Western Regions artisans. Regarding Buddhist monks, they disseminated Western Regions artistic styles through 'sutra translation and image-making.' The eminent Northern Qi monk Huiguang presided over cave temple image-making in Yecheng, and his shading methods and concepts of dynamic form were absorbed by artisans and applied to mortuary murals—the ceremonial figures in the murals of the Wanzhang Large Tomb feature concave-convex shading on their faces, creating a three-dimensional effect, which embodies the Western Regions image-making technique advocated by Huiguang.

¹⁰ Li, B. Y. (2024). *Book of Northern Qi* (Vol. 50, Biographies of Favorites). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

3. The Concrete Presentation of 'Western Regions Elements' in Northern Qi Mortuary Murals

3.1 Western Regions Cultural Symbols in Thematic Content

3.1.1 Ceremonial Guard and Procession Themes

The ceremonial guard and procession themes in Northern Qi murals represent a fusion of Western Regions military culture with Central Plains ritual systems. In the Ceremonial Guard Scene from the tomb of Lou Rui, approximately one-third of the guard figures wear left-lapel Hu-style clothing, pointed hats, and belt ornaments (dlexie dai). This combination of attire finds its prototypes in the murals of Türkic tombs. However, Northern Qi artisans subjected it to sinicized transformation: although the facial contours of the guards feature high noses and deep-set eyes, their expressions and gaze retain the solemn and dignified ritual requirements of the Central Plains, rather than the exaggerated and unrestrained style characteristic of Western Regions art. In the Camel Caravan Scene from the tomb of Xu Xianxiu, the camel depictions are consistent with those in Western Regions murals. The packs loaded on the camels are painted with pearl roundel motifs, and the leader is a Sogdian figure with deep-set eyes and a high nose, holding a horsewhip and silk. Notably, the caravan's direction of travel is from west to east, aligning with the actual route of Silk Road trade, and the caravan is escorted front and rear by Central Plains armored soldiers, reflecting official Northern Qi protection of Silk Road commerce. Traditional Central Plains ceremonial guard themes centered on horse-drawn chariots, with figures dressed in wide robes and large sleeves; in contrast, Northern Qi murals center on camels and horses, with figures in narrow-sleeved Hu clothing. This difference directly stems from the influence of Silk Road civilization—the cavalry culture of Western Regions nomadic peoples replaced the traditional Central Plains chariot culture, becoming the mainstream mode of travel for the aristocracy.

3.1.2 Daily Life Scene Themes

Daily life scene themes directly represent the Westernized lifestyle of the Northern Qi aristocracy, primarily comprising three categories. In the market scene from the murals of Xu Xianxiu's tomb, Hu merchants (Sogdians) and Central Plains merchants are engaged in trade. The Hu merchants hold Persian silver coins, the Central Plains merchants hold silk, and nearby are placed glass vessels and spice jars. The gestures of the trading parties reflect ritual differences between the cultures. This scene corroborates the record in the *Book of Zhou-Treatise on Foreign Peoples* that 'Sogdians excel in commerce; wherever profit lies, they go,' serving as a visual archive of Silk Road trade. In the Banquet Scene of the Couple (Figure 6) from the tomb of Xu Xianxiu, the musical instruments played include the bili (originating from Persia, with a slender pipe and reed mouthpiece), the pipa (originating from the Western Regions, with a curved neck and four strings), and the jiegu (originating from the Türks, a double-headed drum). These instruments were extremely rare in traditional Central Plains music and dance; the dancer performs the huxuanwu (Sogdian whirl dance), whose posture is consistent with Tang dynasty Sogdian whirl dance figurines unearthed in Kuqa, Xinjiang. In contrast to the dignified and slow-paced traditional Central Plains elegant music, Western Regions music and dance are characterized by exuberance and intensity, becoming an indispensable program at Northern Qi aristocratic banquets. In the dining scenes from the murals of the Wanzhang Large Tomb, the foods served by servants include roast whole lamb and grape wine, with hubing (Hu-style flatbread) placed

on nearby food tables. *The Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People* records that Northern Qi people 'made Hu-style bread using oven methods similar to Han bread'¹¹, confirming the popularization of Western Regions cuisine in the Northern Qi. The murals transform this culinary culture into visual symbols, embodying the Westernized tendency of aristocratic life.



Figure 6 Banquet Scene of the Couple (Detail) from the Tomb of Xu Xianxiu

(Source: Chinese Treasure Gallery)

3.1.3 Religious and Mythological Themes

Religious and mythological themes are the result of the integration of Western Regions religious culture and Central Plains funerary concepts, exhibiting the characteristics of explicit Buddhism and implicit Zoroastrianism. The flying apsaras on the tomb ceilings in the murals of the Lou Rui Tomb and the Xu Xianxiu Tomb are typical examples of Sino-Western integration. Their human bodies with bird wings originate from the traditional Chinese winged beings, but their high-bridged noses, deep-set eyes, S-shaped movements of the ribbons, and plump bodies derive from the flying apsaras in Western Regions Buddhism. More importantly, the function of the flying apsaras in Northern Qi underwent localization transformation—while Western Regions flying apsaras mainly served as offerings to the Buddha, those in Northern Qi guided the soul of the tomb owner to ascend to immortality, fully aligning with the concept of ascending to immortality in Central Plains funerary practices. Zoroastrian elements in the murals are mostly presented as simplified symbols, avoiding direct religious ritual scenes. The guardian deity images on both sides of the tomb gate in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb wear sun-and-moon crowns and hold fire altars, but their body shapes are those of traditional Chinese warriors. This combination of Zoroastrian symbols and Central Plains shapes is a clever expression of cultural integration. In the star map of the Wanzhang Grand Tomb murals, fire-like patterns are used to represent stars, consistent with Zoroastrian worship of light, rather than the traditional Chinese star official images. The mythological themes in Northern Qi murals reconstruct Western Regions and Central Plains myths. For example, in the Four Deities (Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, Black Tortoise) image in the Lou Rui Tomb murals, the combination of the tortoise and snake in the Black Tortoise retains the Central Plains tradition, but the wings of the Azure Dragon and the mane of the White Tiger originate from Western Regions winged beast myths, giving the traditional Four Deities a more exotic feel and reflecting the aristocracy's aesthetic

¹¹ Jia, S. X. (2015). *Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

pursuit of novel mythological symbols.

3.2 Western Regions Artistic Influence on Modeling Techniques

3.2.1 Figure Modeling

The figure modeling in Northern Qi murals broke away from the singular aesthetic of the Central Plains tradition of 'slender bones and delicate features,' forming a Sino-Western hybrid characteristic. The high-bridged noses, deep-set eyes, curly hair, and thick beards from Western Regions art became typical images of Northern Qi nobles and ceremonial guards. In the tomb owner's portrait of the Lou Rui Tomb murals, although the tomb owner (Lou Rui, Grand Marshal of Northern Qi) has a Central Plains facial contour, his high-bridged nose and curly beard resemble those of Western Regions nobles. The image of foreign merchants in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals employs the chiaroscuro shading technique, giving the face a three-dimensional effect. This technique originated in the Western Regions, while traditional Central Plains painting only used flat coloring without light and shade variations. Traditional Central Plains figure modeling adhered to the ritualistic proportion of a head-to-body ratio of 1:6, as seen in Gu Kaizhi's Nymph of the Luo River, emphasizing solemnity. In contrast, Northern Qi mural figures adopted the Western Regions proportion of 1:7, with longer bodies and more exaggerated movements. For example, the S-shaped twisted body and outstretched arms like flying birds of the whirling dancer in the Lou Rui Tomb murals, an exaggerated dynamic never seen in traditional Central Plains painting, is identical to the dancer image on Persian textiles, such as the Persian textile in the Musée Guimet in Paris. Functional details of Western Regions clothing were absorbed into Northern Qi murals, such as the narrow-sleeved foreign-style garments of ceremonial guards, the belted long robes of foreign merchants, and the shawls of musicians. These details were not merely decorative symbols but reflections of Western Regions lifestyles. Northern Qi nobles frequently engaged in equestrian and archery activities, necessitating foreign-style garments suitable for movement, and the murals truthfully recorded this transformation in clothing functionality.

3.2.2 Color Application

The color style of Northern Qi murals exhibited the Western Regions characteristics of rich, bold colors with strong contrasts, in stark contrast to the traditional Central Plains ink-wash and light colors. Western Regions pigments used in Northern Qi murals included ultramarine (derived from Afghan blue), ochre (derived from Western Regions red), and gold leaf (derived from Persian gold), which could not be produced in the Central Plains and had to be imported via the Silk Road at high cost. For example, the roundel patterns in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals used a large amount of gold leaf, consuming approximately 500 grams just for the border decorations, reflecting the extravagant use of Western Regions pigments by Northern Qi nobles. In contrast, traditional Central Plains murals mostly used local pigments such as ochre and malachite green, with far lower color saturation than Western Regions pigments. The Western Regions technique of raised powder and gold application was widely used in Northern Qi murals—mixing glue and gypsum into a powder paste to create raised line contours on the murals, then applying gold leaf to give the patterns a relief-like effect. The edges of ceremonial guards' clothing in the Lou Rui Tomb murals and the roundel bases in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals both employed this technique, while traditional Central Plains murals only used line outlines without three-dimensional effects. Additionally, the Western Regions concept of color contrast was absorbed by Northern Qi craftsmen. For example, the winged horse in the Wanzhang Grand Tomb murals has a red

body, green mane, and golden base, creating a strong color impact. Traditional Central Plains murals emphasized color harmony without strong contrasts. The cultural connotations of colors also fused—while red was traditionally valued in the Central Plains, gold became the prestigious color in Northern Qi murals, as seen in the gold-dominated attire of the tomb owner in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb, rather than the traditional Central Plains red. The Western Regions regarded blue as symbolizing the sky and divinity, and the Starry Sky Map in Northern Qi murals was painted with ultramarine, differing from the traditional Central Plains black starry sky, reflecting the Sino-Western fusion of color symbolism.

3.2.3 Composition


The composition of Northern Qi murals broke away from the ritualistic constraints of traditional Central Plains symmetrical balance, absorbing Western Regions concepts of scattered perspective and continuous narrative. Traditional Central Plains painting employed focal perspective, such as Along the River During the Qingming Festival, which has a clear visual center. In contrast, Northern Qi murals adopted Western Regions scattered perspective, with no fixed center in the  (image), and figures and scenes arranged linearly. The Equestrian Procession in the Lou Rui Tomb murals, stretching 20 meters long, is arranged in chronological order—from preparing for the journey (servants leading horses) to the journey itself (ceremonial guards escorting) to arriving at the destination (nobles dismounting). With no focal point, viewers must observe from left to right in sequence. This continuous narrative composition originated in Western Regions murals, such as the Jataka Tales in the Kizil Grottoes in Kucha (Figure 7), while traditional Central Plains murals focused on single scenes, such as Banquet Scenes, without continuous narratives.



Figure 7 Partial Views: Equestrian Procession from the Lou Rui Tomb (Left) and Jataka Tales from the Kizil Grottoes in Kucha (Right)

(Source: Chinese Treasure Gallery)

Western Regions composition emphasizes a rhythmic interplay of density and sparsity, creating a sense of rhythm through contrasts between crowded figures/scenes and sparse arrangements. In contrast, traditional Central Plains composition pursues uniform symmetry with neatly aligned figures. In the Market Transaction Scene from the Xu Xianxiu Tomb, densely packed trading activities are juxtaposed with sparsely distributed onlookers, forming a rhythmic 'dense-sparse-dense' pattern—a composition rarely seen in traditional Central Plains murals but consistent with figure arrangements on Persian textiles (e.g. Persian textile in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Northern Qi murals adopted Western Regions concepts of trans-spatial composition, merging scenes from different times and spaces within a single frame. In the Tomb Owner's Life Scene from the Wanzhang Grand Tomb, the left side depicts the tomb owner's palace life in Ye Cheng, while the right side shows his equestrian activities in Jinyang, connected by cloud motifs. This breaks the constraints of a single spatial setting, a technique derived from Western Regions Buddhist murals. Traditional Central Plains murals strictly adhered to single-space principles, without trans-spatial scenes.

3.3 Traces of Sino-Western Fusion in Decorative Patterns

3.3.1 Botanical Patterns

Northern Qi mural botanical patterns represent a creative fusion of Western Regions and Central Plains motifs, primarily featuring three types of combinations. Honeysuckle patterns, originating from the Western Regions (e.g., Greek acanthus leaves symbolizing eternal life), were merged with lotus patterns from the Central Plains (symbolizing purity) to form intertwined honeysuckle-lotus designs. These designs used honeysuckle vines as stems and lotus flowers as blossoms, with vines intertwining and flowers interspersed. Door frames in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals and the edges of food trays in the Lou Rui Tomb murals adopted this pattern, retaining the curled arcs of Western Regions honeysuckle while adhering to the Central Plains tradition of eight-petaled lotuses (Central Plains lotus patterns typically had six or eight petals, while Western Regions versions often had five). Grape patterns, symbolizing abundance and originating from regions like Persia and Greece, were combined with scrolling vine patterns from the Central Plains (derived from Warring States-era panchi dragon motifs symbolizing auspiciousness). The coffin bed edge patterns in the Wanzhang Grand Tomb murals featured Western Regions grapevines entwining Central Plains scrolling vines, with plump grapes and flowing vines creating a seamless integration. This pattern, absent in traditional Central Plains murals but common in Western Regions cave murals, was enhanced by Northern Qi craftsmen with dynamic scrolling vines, imbuing it with Central Plains grace rather than Western Regions rigidity. Palm patterns, symbolizing victory and originating from regions like Egypt and Persia, were paired with chrysanthemum patterns from the Central Plains (symbolizing longevity). In the screen patterns of the Northern Qi Gao Run Tomb murals, pointed Western Regions palm leaves alternated with rounded Central Plains chrysanthemums, retaining Western Regions morphological features while assigning Central Plains symbolic meanings—a selective absorption reflecting Northern Qi craftsmen's adaptation of foreign motifs.

3.3.2 Animal Patterns

Animal patterns in Northern Qi murals exhibit a fusion of Western Regions prototypes and Central Plains modifications, primarily integrating Western animal symbols into Central Plains cultural frameworks. Winged horse patterns, originating from Persia, underwent Central Plains transformations: the winged horse in the Wanzhang Grand Tomb murals retained Persian features like wings and muscular lines but adopted a Central Plains longma (dragon-horse) head and cloud motifs on its body, transforming it from a Persian sun god chariot into a Central Plains celestial ascension mount aligned with Northern Qi tomb ascension beliefs. This modification, unprecedented in traditional Central Plains art, laid the foundation for Tang dynasty celestial horse imagery. Lion patterns, absent in traditional Central Plains art, were fused with Central Plains tiger motifs by Northern Qi craftsmen: in the Lou Rui Tomb's lion depiction, Western Regions features like mane and physique were retained, while facial expressions and movements borrowed from Central Plains tiger motifs conveyed dignity without ferocity, redefining the lion from a Western deterrent symbol into a Central Plains guardian symbol for tomb entrances. Roundel patterns, iconic of Persia's Sassanian dynasty, were combined with Central Plains dragon-phoenix motifs: in the border patterns of the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals, a circular roundel frame contained a Western camel on the left and a Central Plains phoenix on the right, creating a dialogue between Western and Central Plains animals. Unlike Western Regions single-animal roundels, Northern Qi innovations paired Western and Central Plains creatures, reflecting cultural

equality.

3.3.3 Geometric Patterns

Geometric patterns in Northern Qi murals, based on Persian geometry, incorporated Central Plains traditional geometric motifs, achieving symmetry without rigidity. Roundel patterns (Persian origin) and huiwen (meander patterns, Central Plains origin) were combined: in the Wanzhang Grand Tomb's coffin bed panels, roundels formed the border while huiwen filled the center, contrasting circular roundels with square huiwen to blend Persian roundness with Central Plains regularity. This layered combination, absent in Western Regions single-roundel designs, enhanced textural depth. Diamond patterns (Western Regions origin) and cloud motifs (Central Plains origin) were fused: in the Lou Rui Tomb's floor patterns, diamond grids contained small cloud motifs, contrasting sharp diamond angles with curvilinear clouds to soften Western Regions rigidity with Central Plains grace. Zigzag patterns (Western Regions origin) and water ripple patterns (Central Plains origin) alternated in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb's mural borders, juxtaposing zigzag straight lines with rippling curves to create dynamic visual balance. This innovative pairing, unprecedented in traditional Central Plains murals, showcased Northern Qi craftsmanship.

4. The Fusion Mechanism and Paradigmatic Features of 'Sino-Western Integration' in Northern Qi Tomb Murals

4.1 Fusion Mechanism: Driven by Multiple Forces

4.1.1 Political Impetus: Royal Aesthetics Shaping Cultural Orientation

The Northern Qi royal family's proactive adoption and promotion of Western Regions culture served as the top-down catalyst for Sino-Western integration in murals. The Gaos, with roots in the Northern Six Towns, were deeply influenced by Xianbei and Western Regions cultures. Emperors like Wenxuan (Gao Yang) and Wucheng (Gao Zhan) embraced Western customs, music, and attire, as recorded in the *Book of Northern Qi · Biography of Emperor Wenxuan*, which notes Gao Yang's 'donning Western attire, mastering Western music, and personally dancing.' This royal 'barbarization' directly shaped aristocratic aesthetic preferences. To legitimize imperial diversity, the Northern Qi court incorporated Western cultural elements into ritual systems—elevating Western music and dance as courtly art forms and commissioning imitations of Western artifacts as royal ceremonial objects. This political 导向 (political orientation) permeated tomb murals: aristocrats integrated Western motifs (e.g., Western attire in the Lou Rui Tomb's ceremonial guards, Western music and dance scenes) to mirror imperial court life, reflecting a transmission chain of 'royal aesthetics → aristocratic emulation → mural integration.' Additionally, the Northern Qi court facilitated Western cultural dissemination through diplomatic exchanges—gifting Central Plains silk alongside Western artifacts, which elevated Western elements as symbols of political prestige, compelling aristocrats to feature them in murals as status markers.

4.1.2 Economic Foundation: Silk Road Trade as Material Support

The thriving Silk Road trade under the Northern Qi provided dual material and referential support for Sino-Western integration in tomb murals. Firstly, wealth generated from trade enabled aristocrats to fund lavish mural projects, which required costly Western pigments and skilled artisans. For instance, the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals, spanning approximately 150 square meters, consumed 1

kilogram of gold leaf—equivalent to 60 bolts of silk (based on Northern Qi prices of three bolts per liang of gold leaf), representing a decade’s income for an average peasant household. Such extravagance relied entirely on Silk Road-derived wealth. Secondly, imported Western artifacts and samples served as creative references: Sogdian merchants introduced Western textiles, mural fragments, and objects to Northern Qi, which artisans adapted into mural imagery. The roundel patterns in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals, identical to those on Sassanian Persian textiles, suggest direct replication of Persian prototypes; the huxuan (whirling dance) figures in the Lou Rui Tomb murals mirror the postures of imported huxuan dancer figurines, confirming a pathway of ‘artifact prototypes → mural imagery.’

4.1.3 Religious Mediation: Buddhist Art as a Bridge

Buddhism, as a transcultural religion, became a pivotal mediator for Sino-Western artistic synthesis. The Northern Qi marked a critical phase in Buddhist art’s eastward transmission, with Western monks and artisans introducing Sassanian-influenced styles to cave complexes in Jinyang and Yecheng. These styles permeated tomb murals through artisan mobility: craftsmen involved in cave projects also participated in mural commissions, transferring Western techniques to funerary contexts. The chiaroscuro shading in Northern Qi statues at Tianlongshan Grottoes matches the facial shading in Lou Rui Tomb murals, likely crafted by the same artisans; the dynamic ribbon motifs of Northern Qi apsaras (celestial beings) at Xiangtangshan Caves resemble those in Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals, illustrating a stylistic continuum from ‘cave art → tomb murals.’ Furthermore, Buddhism’s syncretic ethos provided ideological groundwork for artistic fusion: as a foreign religion adapting to local contexts, it encouraged artisans to blend Western motifs (e.g., Sassanian apsaras) with Central Plains traditions (e.g., yuren feathered beings), exemplifying localized Buddhist aesthetics.

4.1.4 Artisan Collaboration: Joint Creation by Western and Central Plains Craftsmen

Direct collaboration between Western and Central Plains artisans constituted the micro-level mechanism for Sino-Western integration. During the Northern Qi, Silk Road mobility brought Western artisans to the Central Plains, where they were employed by royalty and aristocrats for cave projects, artifact production, and mural painting. The Book of Northern Qi · Biographies of Occult Arts records that ‘the Western artisan Nalantilyeshe, skilled in painting, was summoned to Yecheng to oversee imperial paintings.’ While his direct involvement in tomb murals remains unconfirmed, the Western stylistic links in murals suggest his role in technical guidance. More critically, a collaborative model emerged: Central Plains artisans, familiar with local funerary traditions, designed thematic frameworks and cultural narratives, while Western artisans

contributed technical expertise and iconographic elements. For example, in the Xu Xianxiu Tomb’s merchant trade scene, Central Plains artisans conceptualized the theme, and Western artisans rendered the facial features and attire of foreign merchants; in the Lou Rui Tomb’s apsaras figures, Central Plains artisans assigned them celestial ascension functions, while Western artisans executed their ribbons and shading. This model prevented cultural dissonance and preserved local essence, ensuring successful integration.

4.2 Paradigmatic Features: From ‘Element Superposition’ to ‘Cultural Reconstruction’

4.2.1 Hierarchical Progression: Three-Tiered Integration (Figure 8)

The Sino-Western integration in Northern Qi tomb murals evolved through a tiered progression of ‘superficial elements → intermediate techniques → profound cultural synthesis,’ reflecting the transition of Western cultural elements from symbolic import to spiritual assimilation. **Early Phase (550–560 CE): Direct Import of Western Elements.** During the initial years of Northern Qi, Western motifs were introduced without substantial adaptation. For instance, the roundel patterns in the Wanzhang Tomb murals replicated Sassanian Persian designs verbatim, lacking Central Plains modifications. Similarly, the hufu (foreign-style attire) of ceremonial guards retained Western features such as left-lapel closures and pointed hats, with only facial expressions localized to Central Plains styles. This phase represented mere elemental superposition, embodying Northern Qi’s curiosity and imitation of Western culture. **Middle Phase (560–570 CE): Synthesis of Artistic Techniques.** Integration advanced to the fusion of Western and Central Plains techniques. In the Xu Xianxiu Tomb (interred 571 CE), the combination of lifen duijin (raised-powder gilding) and linear contouring exemplified this synthesis: Western raised-powder gilding outlined decorative motifs, while Central Plains linear techniques detailed human figures. Color schemes merged Western bold hues (ultramarine, ochre) for attire with Central Plains muted tones (ochre, malachite green) for backgrounds. This phase marked creative technical hybridization, reflecting Northern Qi’s digestion and transformation of Western aesthetics. **Late Phase (570–577 CE): Cultural Reconstruction.** Integration reached its zenith in the cultural reconfiguration of Western elements. In the Lou Rui Tomb (circa 570 CE), apsaras (celestial beings) merged Western morphological traits with Central Plains ascension ideologies, transforming them from Buddhist devotees into guides for the tomb occupant’s celestial ascent. Similarly, Zoroastrian fire altar symbols were reinterpreted as funerary guardians when combined with Central Plains protective deities. This phase epitomized cultural recontextualization, demonstrating Northern Qi’s internalization and reinvention of Western cultural paradigms.

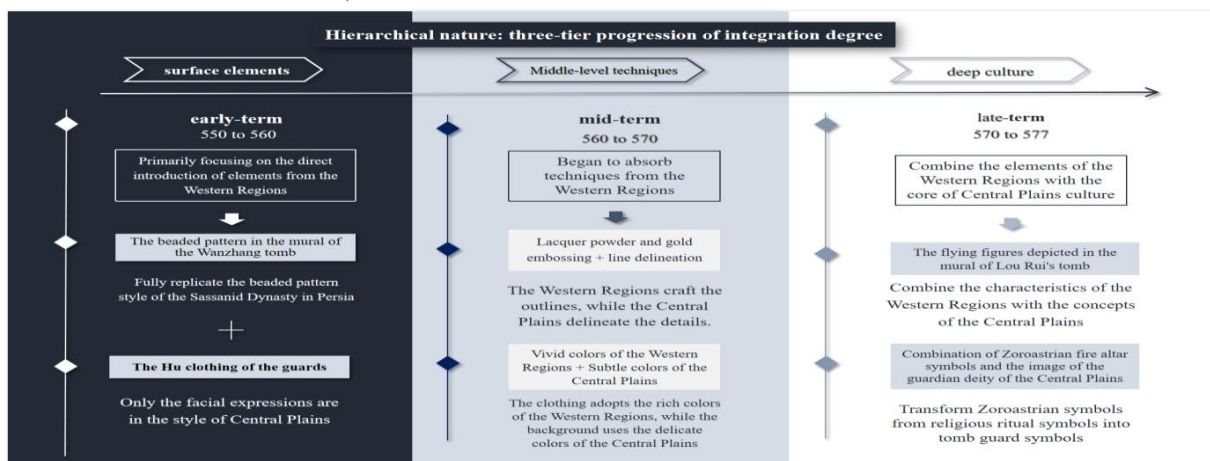


Figure 8 Hierarchical Diagram of the ‘Three-Tiered Progression’ in Integration Degree

(Source: Author's creation)

4.2.2 Selectivity: ‘Filtration and Adaptation’ Based on Local Culture

Northern Qi's absorption of Western elements was not indiscriminate but selectively filtered according to Central Plains cultural traditions and funerary needs. Elements conflicting with local culture were rejected, while adaptable ones were retained, reflecting a fusion principle prioritizing localization. For instance, Zoroastrian decorative symbols were adopted, but their core ritual scenes were excluded due to their incompatibility with Central Plains ancestor worship—which emphasized ancestor veneration over fire-god worship. Thus, the Xu Xianxiu Tomb murals featured only fire altar symbols, without priestly figures. Similarly, Western artistic exaggerations clashed with Central Plains solemnity; artisans mitigated these by reducing the rotational amplitude of huxuan (whirling dance) figures in the Lou Rui Tomb murals and altering their expressions from exuberant to solemn, aligning them with funerary decorum. Conversely, Western bold colors and three-dimensional patterns, aligning with Northern Qi aristocratic luxury, were fully retained and popularized—evident in the extensive use of gold leaf and Western pigments in both Xu Xianxiu and Lou Rui tombs, reflecting elite conspicuous consumption. Novel Western motifs like winged horses and roundels were preserved and hybridized with Central Plains designs, becoming core decorative symbols.

4.2.3 Reconstructiveness: From ‘Sino-Western Addition’ to ‘New Cultural Symbols’

Integration in Northern Qi murals transcended mere elemental addition, achieving a ‘1+1>2’ effect through functional, morphological, and symbolic reconstruction, creating entirely new cultural icons. Functional reconstruction repurposed Western elements for Central Plains funerary contexts: Western apsaras, originally Buddhist attendants, were transformed into guides for the deceased's celestial ascent in tombs; Sassanian roundels, originally textile/ornamental motifs, became border decorations symbolizing wealth and status. Morphological reconstruction fused Western forms with Central Plains elements: Western winged horses, originally equine with wings, were reimagined as dragon-headed equines; Western grapevine scrolls were merged with lotuses to create intertwined lotus-grapevine patterns. Symbolic reconstruction reassigned Western meanings to Central Plains ideologies: Western lion motifs shifted from ‘awe and power’ to ‘protection and auspiciousness’; grape patterns evolved from fertility to wealth and continuity.

4.2.4 Aristocratic Exclusivity: ‘Stratified Monopoly’ of Fusion Paradigms

The Sino-Western fusion in Northern Qi tomb murals was confined to elite aristocratic burials, with negligible presence in lower-status tombs, reflecting stratified dissemination of Silk Road culture. Excavated data reveal a positive correlation between tomb hierarchy and Western element usage: royal and high-ranking tombs (e.g. imperial, sangong, jiuqing) incorporated 30-50% Western elements across themes, techniques, and motifs; middle-ranking official tombs featured only 5-10% (e.g. scattered roundels or hufu attire); commoner tombs lacked Western elements entirely. This disparity stemmed from cost and symbolic exclusivity: expensive Western pigments (e.g. gold leaf, ultramarine) were unaffordable for lower

classes, while Western motifs served as aristocratic status markers. Northern Qi elites used hybrid murals to flaunt their access to Silk Road luxuries and cultural sophistication: the Xu Xianxiu Tomb's caravan and foreign music scenes showcased the deceased's trade wealth and luxurious lifestyle; the Lou Rui Tomb's winged horses and roundels displayed exotic aesthetic taste. Such cultural ostentation reinforced Sino-Western fusion as an aristocratic identity marker.

5. Historical Value and Contemporary Implications of the Sino-Western Fusion Paradigm

5.1 Historical Value: Contributions to Chinese Art History and Silk Road Cultural History

5.1.1 Art Historical Significance: Disrupting the ‘Unidirectional Transmission of Central Plains Art’ Narrative

For decades, scholarship has framed Chinese art history as a unidirectional transmission of Central Plains traditions, with Wei-Jin Northern and Southern Dynasties art viewed as a mere continuation of these traditions. However, the Sino-Western fusion evident in Northern Qi tomb murals decisively challenges this perception. Rather than following a linear Central Plains trajectory, Northern Qi art emerged from the dynamic interplay between Central Plains traditions and Western artistic influences. Thematically, it incorporated Western musical-dance performances and Sogdian merchant scenes; technically, it adopted Western shading techniques and lifen duijin (raised-powder gilding); ornamentally, it integrated Sassanian roundels and Sogdian grapevine scrolls. This synthesis forged a robust, vivid Northern Qi style distinct from the delicate figures of the Wei-Jin period and the exaggerated dynamism of Western art. For instance, Northern Qi human figures retained Central Plains solemnity while acquiring Western three-dimensionality—a balance unique to Sino-Western cultural fusion. This paradigm directly influenced Sui-Tang art: Tang tomb murals' caravan scenes and Western musical ensembles trace their origins to Northern Qi; Tang sancai ceramic winged horses and camels mirror Northern Qi mural prototypes; Tang Buddhist apsaras' flowing ribbons and proportions inherit Northern Qi's hybridized apsaras forms. Thus, Northern Qi laid the foundation for Tang art's cosmopolitan zenith. Without its Sino-Western fusion, Tang art's open, inclusive character would be unthinkable.

5.1.2 Cultural Historical Significance: Empirical Evidence of Silk Road ‘Bidirectional Interaction’

Traditional Silk Road studies emphasize Western cultural transmission to the East while neglecting Central Plains cultural diffusion westward. Northern Qi tomb murals, however, provide empirical evidence of bidirectional cultural exchange. Central Plains motifs, such as the intertwined lotus-grapevine scroll, spread to Central Asia via Sogdian merchants, appearing unchanged in Panjikent murals; the Northern Qi dragon-headed winged horse influenced Persian Sassanian textiles, where dragon-horse imagery emerged in late Sassanian fabrics. These cases confirm Central Plains cultural impact on the West. The murals' Sino-Western dialogue scenes transcend mere trade records, symbolizing cultural reciprocity: Sogdian merchants brought Western goods and culture, while Central Plains traders introduced silk and Confucian values. Moreover, Northern Qi artisans' adaptation of Western elements—rather than passive acceptance—demonstrated active Central Plains engagement. This bidirectionality underscores that Silk Road civilization was co-constructed by East and West, not merely

transmitted by a single civilization.

5.2 Contemporary Implications: Lessons for Cultural Exchange and Innovation

5.2.1 Civilizational Exchange: ‘Respect for Difference, Inclusive Mutual Learning’ as a Driving Force

The Northern Qi paradigm offers three key lessons for contemporary cultural exchange. First, its selective adoption of Western elements—preserving their distinctiveness while integrating Central Plains traits—embodies respect for cultural difference. Contemporary exchanges should avoid cultural hegemony or inferiority complexes, instead fostering coexistence through diversity. Second, Northern Qi’s openness to Western excellence enabled breakthrough innovations. Similarly, modern art could blend Western modernist concepts with Chinese techniques and themes to create globally resonant works. Third, Northern Qi’s successful localization of foreign elements—such as adapting Western pigments to Central Plains funerary contexts—highlights the necessity of aligning external influences with local cultures. For instance, integrating Western environmentalism with China’s Tianren Heyi (harmony between humanity and nature) philosophy ensures cultural relevance and adoption.

5.2.2 Cultural Innovation: ‘Inheriting Core Values, Absorbing External Excellence’ as a Pathway

The Northern Qi paradigm provides a clear roadmap for cultural innovation: uphold indigenous cultural essence while assimilating foreign elements for creative transformation. Despite its Western influences, Northern Qi art never compromised Central Plains funerary core values, ensuring directionality in fusion. Modern cultural projects—such as films—should similarly prioritize Chinese values like *jiaguo qinghui* (patriotism) and *renyi lizhixin* (Confucian ethics) while adopting Western narrative techniques and special effects. The animated film *Ne Zha: The Demon Child’s Rebirth* exemplifies this approach, blending Chinese themes of destiny and justice with Western humor and 3D animation. Northern Qi’s artistic upgrades through Western color techniques and motifs demonstrate the value of external inspiration. Modern design could fuse Western minimalism with Chinese joinery and patterns to create a ‘neo-Chinese’ aesthetic; music could merge Western orchestration with traditional instruments for hybrid compositions. Finally, Northern Qi’s creative reconfiguration of foreign elements—transforming them into new cultural symbols—emphasizes the importance of innovative adaptation. For example, repackaging the Twenty-Four Solar Terms through animations, cultural products, or exhibitions can modernize traditional folklore; integrating calligraphy with modern typography can revitalize this art form for advertising and packaging.

6. Conclusion and Prospects

6.1 Research Conclusions

The Sino-Western fusion paradigm in Northern Qi tomb murals emerged from the collision between Silk Road civilizations and Central Plains culture, characterized by four core features: stratification, selectivity, reconfiguration, and aristocracy. This paradigm transcended mere elemental superposition, achieving organic integration of Western artistic traditions with Central Plains cultural essence. Its formation was driven by four interlocking forces: political impetus (imperial aesthetic leadership), economic foundation (Silk Road trade wealth), religious mediation (Buddhist artistic transmission), and artisanal collaboration (division of labor between Chinese and Western craftsmen). Among these, imperial endorsement served as the top-down catalyst, trade wealth provided material support, Buddhist art acted as a cultural bridge, and

craftsman collaboration ensured execution—each force being indispensable. Art historically, the paradigm disrupted the unidirectional transmission narrative of Central Plains art, laying the groundwork for Sui-Tang artistic flourishing. Culturally, it provided empirical evidence of the Silk Road’s bidirectional interaction, functioning as a visual relic of East-West cultural exchange. Its historical significance lies not only in artistic achievement but also in offering a proven model for civilizational dialogue and cultural innovation.

6.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

6.2.1 Limitations

Poor preservation of some Northern Qi tomb murals (e.g. extensive detachment in the Hebei Cixian Gao Run tomb) hinders comprehensive analysis of Western elements. With only a dozen high-status Northern Qi tombs excavated to date, limited sample sizes restrict generalizations about fusion patterns. Empirical evidence for Western craftsmen’s involvement remains inadequate—despite speculations, no explicit artisan signatures or Western craftsmen’s graves have been identified, leaving their identities, origins, and collaborative models unconfirmed. Additionally, archaeological evidence supporting transmission routes of Western motifs is lacking.

6.2.2 Future Prospects

Continued archaeological efforts in Northern Qi tombs may yield intact imperial or Western craftsmen’s graves, providing critical data for analyzing Western elements and verifying collaboration models. Discoveries of Northern Qi-era Western cultural sites along the Silk Road could further corroborate links between Western culture and the murals. Comparative studies between Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, and Southern Dynasties murals could clarify differential receptions of Western culture: Northern Qi’s proactive absorption due to its geopolitical hub position and imperial sinicization; Northern Zhou’s selective adoption through Turkic alliances; and Southern Dynasties’ passive reception owing to their Silk Road distance. Such contrasts would underscore Northern Qi’s role as a cultural nexus.

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