

Contrastive Study on the Curly Tendrils Patterns in the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes and the Xinjiang Kizil Grottoes

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Abstract

Decorative patterns are an important part of Chinese culture. With the help of the Silk Road, the cultural and commercial communication between ancient China and western countries are closer. Through communication, Buddhism and the western curly tendrils patterns generally spread to the domain of ancient China. This article discusses the origins of the curly tendrils patterns and compares the curly tendrils patterns in the Mogao Grottoes and the Kizil Grottoes. We find out that there exists an obvious relationship between them as well as distinctions. After analyzing the cultural, religious, and aesthetic values of the curly tendrils patterns, we provide some examples of the use of the curly tendrils patterns in modern society and conclude that it originated from the western world, and are born to spread to the whole world again.

Keywords: curly tendrils pattern, Mogao Grottoes, Kizil Grottoes

1. Introduction

The Curly tendrils patterns, or tendrils design, is a kind of frieze art applied in murals and other art wares. With an “S” shape main stem and several “C” shape branches (see Figure1), decorated by other plants, flowers even human or Buddhist figures, the curly tendrils patterns have proved its value in aesthetics, culture and religion through history. The style, formation, color of it will uncover the historical background of a certain dynasty or period, providing endless thoughts for descendent to savor and discuss.

Figure 1: Sketch of the curly tendrils patterns



Despite the evolution and development of the curly tendrils patterns, the “S” stem and “C” branches never changed (Zhang et al., 2010). The unique “S” shape figures in the curly tendrils pattern conform to the “Samsara” and “Satisfactory” ideas in the Buddhist culture. Attached flowers in different types of the curly tendrils patterns will attach different auspicious meanings. Therefore, the curly tendrils patterns as the carrier of Buddhism could

be easier accepted and understood by the public. It absorbs characters from different regions and eras, acknowledged by the governor from the perspectives of social, economic, political, spiritual, and aesthetic. Hence it prevails in every social class, becomes a significant cultural symbol.

Dunhuang, the peerless metropolitan in ancient China, an oasis on the Taklamakan Desert, a pure land of the Buddhist World, a navigator of the Silk Road, located at the North-West of China, Gansu Province, is awakened with its iconic culture in the 21st century. Mogao Grottoes is the integrated representative of Dunhuang culture. First carved by a Buddhist monk Yuezun in 366 AD, its carving history throughout from Sixteen kingdoms to the Yuan dynasty, left countless Buddhist murals, sculptures, sutras for descendent. The Curly tendrils pattern is used in the murals pervasively in different forms, colors and compositions, with its highly proven cultural and artistic value, which could be used to analyze the development of motifs in China.

Kizil Grottoes, located near Kizil Town, Xin Jiang, is the earliest group of caves in China even in ancient Central Asia. It is the kickstart of grotto art in ancient China, which is spread from ancient Greek, ancient Iran and ancient India. 170 years earlier than Mogao Grottoes, the carving history of Kizil Grottoes start from the 3rd century AD and gradually ceased in the 9th century AD. Most of the statues and murals are destroyed and stolen. Although the officially numbered grottoes reached 236, only 81 caves are left with murals now. The Curly tendrils pattern could also be found in several caves of Kizil Grottoes. The comparison of it with that in Mogao Grottoes would clear the mist of history of the origin and development of the Curly tendrils pattern.

2. Origin of the Curly Tendrils Patterns in the East World and the West World

The Curly tendrils patterns are fruits of cultural communication of the East and West world. As an aggregated pattern, it is derived from many types of patterns and designs.

Nowadays, there are several split parties discuss the origin of the Curly tendrils patterns. The Western world party holds the view that the origin of the Curly tendrils patterns could source to ancient Greece and Egyptian culture. Riegl (2018) states that the curly tendrils patterns come from the ancient Egyptians. Papyrus and lotus patterns of ancient Egypt, Acanthus leaves patterns of ancient Greek and Palm patterns of Mesopotamia Civilization are three main origins of the Curly tendrils patterns in the West world. These patterns spread to ancient India with the wind of war and commercial activities, then land in Xinjiang, ancient China with the help of Buddhism.

While the Eastern world party reckons the curly tendrils patterns is evolved from local patterns. Painted pottery in Neolithic Period, Rolling-Cloud and other cloud shape patterns from the Shang Dynasty (1600 BC) to the Han Dynasty (220 BC), *Lonicera japonica* Thunb (Latin) of the Wei, Jin and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589), Tang's tendrils patterns of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), all of these are the evidence of the origin of the curly

tendrils patterns. For short, many similar patterns of the curly tendrils patterns occur in different regions and dynasties in ancient China.

Either from the angle of the Western party or Eastern party, we can easily find out a significant fact: The itinerary of the curly tendrils patterns is in line with the eastward spread of Buddhism. Affect by the Buddhism culture, some scholars state the curly tendrils patterns is the fruit of the communication of East and West. And the curly tendrils patterns had become the carrier of the spread of religious culture since the Tang Dynasty (Cai, 2018). As mentioned by Tai (2019), the forming of a kind of pattern is the outcome of complex communication between diversified cultures. Furthermore, the curly tendrils patterns have the nature of multiformity, depending on the plants and formation itself.

Except for all these above discussions about the possible origin and trace of the curly tendrils pattern, what can ensure is the officially forming of the curly tendrils patterns in mainland China is during the Wei, Jin and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589). Because it is the era when Buddhism spread to mainland ancient China, the curly tendrils patterns could be easily found in the murals and sculptures of Buddhism caves like Mogao Grottoes and Kizil Grottoes.

3. Curly Tendrils Patterns in the Mogao Grottoes

The curly tendrils patterns are extensively used in the Mogao Grottoes. Mainly painted in the caisson ceilings and murals. Also appears in the arched door, Buddhist niches, pillars and “Hua Gai” (canopy). Huo (1997) points out that the curly tendrils patten almost can be found in every grotto of the Tang Dynasty.

3.1 Early Tang Dynasty (618–704)

Recorded by Ouyang and Shi (1995), the curly tendrils patterns in the No.217, 340, 334, 392 caves have the features of acanthus leaves and the cloud-shape patterns. The turquoise leaves curved like clouds, decorated with the fruits of pomegranates, are quite simple while elegant as a whole. The figures below are the curly tendrils pattern of the Early Tang Dynasty.

Figure 2: No.217 cave of the Mogao Grottoes



Figure 3: No.340 cave



Figure 4: No.334 cave



Figure 5: No.392 cave



From the curly tendrils patterns in the No.340 cave (Figure 3), the “S” shape stem leads the direction of the pattern, the leave is tender and fresh. Affected by the style of the Sui Dynasty, the lines are smooth. Generally, the curly tendrils patterns in the early Tang Dynasty

are stereotyped, some figures are repetitive. Feng (2017) states that the most of flowers in the curly tendrils pattern in the Early Tang Dynasty are trumpet-shaped.

3.2 High Tang Dynasty (705-780)

The evolution of the curly tendrils pattern is related to the political environment and economic development. Therefore, the curly tendrils patterns in High Tang Dynasty are more mature and opulent (Zhu, 2021).

Take the pomegranate blossom in the No.148 cave (Figure 7) as an example, the shape of it is more natural with more details. And the painting style is closer to reality. The figure of flowers and leaves are distinctive.

The curly tendrils patterns in the high Tang Dynasty combined with the flower shape patterns and geometric patterns in the new period, forming the new curly tendrils patterns with features of geometric. A trend can be found from the Tang Dynasty development period of the curly tendrils pattern: from simple to complex, from general to specific (Zhang, 2005).

Figure 6: No. 46 cave



Figure 7: No.148 cave



Figure 8: No. 166



4. Curly tendrils patterns in the Kizil Grottoes

Most of the artworks in the Kizil Grottoes are destroyed, however, the curly tendrils patterns are also mainly concentrated in the murals. Tursun (2021) divides the curly tendrils patterns in the Kizil Grottoes into three types: Wave-shaped, Circle-shaped and Symmetry shape.

4.1 The Northern and Southern Dynasties

Figure 9: No.110 cave of the Kizil Grottoes sermon scene 5th century



As Figure 9 shown above, the curly tendrils patterns at the margin of these murals are mainly formed by simple points and lines. With obvious features of plants while the kind of plant is unidentifiable.

In the No. 76 Cave (Figure 10), painters divide the curly tendrils patterns by different colored color-block, which contradicts with the continuous tendrils in the Mogao Grottoes.

Figure 10. No.76 Cave of the Kizil Grottoes, circa 400 CE



The curly tendrils pattern in the No.77 Cave of the Kizil Grottoes (Figure 11) is mainly composed of acanthus leaves with an “S” shape stem, decorated by board leaf crossed with foliole.

Figure11. No.77 Cave of the Kizil Grottoes, Nanda the cowherd. 406-425 AD



4.2 The Sui Dynasty:

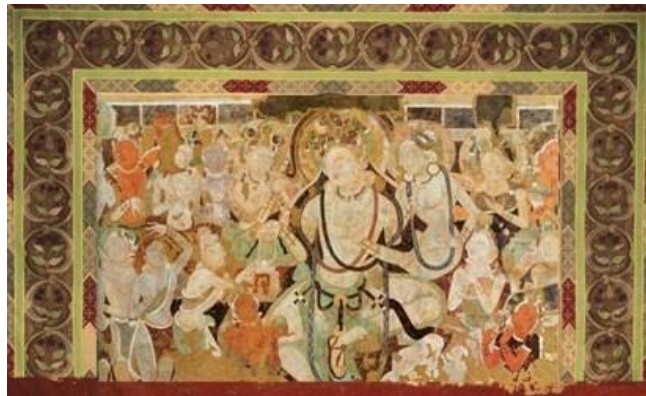
Figure 12. No.207 Cave of the Kizil Grottoes, Acanthus leaves and faux beams, 6th century CE



The figure of acanthus leaves, which is brought by foreign cultures, first appears in the Grottoes of ancient China (Figure 12). It is earlier and deeper influenced than the Mogao Grottoes.

4.3 The Tang Dynasty

Figure 13. No.118 Cave of the Kizil Grottoes



As illustrated above in Figure13, the patterns connecting three spices flowers head to tail form a string. “S” shape stem and “C” shape leave linked and form circles. View it at a distance, the patterns are symmetric and reduplicative. While slight differences appear when scrutinizing.

Figure 14. No.212 Cave of the Kizil Grottoes. Apart of the frieze made by “the painter from Rome” Rumakama along the border of the mural. 7th century



As displayed above in Figure 14, The acanthus leaves link the Buddhist skull and form a strip shape pattern.

Besides, “Rumakama” (रुमकामा, “the one from Rome”), appears in a Sanskrit inscription in the cave. This indicates that the painter of this murals and patterns painted in this cave is from the Roman Empire or the Byzantine Empire.

The function and color features of the curly tendrils patterns in the Mogao Grottoes and the Kizil Grottoes are similar. However, due to the geographic location of the Kizil Grottoes being farther from the domain of ancient China, its curly tendrils patterns are more affected by foreign patterns and cultures. Although the “S” shape stem and “C” shape branches are still the same, the distinctions in types of plant, angles, cultures, contents, expression are obvious.

5. The cultural and religious implication

From the perspective of the figures involved, the curly tendrils pattern symbolized the vision for better future of people.

5.1 Grape

Grape is the symbol of fertility in Chinese culture. The meaning of grape patterns in China has changed over time. After the wars of the changing dynasties in Qing Dynasty, people paid more attention to peace, longevity, and reproduction, and has a saying that said, “The more offspring, the more fortune.” Therefore, artisans inscribe "Grape for happiness and longevity" next to the grape pattern, gradually making it a common practice. Today, our generally cognition of the implied meaning of grapes symbolizing fertility and good fortune originated from the Qing Dynasty (Li, 2015).

The grape curly tendrils pattern in the No.322 cave (Figure 15) of the Mogao Grottoes combines the blooms, leaves, fruits of the grape. Craved at the doorframe beside the statues of Buddhists, the grape curly tendrils pattern adds extra favor to the cave while not stealing the thunder of statues.

Figure 15: No.322 Cave of the Mogao Grottoes Early Tang 618–704



5.2 Pomegranate

As shown below (Figure16-18), the pomegranate pattern is another pattern pervasively used in Mogao Grottoes. Similar to the grape, the pomegranate is also symbolized fertility. “All the posterities gathering in one chamber” is the implication of pomegranate. (He, 2013)

Figure16: Single branch pomegranate curly tendrils pattern in the No.217 Cave of Mogao Grottoes (High Tang Dynasty 705-780)



Figure17: Multi branches pomegranate curly tendrils pattern in the No.148 Cave of Mogao Grottoes (High Tang Dynasty 705-780)



Figure18: Leafy pomegranate curly tendrils pattern in the No.23 Cave of the Mogao Grottoes (High Tang Dynasty 705-780)



5.3 Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*)

Lonicera japonica can survive in tough environments. The pattern of it, therefore, implies the meaning of tenacity. (Sun & Zhang, 2020). Aside from tenacity, Li Shizhen (Traditional Chinese doctor at Ming Dynasty) mention that the *Lonicera japonica* could be used to extend longevity in his great work “Compendium of Materia Medica”. Therefore, the *Lonicera japonica* design may contain people’s wishes of living longer.

The *Lonicera japonica* pattern is said to be the predecessor of the curly tendrils pattern, the relationship between them is quite close as the “S” shape exists both. The *Lonicera japonica* pattern can be found in the No.249 Cave, No.329 Cave and No.427 Cave of the Mogao Grottoes.

Figure19: Lonicera Japonica pattern in the No.249 Cave of Mogao Grottoes (Northern Wei Dynasty 386-534)



5.4 Lotus

Lotus is the representative flower of Buddhism. It represents the pure land of Buddhism as it thrives from silt but not dye. (Yuan, 2004). The application of lotus figures usually combines with other figures like the *Lonicera japonica*. The lotus and *Lonicera japonica* patterns can be found in the No.428 Cave of the Mogao Grottoes (Chen, 2019).

Figure20: Lonicera Japonica and lotus pattern in the No.428 Cave of Mogao Grottoes (Northern Zhou Dynasty 557-581)



5.5 Phenix and Birds

Phenix represents noble while birds make patterns more vivid. The combination pattern of curly tendrils and phenix and birds can be found in the No.116 Cave and No.196 Cave of the Mogao Grottoes.

Figure21: Phenix and curly tendrils pattern (Behind the head part of the central Buddha statue) in the No.196 Cave of Mogao Grottoes (Late Tang Dynasty 892-893)



From the perspective of the religions, the existing and spread path of the curly tendrils pattern contains religious meaning and humanism spirit of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. The lotus as one of the Eight Treasures of Buddhism, represents the sanctity of the Buddhist doctrine, which will lead and bless all living creatures. It is also the national flower of India. As recorded in the sutra, Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism is born with lotus. Lotuses grow with every step of Sakyamuni. Therefore, the lotus patterns are not only used along with the curly tendrils patterns, but also in other Buddhist artworks. Furthermore, the complex and repeating “S” and “C” shapes are also linked with the concept of “Samsara” in Buddhism. The end of the “S” shape is the start of the next “S” shape, which means death is the beginning of the next life. (Wang, 2019)

Taoism and Confucianism, however, may be neglected from the context of the Buddhism Grottoes generally. It also affects the forming of the curly tendrils patterns. “Tai Chi” and “Yin and Yang” are the core concepts of Taoism. The “S” shaped figure of the Tai Chi pattern is nearly identical to the “S” shaped figure in the curly tendrils pattern. While the two dots beside the “S” shaped figure of the Tai Chi pattern, which represent the Yin and Yang, are also similar to the branches and other ornamentation used in the curly tendrils patterns.

“The golden mean” or “The doctrine of mean” is a representative idea in Confucianism, which emphasizes the harmony, constant and balance of objects. The use of the curly tendrils patterns live in harmony with the Buddhist statues and the caves as a whole. Furthermore, the curly tendrils patterns accomplish the integration of folk culture, religious culture and aesthetic value, which is an explanation of the doctrine of “The golden mean”.

In a nutshell, either the Buddhist culture or the curly tendrils pattern are outcomes of multilateral communication.

6. Aesthetic value

The most obvious characteristic of the curly tendrils patterns is symmetry, continuous, various while constant. It has six significant values in the Buddhist caves (Hu & Hu, 2003).

- 1) Its integral structure is a stable strip, which gives a sense of sedateness to viewers. It is perfect to fill the gap at the margin space of murals.
- 2) Used as a boundary between different chapters or parts of Jataka Murals.
- 3) Some painted characters show up several times in different locations and times in one wall painting, which may confuse the viewer. The creeping direction of the curly tendrils patterns guides the visual orders of viewers in this situation, helping them to understand the story told.
- 4) Connecting and integrating the buildings, colored Buddhism sculptures and murals.
- 5) Creating the mysterious religious atmosphere in grottoes and arousing respect of viewers.
- 6) The owner and painter of certain caves use this pattern for auspicious purposes such as health, longevity, fortune, fertility, etc.

From the angle of shape, since the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the curly tendrils patterns absorb the features of foreign plant patterns and local Rolling-Cloud patterns, forming a repeating wave-shaped pattern with the core curly plant. By permutating and combining points, lines and planes, decorated by animals, plants, mythical creatures and celestials, the image of curly tendrils patterns is quite active and dynamic. The painters observe the form of plants in reality, refine, summarize and exaggerate the features of stems, leaves, flowers and fruits. By subjectifying and idealizing the objects, the painters break the law of nature and limits of the Focus Perspective. Therefore, the curly tendrils patterns are of high aesthetic value as it breaks the framework of time, space and location.

From the perspective of color, the hue of the curly tendrils patterns is pure. The basic color of it is red, supplemented by cyan, green, blue, white and black colors, the contrast of it is hence very sharp. Furthermore, the pigments used are ground by colored rock, which has a stable chemical structure and hence will not fade in a long time.

The painting techniques are limited as the wall of caves is fragile. It is improper to carve delicate patterns, while direct drawings are suitable. Therefore, Sfumato (softening the transition between colors) and flat coating skills are pervasively implied in caves.

7. Conclusion

As the fruits of the integration of various cultures, there are countless ornate designs in the Grottoes. After hundreds of years of developing, forming the current curly tendrils patterns. Because of its superior aesthetic and cultural values, we can also see the figures of it in architecture, clothes, packages, animations, etc. Especially in the era of prosperous China, the cultural confidence of the Chinese is awakening. The curly tendrils patterns are used in many

cultural products such as cups, pendants, umbrellas, etc. The curly tendrils patterns also exist in the design of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. We could conclude that the value of the curly tendrils patterns is gradually realized and explored by the public. In a word, the curly tendrils patterns have an auspicious implication, it fulfills the visions and aspirations of the Chinese, hence widely accepted by the public. As an integrated icon of culture, aesthetics and religion, it has the potential to march towards the world again.

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