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SYMBOLIC IMAGERY AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS IN DUNHUANG FRESCOES AND CAVE ART

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ABSTRACT

Dunhuang frescoes and cave painting are also popular examples of artistic and cultural iconography, which prescribes Buddhist Taoist Confucian ideologies. The pieces are works of art that after hundreds of years of development in the Great Silk Road, turned into illumination and philosophical commentaries on such issues as cycle of life and death, the interdependent origin and other phenomena in the area of spirituality. Nonetheless, the literature on them remains scanty and a majority of the literature has focused on explaining its aesthetics and its history. This study aims to examine the philosophical and religious ideologies embedded in Dunhuang frescoes, providing insights into their spiritual and cultural significance. It further seeks to analyze the symbolic representations within these artworks, exploring their role in fostering philosophical discourse and functioning as profound metaphysical expressions in religious art. The literature review was performed in respect of the systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, utilizing the peer-reviewed articles available in the scholarly databases. The thematic analysis simplified the pattern recognition process and only data with the inclusion criteria was used. Research findings highlighted the fact that frescoes served to combine culture, expressing metaphysical concepts and eliciting a philosophical discussion. New technologies such as virtual reality in one way or another have made its interpretative accessibility both traditional and modern. Dunhuang frescoes serve as vital texts for understanding religious art's philosophical dimensions, reflecting a unique synthesis of spirituality, culture, and metaphysical thought. This study bridges gaps between art history, religious studies, and philosophy, emphasizing their modern relevance.

KEYWORDS: Traditional Culture, Dunhuang Art, Aesthetics, Mural art, Tang Dynasty Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Dunhuang frescoes and cave paintings are both valued works of religion and art in the ancient world. The art works were made over centuries and the outcome of cross-cultural, cross-spiritual, and cross-art trends along the Silk Route of China. Whole Buddhism relations are the most correlated with the frescoes that introduce some deep philosophical and mystical notions, as Yan and A. Zhang (2024) note. They have intricate forms of ideas such as transience, paradise and the unity of the creation that are the golden rules of the Buddhist religion. These indicators see the Dunhuang frescoes serving as a form of art or aesthetics and philosophical writings.

Religious art is generally not just a work with a well-executed, beautiful design and composition on its surface but a work with spiritual meaning. It is the art of telling complex philosophical and cultural stories. Wilkinson (2020) stated that symbols in religious iconographies are pivotal because they provide vehicles to translate metaphysical concepts and, hence, philosophically intangible into something more comprehensible to humans. Likewise, the artwork of the frescoes shows spiritual themes that transcend the centuries that belong to every human being. Nonetheless, literary circles have paid little attention to these frescoes as contrivances for philosophy, emphasizing their aesthetic and historical features. Tingting (2023) points out that it is possible to label art containing sacred images as an ideological and cultural mirror of the time and the connection between consciousness and spirit. Here, not only does the art represent the paintings, but it also explains the moral teachings of Buddhists in the context of Dunhuang (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A Bodhisattva Mural from the Mogao Cave. Retrieved from (<https://buddhistartnews.wordpress.com/2013/10/25/silk-road-secrets-the-buddhist-art-of-the-mogao-caves/>).

Moreover, Pezzoli-Olgati (2015) has stated that analyses of religious signs in the processes of visualization concern both the aesthetic surface and the conceptual meaning of the images. The material duality, therefore, provides possibilities for examining how art conveys assorted messages about religion in the case of Dunhuang frescoes. Thus, the Dunhuang frescoes are not only examples of art but reflections of philosophical narratives into which more specific academic research should be directed. Hence, this research seeks to fill the gap by investigating the chosen works from a historical and philosophical perspective in art and providing a comprehensive analysis of such masterpieces.

The Dunhuang frescoes, as appealing works of art and cultural artifacts, have been studied primarily in historical and artistic contexts. However, the same approach fails to acknowledge the potential of the texts as works of philosophy that reflect metaphysical and religious views. Oza (2021) mentioned that these artworks are visually saturated with meanings for key Buddhist principles, including changeability and relation; however, these artistic works' philosophical aspects were presented insufficiently. Examining how these idols convey deep theological concepts and contribute to philosophy is necessary to fill this gap. The purpose of this study will be to provide more insight into religious art as an open for comment on diverse ontological ideas.

1.1. Research Objectives

- To examine the philosophical underpinnings and religious ideologies reflected in the symbolic representations of Dunhuang frescoes and cave paintings.
- To analyze how symbolic representations in Dunhuang artworks contribute to the philosophical discourse on the relationship between art, spirituality, and religious meaning.
- To assess the integration of philosophical theories in the interpretation of Dunhuang frescoes (DF) and their implications for understanding religious art as a medium of metaphysical expression.

The study is important in filling the gap between art history, philosophy, and religious studies due to the demonstration of how abstract art transmits and materializes philosophical content. The symbols in the Dunhuang frescoes are important because it is possible to study how a painting is a means of expressing metaphysical/cultural discourses. Renoust et al. (2019) have pointed out that religious

motifs in art keep religious knowledge and strengthen the viewer's comprehension of religious and philosophical values. For the expanded preference of these frescoes as philosophical texts, the present research is vital in adding to discussions on the place of the Dunhuang frescoes in the Buddhist canons, as well as the arts and philosophies of world civilizations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Philosophical Underpinnings and Religious Ideologies in Symbolic Representations of DF and Cave Paintings*

The frescoes and cave paintings, specifically at Dunhuang, dramatically represent the world's earliest striving to integrate philosophical and religious perspectives in Buddhism. The Dunhuang frescoes are consistently explained on philosophical grounds, which can be illustrated using an example of a lotus, symbolizing purity in Buddhism. H. Liu *et al.* (2024) notes that these ornaments serve more than a decorative purpose because they represent comprehensive spiritual and philosophical planes connected to the Buddhist theory of relativity among organisms. In this manner, symbolism provides a basis for linking the artwork to religious premises and an understanding of the cultural considerate of philosophy in China.

The aesthetic value of Dunhuang frescoes is an instrument of the exchange of culture and development of religious thought in the Course of the Silk Road. According to X. Zhang (2023), the Dunhuang caves combine Buddhist ideas with Chinese and Central Asian traditions. This interaction reveals the constant transformation of religious signification by reshaping new paradigms as symbolic philosophies for changeability and nirvana. However, some critiques arise regarding the absence of historical and artistic accounts versus philosophical ones in prior studies. J. Wang and Qiu (2014) note that in academic literature, architectural images of Dunhuang frescoes are well described in detail, but much less so when it comes to symbolism and philosophy. It weakens an omnibus recognition of the frescoes as sight philosophical texts if left out.

The meaning and explanation of Buddhist symbols present in Dunhuang art are also based on philosophical ideas. As Bao and Ao (2022) indicate, the appropriation of Indian Buddhist motifs into the Chinese cultural context not only retains the doctrinal content but also combines local syncretic thinking, forming a new religious story. This philosophical underpinning has been localized by

tradition and advanced thoughts. Baoru (2019) concludes that such elements as the unity of humans and nature in a painting or capturing background scenes symbolize the Buddhist theory of relativity. Such representations further emphasize that the frescoes were designed to transmit metaphysical concepts.

2.2. *Symbolic Representations in Dunhuang Artworks Contribute to the Philosophical Discourse between Art, Spirituality, and Religion*

Symbolism in the artworks of Dunhuang can be considered an efficient research tool to discover a connection between art and religion. These representations contained in the frescoes and sculptures of the Dunhuang Caves explain concepts fundamental to Buddhist philosophy while participating in other cultural and existential debates of their time. Ruan (2023) underscores the aesthetic function of decoration, the lotus motive, and the function of the lotus motive of giving philosophical meaning to the object. The lotus begins and ends the tale and recurs more than any other motif, representing the Buddhist concept of being above the flesh and the consequent pain. However, Ruan critiques that in some interpretations of Michelangelo's sculptures and other works of art, the desire to be overly artistic is wrong because excluding the philosophical aspects of such signs diminishes the spiritual elements.

Hung (2022) notes the function of Dunhuang artworks in global philosophical and educational possibilities and relates the signs of the artworks to the general notions of moral and aesthetic proposal. The author makes a point of arguing how little has been done by scholars to explain how these symbols encourage philosophical discourse in non-figurative religious settings. This common failure should be avoided. Zhai (2024) introduces the special meaning of the Dunhuang mural's target symbol of 'Three Rabbits Sharing Ears' to symbolize family ties and spiritual wealth. Although the motif provides a deeper insight into the art of Dunhuang's cultural iconography, Zhai critiques questions its exclusion from other interpretations of Dunhuang's philosophical value and, in particular, its significant point to the discussion of the relation and the community in Buddhism.

Wang and Saxdu (2023) examine the change in Buddhist symbolism in Dunhuang art and how the exterior cultural and philosophic factors impacted it. The references to both Taoism and Confucianism in harmony with Buddhism form the syncretic visual messages that enrich the extent of philosophical

discussion within the paintings. However, critiques regarding how this syncretism affects the understanding of spirit and philosophy. In Su and Zhou (2019), the authors discuss the human-nature relationship theme portrayed in the frescoes in the light of Buddhism, where harmony is achieved because everything is interconnected. These representations are post-philosophical reflections on the position of people in nature. Su and Zhou, however, reject such surface-level treatment of these topics in mainstream research and insist on the metaphysical aspect of the themes.

2.3. Philosophical Theories in the Interpretation of DF and Their Implications for Religious Art as a Medium of Metaphysical Expression

Applying the philosophical concept contributes meaningful insight toward understanding the religious frescoes in Dunhuang as a symbolic art form. Apart from representing works of art, Dunhuang frescoes contain historical and philosophical messages, or at least that can be interpreted from a Buddhist perspective. Critics have analyzed these artworks using philosophic outlooks to explain how they represented spiritual and metaphysical concepts. J. Wang and Qiu (2014) investigate the architectural features depicted in the frescoes at Dunhuang Mogao that belong to the period of the Northern Dynasties with special reference to the role of symbolism in the framework of Buddhist art and culture. The authors point out that these architectural images effuse order and measure, an understanding that parallels the Buddhist concepts of anatta and anicca. Though their study highlights the issues of the metaphysical aspect of these representations, they express dissatisfaction with the existing historical and aesthetic approaches, arguing that the philosophical and symbolical content that underlies the architectural symbols is not elaborated enough.

I. Sandu et al. (2024) conducted a system-structural study of the development of symbolic styles in Dunhuang frescoes. It identifies how canonical imagery drawn from Buddhist tradition is fused with artistic practices associated with specific locations to reveal a complex interweave of metaphysical and cultural discourses. However, they express their dissatisfaction with another sort of historical analysis in which philosophers look at art and pay too little attention to metaphysical discourses while arguing for further discourses on the combined nature of art. Zeng et al. (2024) look at the development of themes in Dunhuang murals and identify how changes in the art mirror the shift in

social, spiritual, and philosophical aspects over time. They have pointed out that their research shows how such metamorphic changes can occur in a set context that is targeted or influenced by Buddhists, giving evidence that edifices' murals can convey lofty metaphysical ideas as applicable to a particular society and, notably, appropriate to local traditions. The authors state, however, that several themes are layered over one another in the murals. Factors such as history and culture complicate the identification of certain philosophical concepts and make a clear understanding of the symbolism underlying the murals quite challenging.

Liu and Q. Yang (2023), while discussing Dunhuang frescoes, the author's center of attention is on musical and dance aspects as representing the sign of harmony and metaphysical concepts. They find fault with the absence of broad theories on the philosophical aspects of these elements and call for more holistic approaches to art analysis. Chen et al. (2024) discuss how the Dunhuang frescoes are being altered by digital media technologies to make the metaphysical and philosophy more understandable today. It claims the possibility of enhancing the experience of these works through virtual reality and simultaneously outlines the problems with simplifying the specimens' philosophical messages in their digital versions.

3. LITERATURE GAP

In the current state of knowledge about the Dunhuang frescoes and the paintings in the caves, one has to focus on the fact that most works mainly concentrate their analysis on esthetic, historical, and cultural perspectives. Although these are interesting for their art and religious purpose, one can observe that there is little extensive investigation pursuing the philosophy in them. Scholars such as H. Liu et al. (2024) and X. Zhang (2023) explicate the semantic meanings of the simple ornaments depicted in the frescoes, including the lotus, without exploring that the latter symbol signifies pure consciousness and other metaphysical essences of the Buddhist convention.

As pointed out by S. Wang and Saxdu (2023), the influences of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are illustrated in frescoes, and they are syncretic. However, there is a failure to gauge how this combination shapes the comprehension of spiritual and philosophical accounts. Similar to Sandu et al. (2024) and Zeng et al. (2024) highlight the lack of focus on philosophy compared to history, sadly reducing symbolic styles' metaphysics to a minimum. In addition, as Ruan (2023) and Y. Liu &

Q. Yang (2023) attempt to explain concepts like harmony and connectivity, there is a lack of appropriate theoretical foundations for the topics. This deficiency explains the need to explore Dunhuang frescoes as philosophical texts and expand the existing literature on religious art as the form of conveyance of metaphysical concepts.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Methods and Design

A systematic literature review (SLR), a qualitative research method, was utilized to achieve the research objectives of this study. The SLR method identified, evaluated and criticized the utilized studies promptly to finely cover the topic. The approach employed was to screen the literature using inclusion and exclusion criteria in order to assess the quality of the attained data. Based on that, the rigor of the SLR was used to define the reliability and validity of the results, which made the procedure follow the aims of the study.

4.2. Data Collection Method

Searching Techniques: The data collection process began by identifying and employing relevant

keywords aligned with the themes of the study. Keywords included terms related to "Dunhuang frescoes," "symbolic representations," "philosophical interpretations," and "religious art." These terms facilitated a focused search for scholarly literature pertinent to the research objectives.

Databases: Some of the targeted databases included the search in the search were a few academic databases, including JSTOR, Web of Science (WOS), Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. These sources were selected due to their large pool of articles that were accepted by other scholars on the subjects covered in the research. The databases assisted in ensuring that only good and reliable sources of information were collected.

Boolean Operators: Advanced searches methods were applied with the use of such Boolean operators as AND, OR, NOT. The operators narrowed the search and broadened the search capacity of the search as they allowed locating literature that dealt specifically with the intersections of symbolism and philosophy and religious art.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was established to refine the search results. The criteria are presented in the following Table 1

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publications	Peer-reviewed journal articles after 2013	Non-peer-reviewed articles, blogs, or editorials before 2013
Research Type	Empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, SLRs	Opinion pieces or incomplete studies
Language	English	Non-English publications
Focus	Symbolism, philosophy, and religious art	General discussions without a specific focus

4.3. Selection of Paper through PRISMA Framework

The screening and selection of the articles was carried out and accomplished with the help of the

PRISMA framework. The first search resulted in 80 articles, found according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria.



Figure 2: PRISMA Framework.

The abstracts and full texts collated were checked against the study aims and objectives on more than

one occasion. Out of this stringent screening, 12 articles were found to review (Figure 2). This purposive method of sampling ensured that research studies which described the research themes were used accurately.

4.4. Data Analysis Methods

The data collected was reviewed by use of thematic analysis. This allowed patterns and themes to be taken into consideration and integrated to extract information based on the research goals. All the analysis procedures such as theme identification were carried out systematically with the assistance of the NVivo Software. Table 2 below describes the steps of the thematic analysis

Table 2: Data Analysis Methods.

Steps	Description
Familiarization	Immersion in the data through repeated reading of selected studies.
Coding	Highlighting key themes and ideas from the text.
Theme Development	Grouping codes into broader themes aligned with the research objectives.
Reviewing Themes	Refining and validating the themes for consistency and relevance.
Reporting	Synthesizing the themes into coherent findings for the study.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

The main emphasis of the study was the measure of the ethical considerations. To solve the problem of intellectual property rights, only the articles published, and available on peer-reviewed scientific journals were used. The reference guidelines were followed and therefore, any concept not authored by the author is not ignored. The bias of this research was kept under control by making sure that it followed the inclusion and exclusion criteria hence

restrained biases during the article selection process.

5. RESULTS

This chapter presents the data collected in this study systematically in tabular form and the implications of each of the research objectives. Table 3 below shows the description of themes extracted for data analysis using NVivo Software used to study the data collected.

Table 3: Theme Extraction for Data Analysis.

Themes	Description
Philosophical Underpinnings	Exploration of the foundational philosophical ideas reflected in the symbolic representations of Dunhuang frescoes, focusing on how these symbols embody metaphysical and spiritual principles central to Buddhist teachings.
Religious Ideologies	Analysis of how the symbolic elements in the frescoes convey religious ideologies, including the integration of Buddhist doctrines and their interaction with local traditions such as Taoism and Confucianism.
Symbolism in Art and Spirituality	Examination of the role of symbolic representations in fostering philosophical discourse on the interplay between art, spirituality, and religious meaning, emphasizing their function as mediators of spiritual experiences.
Metaphysical Expression	Assessment of how Dunhuang frescoes serve as a medium for expressing metaphysical ideas, such as impermanence, interconnectedness, and the transcendence of material existence, through the integration of philosophical theories.
Cultural and Artistic Synthesis	Study of the blending of artistic and cultural influences in the frescoes, revealing a syncretic approach that merges Buddhist, Chinese, and Central Asian traditions into a unified philosophical and artistic narrative.
Impact on Religious Art	Evaluation of the implications of interpreting Dunhuang frescoes as a philosophical and metaphysical text, contributing to a broader understanding of the role of religious art in shaping and transmitting spiritual and cultural ideas.

Table 4 highlights two studies on Dunhuang murals and sculptures. M. C. Wang (2018) reconstitutes the philosophical and religious tenets in these artworks, which are a reflection of a syncretism of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian concepts emanating from the combination of Indian Buddhism with Chinese culture. Z. Yan and Mokhtar (2023) discuss the

metaphysical allusions of the 'baoxianghua' motive used in frescos found around Dunhuang and their importance in the theological and spiritual sense during the Tang dynasty, as well as in depicting the philosophical and metaphysical concepts. Both studies serve to explore transcultural exchanges and metaphysical notions in Chinese art.

Table 4: Philosophical Underpinnings.

Study	Objectives	Methods	Findings	Conclusion
M. C. Wang (2018)	To reconstruct the philosophical and religious principles depicted in the Dunhuang murals and sculptors, with an emphasis on centuries.	Literature review and analysis of Dunhuang artefacts.	The murals represent a syncretism of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian beliefs that reflected Indian Buddhist traditions, incorporating Chinese cultural and religious elements into 'Chinese secular Buddhism.'	By closely examining Dunhuang art and its historical and cultural context, this study contributes to exploring Buddhist metaphysics and understanding the processes of transcultural exchange.
Z. Yan and Mokhtar (2023)	The analysis of the symbolic and philosophical meanings of the 'baoxianghua' patterns in Dunhuang murals, according to their representation of metaphysical spiritual principles.	Qualitative visual analysis and iconographic analysis.	Motifs of 'baoxianghua' are significant symbolic representations, spiritual and cultural values of the Tang dynasty, and indicators of metaphysics, such as symbols in Dunhuang frescoes.	In Dunhuang frescoes, the study of 'baoxianghua' patterns is highlighted, especially concerning their metaphysical symbolism and the metaphysical role of the 'baoxianghua' patterns incorporating philosophical and spiritual principles.

Table 5: Religious Ideologies.

Study	Objectives	Methods	Findings	Conclusion
Khan et al. (2021)	This study aims to analyze the stages and dimensions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, having been integrated into Chinese culture and ideology.	Historical analysis and philosophical inquiry.	Four stages and three dimensions of integrating Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism formed a development process and gradually formed the foundational structure of traditional Chinese ideology and culture.	Indeed, the philosophical and cultural integration of the three religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) has contributed significantly to Chinese traditional culture, which pays for harmony and coexistence.
Bi (2024)	To determine how Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism cultural systems were depicted in the murals of Dunhuang.	Qualitative analysis of murals and historical texts.	It is seen that the primary religious interfusion of the murals is of Buddhist origin, which, however, adopts a harmonious synthesis from the surrounding Taoist, Confucian, and even Zoroastrian culture, depicting a shared cultural message.	The images of Dunhuang are the best example of the "one and many" principle, as many religions function in complete unity with each other in a particular cultural sphere.

Table 5 presents two studies on the integration of religious ideologies in Chinese culture. Khan et al. (2021) argue on the stages and dimensions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in revealing how they combined to form the essence of Chinese ideology to ensure harmony and coexistence. Bi (2024) interprets Dunhuang murals and shows that though the Buddhist influence overwhelms, other traditions, such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism, are also manifested there, presenting the religious cultures in syncretism. Both studies highlight the integration and unity of the different religious traditions of Chinese culture.

Table 6 highlights two studies on the symbolism of Dunhuang frescoes in art and spirituality. S. Li and T. Li (2021) discuss how the music and dance aspects

of the frescoes reflect the synergy of aesthetics and metaphysics with an emphasis on their part in cultural conservation via digital analysis.

Dengming and Jian (2019) review the symbolic elements of these frescoes, for example, colors and patterns, which demonstrate how they tell religious stories and inspire modern art and education. The combination of art, spirituality, and cultural continuity is emphasized in both studies.

Table 7 presents two studies on the metaphysical expression in Dunhuang frescoes. L. Wang and N. Wang (2022) analyze how such frescos represent metaphysical concepts such as change, impermanence, and mutuality with a tendency of the early civilizations and the universe to have a strong relationship. By comparing Dunhuang frescoes with

Zhongyuan tomb murals, Z. Li (2017) reveals the former's irresistibility to ephemeral and transcendent themes and the latter's attaching to cultural realism.

Both types of research highlight the Dunhuang frescoes as an excellent visualization of metaphysical ideas.

Table 6: Symbolism in Art and Spirituality.

Study	Objectives	Methods	Findings	Conclusion
S. Li and T. Li (2021)	To pursue the artistic and digital analysis of frescoes in Dunhuang frescoes and understand how to interpret and perform music and dance in spirituality.	Qualitative analysis and digital design methods.	Musical dance elements are an essential part of the frescoes of Dunhuang, which test the synergy of aesthetic and metaphysical concepts in art and an important aspect of cultural preservation in the contemporary through digitization.	Musical dance frescoes in Dunhuang are best viewed as representing spiritual intercession and the synthesis of art, animation, and artefacts.
Dengming and Jian (2019)	To examine how Dunhuang frescoes appeared artistically and symbolically in the modern perspective and how these frescoes function within the stories of spirituality and aesthetics.	Literature analysis and qualitative exploration.	It is established that the symbolic features of Dunhuang frescoes like colours, patterns, and figures, elucidated to offer religious stories and motivate modern art and education initiatives.	Symbolism in the frescoes in Dunhuang assists in pulling the meaning behind ancient spirituality into the present through artistic creation and use in teaching.

Table 7: Metaphysical Expression.

Study	Objectives	Methods	Findings	Conclusion
L. Wang and N. Wang (2022)	To raise the discussion on possible specific ways of demonstrating the concept of such general Metaphysical ideas as relation and mutuality, change, and impermanence through analyzing the contexts, practices, and philosophies of the ancient world with the help of analyzing frescoes created in Dunhuang.	Historical and contextual analysis.	The frescoes show how the early civilizations of man connected with the universe by observing metaphysical features of life, wisdom that was earned from past knowledge of change, and harmonization of the soul.	Dunhuang frescoes are, therefore, a colourful depiction of metaphysics that directly connect the philosophy of the ancient world to art.
Z. Li (2017)	Analyzing Dunhuang frescoes figuratively or philosophically and comparing them with Zhongyuan tomb murals in terms of their chosen motifs, such as temporal mutability and eternal salvation.	Comparative analysis of visual elements and themes.	While Dunhuang frescoes bring otherworldly concepts regarding style themes and motifs, including ephemeral and transcendent themes, Zhongyuan tomb murals are firmly grounded in cultural realism.	Therefore, the subjects of Dunhuang frescoes are different in that they embody various forms of metaphysical significance to a higher degree than most other styles of art of the same period.

Table 8 highlights two studies on cultural and artistic synthesis in Dunhuang frescoes. The "Nine-Colored Deer Benshengtu" mural is considered (Ran, 2023) as an example reflecting Indian Buddhist Art influences, Sinicization (incorporating Chinese narratives with Buddhist themes). Liang and D. Guo (2017) analyze the role of color in Dunhuang frescoes to highlight how color techniques maintain the cultural integration and artistic syncretism along the

Silk Road, with a fusion of Indian, Central Asian, and Chinese details. Both studies highlight the harmonious combination of different forms of cultural impact in Dunhuang art.

Table 9 discusses the impact of Dunhuang frescoes on modern religious art. Feiyu (2024) examines how elements of these frescoes encourage contemporary illustration design in a way that ensures the living spiritual and aesthetic essence of

these frescoes is not lost but that they are with their time. In their work, B. Y. Liu and Oh (2021) look at the role of the metaverse technology in digitally displaying Dunhuang frescoes and increasing their philosophical and spiritual value. Both studies point

out the constantly relevant and globally important status of Dunhuang frescoes, which are sustained in their cultural legacy via modern technological applications.

Table 8: Cultural and Artistic Synthesis.

Study	Objectives	Methods	Findings	Conclusion
Ran (2023)	In order to probe into artistic and cultural integration and the Sinicization process of Buddhist mural paintings, this paper selects the "Nine-Colored Deer Benshengtu" inside the Mogao Cave 257 in Dunhuang, Gansu Province as the primary sample.	Iconographic and stylistic analysis.	The "Nine-Colored Deer Benshengtu" proves the shift of the Indian Buddhist art influence to the decoration of ingeniously representing the cultural still a distinctly Chinese narrative in Buddhist murals.	The success of the Sinicization of Buddhist murals in Dunhuang in preserving Indian and Chinese art elements brought out a unique cultural/philosophical identity.
Liang and D. Guo (2017)	To specifically examine the identification of color representation in the frescoes of Dunhuang as an essential aspect of political and cultural assimilation and artistic development.	Systematic analysis of color techniques and symbolic meanings.	The approach to the use of color in the frescos of Dunhuang provides shape to a similar penchant for artistic syncretism, which originated in India, Central Asia, and China to ensure that a harmonious fusion of bright colours was painted, which stands as a testimony to the cultural interaction along the Silk Road.	It cannot be denied that the incorporation or synthesis of various color systems and skills depicted by Dunhuang frescoes speaks volumes for the synthesis of cultures.

Table 9: Impact on Religious Art.

Study	Objectives	Methods	Findings	Conclusion
Feiyu (2024)	To discuss the impact of Dunhuang frescoes elements in modern illustration design and their social and cultural significance as a form of spiritual and art heritage.	Qualitative analysis of design elements and symbolic interpretation.	Based on the development of Dunhuang frescoes with symbolic and artistic blessings, we maintain the spirit of illustration design while creatively drawing inspiration from it.	Transposing Dunhuang fresco elements into modernistic design helps maintain their soul and indicates that all the themes are still valid for people nowadays.
B. Y. Liu and Oh (2021)	To develop this idea further, the present research aims to study how metaverse technology's application can help to build a vivid presentation of the Dunhuang frescoes and provide deeper philosophical and spiritual meaning.	Digital transformation and user experience research.	Metaverse technology integration makes it possible to create familiar and engaging detailed representations of Dunhuang frescoes while highlighting their philosophical and spiritual value to the global society.	Metaverse technology enhances Dunhuang frescoes as digital interactive sites for philosophical-spiritual uses, which deserve further worldwide understanding.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Interpretation of the Findings

The findings highlight and support the importance of Dunhuang frescoes as an essential interface between art, philosophy, and religion in a significant way, thus meeting the study's objectives in the most desirable ways. First, the frescoes combine metaphysical writings showing concepts of Buddhist teachings, such as the concept of impermanence and relations between phenomena.

For instance, in conjunction with symbolic accents, such as the themes of man and nature, the publication reveals the relationship between metaphysical concepts and artistic realms.

Second, the frescoes are not only superficial since they serve as vessels of cultural assimilation. The intertwined of the elements of the Indian, Chinese, and Central Asian art narrates a religious and also a philosophical tale. The patterns of harmony in morality and culture like the "Nine-Colored Deer" and controlled, imaginative colorings equalize the

broad breadth of styles of art.

Also, the research indicates that, new technology has also improved the interpretative values of these frescoes. Distance education and virtual reality make them more available and keep their philosophy intact and promoting the contemporary connection. Regardless of technology spread in the modern world, these frescoes ensure the combination of the academic symbolism with technical means to facilitate the most recent ideas and cultural experiences.

Lastly, the results indicate that Dunhuang frescoes are treated differently in scholarly sources, which attend to their historical and aesthetic sides to a greater extent and underplay their philosophical richness. This study makes that gap since the frescoes constitute the essential artifacts to determine how religious art is the vehicle of conveying both spiritual and cultural ideologies.

6.2. Comparison with the Previous Studies

Philosophical Underpinnings According to M. C. Wang (2018), it is apparent that Dunhuang murals reflect the principles of Buddhism Taoism as well as Confucianism, what is known as the “Chinese secular Buddhism.” These are similar to the findings of Hung (2022) who confirmed the cultural and philosophical elements established in Dunhuang art. However, the current research highlights the functionality of the metaphysical interpretations which include motivation which gives an extra dimension to analyzing how artwork communicates metaphysical ideals.

For Z. Yan and Mokhtar (2023), examining “baoxianghua” motifs in Tang dynasty frescoes of the Mogao Caves introduces an entirely new layer of metaphysical concern. These findings are consistent with Z. Yan and Mokhtar (2023) work because they addressed the metaphysical aspect of symbolic elements as investigated by X. Lu et al. (2022). Nevertheless, the current study goes further by relating these motifs to overarching philosophical themes and presenting an intertextual analysis of the representation of these motifs.

Religious Ideologies Khan et al., (2021) align the historical analysis of the synthesis of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in Chinese civilization as presented by B. Y. Liu and Oh, (2022). From both studies, the coexistence of these ideologies as how it is, is highlighted as the basics of clearly the traditional Chinese thought. However, while Khan et al. (2021) pay much attention to the philosophical changes, Liu and Oh (2022) offer some understanding of the technological remobilization of

these philosophies in the contemporary world.

Regarding Bi (2024), the “one and many” is similar to the analysis with Shi (2024), who looks at the religious syncretism in Dunhuang murals. However, the work under analysis is primarily based on the configuration of Bi (2024) project, which includes Zoroastrianism as one of the components, while it has not been studied sufficiently in the preceding research.

Symbolism in Art and Spirituality Li and Li (2021), the implication of the musical dance aspect in Dunhuang frescoes is largely asserted in spiritual and aesthetic aspects, largely supported by Kuang (2019). Kuang (2019) review pays attention to the function of musical and dance motifs as mediators of spiritual and cultural interactions and is devoted to the history of this concept. However, Li and Li (2021) build on this by integrating digitization as a factor that helps to maintain and redefine these factors for the present society.

Dengming and Jian (2019) examined symbolism in Dunhuang frescoes, specifically patterns, colour, and figures, about present-day education and art. This aligns with Feiyu (2024) who examines how such frescoes inform contemporary illustration design as a way of developing the traditional into modernity. Dengming and Jian (2019) however, pay more attention to the religious meanings that are revealed through those architectural symbols.

Metaphysical Expression These findings of L. Wang & N. Wang (2022) on metaphysical themes in Dunhuang frescoes particularly the themes of transience and reciprocity proved the study of Baoru (2019). They also discuss how these frescoes express humans’ cosmic affiliations, symbolic in terms of unity and transformation. Nonetheless, Wang and Wang expand a more specific exploration of philosophy, and Baoru concentrates on the environmental and educational implications to be learned from such metaphysical motifs.

Z. Li (2017) is also similar to Y. Zhao and Y. Guo (2021), who address the use of colour and signs in Dunhuang frescoes. As can be observed from the two articles, there appears to be good subject matter incorporating philosophical concepts in the artistic concept of the frescoes. However, Z. Li offers a more inclusive comparative analysis with Zhongyuan tomb murals, while Zhao Guo gives evidence of metaphysical concepts depicted by physical appearance using artistic skills.

Cultural and Artistic Synthesis Ran (2023) and Liang and D. Guo (2017) point out that Dunhuang frescoes are an outstanding example of the Sinicization of Buddhist art & integration of various

cultural aspects which is very well depicted through colours and stories. The results of the study are in concordance with Zhao and Y. Li (2023), who emphasize the role of the exchange in the Silk Road in the development of Dunhuang's art and identity. However, Zhao and Y. Li (2023) take it one step further to ground the integration in globalization and modern digital archival issues.

In the same regard, the findings conform with X. Zhang (2023), who has suggested that Dunhuang murals were central to depicting the Buddhist teachings and the influence from the Central Asia region in the same respect, with particular recognition of cultural sensitivity. In this aspect, the main difference is that, while Ran (2023) sees specific art products like the "Nine-Colored Deer Benshengtu" as the criteria, X. Zhang (2023) positions these same objects as lying along a range.

Impact on Religious Art Feiyu (2024) and B. Y. Liu and Oh (2021) have shown that the application of digital and metaverse practices plays an innovative function in conserving the cultural and spiritual significance of Dunhuang frescoes. These findings align with Zhu and Chung (2023), who amplify the effects of IT on audience participation and provide an insight into the religious importance of the frescoes. By applying traditional symbols to new illustration designs, Feiyu (2024) expands on Zhu and Chung (2023) concept by updating their metaphysical meaning into a new form of modern art.

The study is also relevant to Y. Zhao and Y. Guo (2021), who concentrate on the connection between the fresco pigments and their iconicity. Y. Zhao and Y. Guo (2021) discuss the physical and symbolic aspects of the works, while B. Y. Liu and Oh (2021) focus on the mediated images and advanced technologies that bring centuries-old art to contemporary philosophy.

7. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The research underscores the multidimensional functions of Dunhuang frescoes, focusing on the fact that these paintings are philosophical writings and artifacts. In combination of art and religion through symbols, a deeper way of interpreting the link between the art, the spiritual, and the philosophical can be derived from the frescoes, as stated by Quyang (2023). The study fills existing gaps in the literature by showing how art acts as an avenue through which other philosophies, such as the transience of life and the symbolic relationships of all things, may be depicted.

Additionally, this study demonstrates the integration of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism

in Dunhuang art and reveals the essence of such syncretism as a model of culture in the modern context concerning educational and art practices. In this context, while using such technologies as virtual reality to read frescoes, the study not only safeguards the religious meaning of the art but also introduces these frescoes into contemporary philosophical debates, as stated by Q. Xu (2023). Finally, this research builds up a paramount for the theory of religious art as the model of interpretative possibilities for the metaphysical discourse and opens perspectives for the further interdisciplinary interaction of art history, religious studies, and philosophy.

8. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the multifaceted significance of Dunhuang frescoes as intersections of art, philosophy, and religion. Thus, the conceptual meanings of these frescoes embrace the main living principles of Buddhism and particularly stress the notions of impermanency and interdependence. They also act as valuable cultural objects that present the integration of Indian, Chinese and Central Asian cultures. However, the research focuses on the intended use of the frescoes as tools for stimulating philosophical discussions and on their applicability to modern society, especially following the technological breakthrough in the creation of virtual reality. Besides contributing to these gaps in the current literature on the philosophical concepts related to these artworks, this study locates Dunhuang frescoes as a significant source of religious art that has the potential to disseminate religious and cultural doctrines. This paper thus establishes the journey of these art pieces as they transition from being aesthetic icons to philosophical documents between the modern and the ancient world.

8.1. Limitations of the Study

The study provides valuable information about art, philosophy and religion as exemplified by Dunhuang frescoes. However, the following limitations can be seen: First of all, it can be noted that no use of primary data only secondary data from peer-reviewed articles have been used rather than direct surveys or analysis from frescoes or interviews with historians and artists. This might also reduce the possibility of discussions in terms of symbolism and the philosophical meaning of the frescoes.

Second, the conceptual concentration of the Buddhist ideology and metaphysical concepts may spoil focus of other religious and cultural aspects that

propagated in the frescoes including Taoist and Confucian aspects which warrant additional discussion. Finally, although the article raises the issue of digital progression such as virtual reality, the research does not provide any empirical support on how successfully the technologies benefit the modern experience with the frescoes. The gaps in the research could be filled by future objective by using interdisciplinary approaches and extending to different cultures to gain the inclusiveness of the research.

8.2. Future Work

Research done in the future can study additional elements of Dunhuang frescoes with secondary information adopted by sources which cover non-textual proofs of the areas or historical and art

professionals of frescoes. Further studies of interaction of texts, even more specifically, the Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist influence, could give a more knowledgeable understanding of the syncretism of the frescoes. In addition, quantitative exploring of the impact of technologies, virtual reality, in capturing the attention of the audience to the frescoes, and their interpretation of the frescos would contribute to the current applications. Moreover, finding frameworks in the frescoes that oppose, say, the Zoroastrianism, would perhaps vary the views of cultural interactions in the latitudinal. Last but not the least is the idea of integrating art history and philosophy with the use of the technology as multidisciplinary approaches to gain the old approaches to capture the complexity of how art and metaphysical discourse are connected and, thus, to be able to appreciate and learn these paintings by the descendants themselves.

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