

Social Mirror and Identity Performance: An Art-Sociological Interpretation of the Donor Portraits in Dunhuang

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Abstract

From the perspective of art sociology, the study of Dunhuang donor portraits reveals a dichotomy between two paradigms: the “Art-Society” paradigm, which uncovers their nature as a mirror of social structure, and the “Art-Sociology” paradigm, which focuses on the performative practice of image-making in the display of secular identity. This paper employs these two paradigms to interpret two aspects of Dunhuang donor portraits. First, at the level of social mirroring, the system of Dunhuang donor portraits is essentially a visual projection of the social structure of Dunhuang during the late Tang and Five Dynasties period; their sequence, spatial arrangement, and symbolic system multidimensionally reflect the local power structure dominated by powerful families. Second, at the level of identity performance, using Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory to deconstruct the performativity of patronage acts reveals that these powerful families used Buddhist worship as a “Front Stage,” transforming religious space into a field for displaying secular authority. Adopting this dual perspective, and building upon the first two levels of Panofsky’s iconological method, this study delves into the third level—iconological interpretation—to analyze the logic by which Dunhuang’s powerful families constructed power through patronage acts.

Keywords: Dunhuang donor portraits, art sociology, Dramaturgical Theory, futou

1. Introduction

The formation of Chinese art history follows an evolutionary mechanism characterized by “renewal at the center and intense transformation at the periphery.” Dunhuang frescoes are an outstanding representative of this peripheral transformation, their artistic origins traceable to the core Central Plains regions (Zhu, Q. S., 2025). During this prolonged process of “intense transformation,” donors gradually emerged as a distinct artistic group: motivated by specific religious beliefs, they contributed financial resources, materials, or labor to the creation of sacred images, the excavation of caves, and the construction of religious sites, thereby promoting the spread of doctrine. Their identity is essentially that of devout religious practitioners.

Within this cultural context, writings on Dunhuang donors align closely with the “descriptive writing” and “interpretive writing” modes proposed by David Carrier in *Ekphrasis and Interpretation: Two Models of Art History Writing* (Carreir, D., 1987). Furthermore, the donor group can be seen as a typical case for art-social history research—a theory positing that art history should encompass two dimensions: one concerning the artist and their work, and the other involving the art patron and their economic, political, and religious context (Lv, P., 2007). Correspondingly, two research paradigms have emerged in constructing a reading system for Dunhuang donor images: the “art-society” paradigm and the “art-sociology” paradigm (Lu, W. C., 2016). The former typically focuses on the levels of pre-iconographical description and iconographical analysis, while the latter delves deeper into the cultural context, employing iconological methods to interpret the symbolic structures and meaning systems behind the images (Panofsky, E., 1972). It is important to note that these two paradigms are not mutually exclusive but constitute different stages in the reading process: researchers often begin with

pre-iconographical description and iconographical analysis, involving the initial identification and recording of formal elements such as figure posture, costume, composition, color, line, and objects. Only after sufficient formal analysis can one advance to the stage of iconological interpretation—exploring the themes, narratives, and cultural connotations carried by the visual elements, and discerning the symbolic meaning of donor identity, religious symbols, and scenes by comparing texts, historical records, and contemporaneous images.

This paper takes the crown symbols presented by the representative Guiyijun donor group in Dunhuang as a specific case study, attempting to reconstruct the image reading process of the aforementioned two stages. Although numerous researchers have made significant contributions to pre-iconographical and iconographical analysis, senior scholars have left some research space. Advancing iconological interpretation from an art-sociological perspective may provide a clearer direction for uncovering deeper cultural meanings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Recent Research on Dunhuang and Its Donors

Recent Dunhuang studies globally show a predominance of Chinese scholars, but with differing foci between domestic and international researchers. Foreign scholarship primarily concentrates on Buddhist elements within the Dunhuang caves, particularly textual studies of Buddhist manuscripts, such as Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist texts and secular documents. Examples include Van Schaik, S.'s *The Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts in China* (Van Schaik, S., 2002), Dotson, B.'s *The Dunhuang Region during Tibetan Rule (787-848): A Study of the Secular Manuscripts Discovered at Dunhuang* (Dotson, B., 2014), Hendrischke, B.'s *Dunhuang Manuscript Culture: End of the First Millennium* (Hendrischke, B., 2022), and Alekseev, K.'s *The Dunhuang History of the Cycle of Birth and Death in the Mongolian Manuscript Kanjur* (Alekseev, K., 2025). In contrast, domestic Chinese research largely falls into the categories of textual criticism/image-narrative interpretation and can be further divided into two directions. The first part consists of foundational research, mainly dedicated to identifying the specific identities of donors in cave frescoes, such as Chen Juxia et al.'s *A Study on the Khotanese Donor Figures in Mogao Cave 4 at Dunhuang* (Chen, J. X. & Li, S. N., 2021) and *A Study on the Donor Figures of the Couple of Yannai* (Chen, J. X. & Ma, Z. M., 2021), and Ren Huaisheng's *The Identification of the Male Donors in Mogao Cave 409 and 237* (Ren, H. S., 2019). The second part involves deeper excavation based on such textual research, using visual materials like donor images as entry points to evidence and interpret broader historical and cultural themes such as ancient political relations, ethnic characteristics, artistic exchange, religious beliefs, and institutions. Prominent representatives include a series of relevant papers by Professor Sha Wutian, such as *Female Donors in Uighur Costumes in the Dunhuang Caves of the Five Dynasties and the Song Dynasty & the Ethnic Characteristics of Cao Family's Administration over the Return-to-Allegiance Army Regime* (Sha, W. T., 2013), *Role Reversal and Historical Memory: Artistic Significance of the Wall Painting of Zhang Qian Exploring the Western Regions on a Diplomatic Mission in Mogao Cave 323* (Sha, W. T. & Wang, P. X., 2014), *On the Buddhism Sponsorship and Political Propaganda* (Sha, W. T., 2020), *Influence of Chang'an and Borrowing of Local Patron Deities: Re-interpretation of the Motivation and Thought of the Selection of Khotan Auspicious Images in Dunhuang Caves* (Sha, W. T., 2022), among others. Additionally, there is Cui Yan's *The fish bags in Dunhuang murals and the reflected ceremonial costume system: Centered around the inscriptions and portraits of the donors* (Cui, Y., 2024). In summary, building upon and deepening the academic path represented by Professor Sha Wutian and Researcher Cui Yan, this research focuses on the materiality and cultural functions of donor images and inscriptions in Dunhuang caves. It adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, comprehensively applying analytical methods from iconology, history, and socio-cultural history to deeply interpret the multiple historical connotations—such as ritual, belief, and political concepts—carried by these visual materials, aiming for a more holistic understanding of social and cultural change in the medieval Dunhuang region.

2.2 The Two Paradigms of Art Sociology

Since the latter half of the 19th century, influenced by Marxist theory, social art history gradually developed into an important direction within art historiography. This school originated from the Marxist discourse on the relationship between economic base and superstructure, viewing art as an expression of ideology within the superstructure. Marx and Engels jointly pointed out in *The German Ideology*: “Art is not something produced by great genius in an almost incomprehensible way, but is merely another form of economic production.” (Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1998) Entering the 20th century, the discipline of art history, through the efforts of several generations of scholars, gradually established a relatively complete theoretical system, research methods, and academic framework. Simultaneously, sociological thought began to penetrate the humanities, promoting an important turn in art historical research. In this context, the Hungarian art historian Arnold Hauser published *Social history of art* (Hauser, A., 2005) in English in 1951, eliciting widespread and profound response in English-speaking academia. He openly proposed that art must be understood within its social context, its style, themes, and functions all closely related to the economic base, class structure, and ideology. Furthermore,

Hauser introduced a dialogic mode into Marxist theory, reconstructing the sociology of art and constructing a sociological angle suitable for art history (Ludz, P. C., 1979).

Amidst the advances in the sociology of art by numerous 20th-century scholars, two paradigms gradually formed: the “art-society” paradigm represented by Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldmann, and the “art-sociology” paradigm represented by Howard S. Becker (see Table 1). The former investigates the relationship between art and society, its fundamental purpose being to judge the value of the artwork, with the focus remaining on the art itself. “Art-society” is dominated by reflection theory: it holds that artworks reflect social reality (especially class structure and social totality), and that great works can more comprehensively and truthfully reflect the “social whole” of their time. It can be said: “Lukács’s social philosophy is almost the inevitable result of formal aesthetics, which in turn feeds on a general interest in the social cultural order” (Gilbert, A. S. & Magerski, C., 2020). This paradigm also carries philosophical and transcendentalist colors; its methodology is not empirical but involves strong philosophical speculation and a priori presuppositions, such as Lukács’s concept of “totality”: he claimed the validity of dialectical materialism owed to its more comprehensive framework, which considered the historical dimension of social life: “Only the dialectical attitude can achieve a synthesis (of history and sociology: M.G.) by understanding past as a necessary and valid stage and a path towards the common action of men of the same class in the present in order to realize an authentic and universal community in the future” (Glucksmann, M., 1969). The latter, however, uses sociological methods to study artistic phenomena, its fundamental purpose being to develop sociological theory itself, with the focus on sociology. In Becker’s view, the works of Lukács and others are “thick with philosophy, devoted to discussing classic aesthetic questions, and focused on judging artistic value” (Becker, H., 2008). He views art as collective activity, studying not only elite art but also folk art and the work of ordinary artisans; and believes that the organizational ways of art worlds are comparable to other social fields (like political movements), aiming to extract universal sociological theories from art research.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the “Art-Society” and “Art-Sociology” Paradigms

Dimension of Comparison	The “Art-Society” Paradigm	The “Art-Sociology” Paradigm
Representative Scholars	Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann	Howard S. Becker
Central Concern	To investigate the relationship between art and society	To employ sociological methods to study artistic phenomena
Focus of Study	The artwork itself	Sociology
Fundamental Tenet	Guided by reflection theory	Views art as collective action
Methodology	Philosophical speculation and a priori presuppositions	Empirical science and positivist research
Intellectual Background	Rooted in the Marxist tradition of continental Europe	Influenced by the Chicago School’s pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and the sociology of occupations.
Disciplinary Orientation	Functions more as an extension of philosophy, aesthetics, and literary criticism	Promoted a shift towards an empirical science

From an academic background perspective, the “art-society” paradigm is rooted in the Marxist theoretical tradition of continental Europe. From the post-WWII period until the 1970s, this kind of macro-theory, deeply influenced by Hegelian philosophy and Marxism, aimed at critiquing modernity and seeking human liberation, dominated American academia. It functioned more as an extension of philosophy, aesthetics, and literary criticism than as a strict social science. The “art-sociology” paradigm emerged in American sociology during the mid-to-late 20th century, deeply influenced by the Chicago School’s pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and the sociology of occupations. Becker and others were dissatisfied with the “philosophical atmosphere” of the traditional paradigm, considering it not genuine sociology. They promoted a shift in the sociology of art towards an empirical science, making it a formal branch of sociology concerned with specific, observable social facts and organizational forms.

2.3 The Structure of Goffman’s Dramaturgy

In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman proposed a dramaturgical interpretation of interpersonal and social life, analogizing social interaction to stage performance. He argued that individuals, like actors in daily life, engage in a series of “performances” to convey certain impressions, thereby maintaining

social order and interactive relationships. Goffman used the term “performance” to refer to all the activities of an individual before specific observers that influence them; further proposing the concept of “Front Stage”, which is “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance,” described as “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance (Goffman, E., 1956).” In existing research, dramaturgy is mostly used to analyze social phenomena, e.g., Amelia, L.’s *Analisis Self-Presenting Dalam Teori Dramaturgi Erving Goffman Pada Tampilan Instagram Mahasiswa* (Amelia, L., Amin, S., 2022), Pettit, M.’s *The con man as model organism: the methodological roots of Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical self* (Pettit, M., 2011). However, there is a relative lack of systematic research applying this theory to the analysis of fine artworks.

2.4 Research Gap

Dunhuang frescoes research remains a vital field in global cave mural studies. With the increasingly in-depth participation of scholars worldwide and the diversification of research methods, some methodological gaps have gradually appeared and warrant deeper exploration. This study aims to utilize the framework of modern Western sociological theory to analyze the crown symbols from the Guiyijun period in Dunhuang frescoes, attempting to move from the surface level of the image gradually to its underlying social and political context, revealing how those latent “Back Stage” social structural factors are manifested through “Front Stage” symbols. The feasibility of this analysis undoubtedly relies on the solid and outstanding scholarly achievements of previous scholars in descriptive work, including the systematic collection of mural images and the identification of donor identities.

Within the purview of art sociology, current research on Dunhuang donor portraits has roughly formed two paradigmatic paths: the “art-society” paradigm and the “art-sociology” paradigm. However, existing studies have not yet systematically applied Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory—particularly its core concepts of “Front Stage” performance and impression management—to analyze the mechanisms of identity construction and power performance by powerful families in Dunhuang donor portraits, nor have they fully explained how these families transformed religious space into a field for displaying secular authority. Therefore, by combining Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory with iconological interpretation, one can deeply explore how Dunhuang’s powerful families constructed their power logic through patronage acts.

2.5 Conceptual Definitions

Guiyijun: The Guiyijun was a local regime force centered in Dunhuang from the fifth year of the Dazhong era of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (851 AD) until the third year of the Jingyou era of Emperor Renzong of Song (1036 AD), founded by Zhang Yichao. The Tang court established the Guiyijun Jiedushi in 851, appointing Zhang Yichao as Jiedushi. The regime underwent transitions between the Zhang and Cao families. Zhang Chengfeng changed the state name to “Western Han Jinshan Kingdom” in 909 AD. Cao Yijin restored the Guiyijun in 914 AD. The Cao family maintained relations with surrounding regimes through marriage alliances, upholding the orthodox calendar of the Central Plains. The large-scale excavation of merit caves at Mogao that began during Zhang Yichao’s time almost coincided with the duration of the Guiyijun regime. This allows researchers to glimpse the formation, development, and expression of Dunhuang local royal consciousness during the Guiyijun period through the merit caves of successive Guiyijun rulers and their close associates (Rong, X. J., 2001).

Futou: The futou was an important form of headwear for ancient Chinese men, originating in the late Northern and Southern Dynasties, standardizing in the Sui Dynasty, and used continuously from the Tang to the Ming Dynasty, spanning over a thousand years. There is academic consensus on its basic form and types: a three-foot black gauze scarf cut into four flaps, first wrapped around the head, then tying the four flaps to secure it—two flaps tied at the back of the skull, two tied forward (Zhang, C. & Gong, T. S., 2023). Based on the wrapping method, it can be categorized into soft-wrapped and hard-wrapped types. The futou was popular among all social strata, inside and outside the court, due to its convenience and variability, becoming the regular dress for officials and commoners alike. The evolution of its form reflects the interplay and fusion of the hierarchical nature and practicality of official dress.

3. Two Paradigms for Interpreting Dunhuang Donor Murals from the Perspective of Art Sociology

In the theoretical spectrum of art sociology, the reflection theory paradigm and the production theory paradigm constitute dual paths for understanding Dunhuang donor portraits. The “Art-Society” approach, centered on Lukács’s theory of “totality” from *History and Class Consciousness* and Lucien Goldmann’s “genetic structuralism,” emphasizes that artworks are the objectified presentation of the mental structures of social groups. What Lukács referred to as “form being the social sedimentation of content” is concretized in Dunhuang portraits as a visualized social topology—during the Guiyijun period, powerful families, through the vertical ordering of donor processions (e.g., the “ruler-minister-clan” three-tier structure of the Cao family in Mogao Cave 98), transformed what Peter Berger termed the “social pyramid” into a solidified power chart within the

cave. The core question traditional art sociology, represented by Lukács and Goldmann, sought to answer is: What is the relationship between art and society? Their exploration of this relationship is essentially based on “reflection theory” or its variants (Lu, W. C., 2016). Methodologically opposed to this is the “Art-Sociology” paradigm established by Becker in *Art Worlds*. This theory deconstructs art as a “networked product of collective action,” emphasizing the collaborative game of multiple actors such as painters, donors, and material suppliers. For Lukács and Goldmann, the interesting question is how art and society are related, whereas for Becker, the interesting question is how art is manufactured in society (Becker, H., 2008). From this perspective, the “identity performance” of Dunhuang donor portraits exhibits the typical mechanisms of Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory: the Buddhist worship scene serves as a ritualized “Front Stage”, adhering to Buddhist performative norms; while transgressive visual symbols within the portraits become “Back Stage” evidence exposing secular ambitions. This duality confirms that when powerful families perform within the religious field, their “context of meaning” consistently points towards the augmentation of secular power.

The methodological tension between these two paradigms reveals the dialectical nature of Dunhuang donor portraits: they are both a static reflection of social structure (Lukács-Goldmann paradigm) and a dynamic process of power production (Becker paradigm) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Corresponding Explanation of Key Relationship.

Theoretical Paradigm	The “Art-Society” Paradigm	The “Art-Sociology” Paradigm
Representative Scholars	Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann	Howard S. Becker
Research Focus	The relationship between art and social structure	The collective collaboration in artistic production
Corresponding Stage	Social mirror (structural visualization)	Identity performance (Dramaturgical Theory)

4. The “Art-Society” Paradigm and the Surface Reflection of the Social Mirror in Dunhuang Donor Portraits

4.1 The Limitations of Formal Reflection Theory

In the “Art-Society” paradigm constructed by Lukács and Goldmann, art is seen as the formal crystallization of social structure. Lukács proposed the principle of “totality,” emphasizing that the internal form of an artwork condenses the essence of social relations at a specific historical stage: artistic form is a particular reflection of the overall social structure (Lukacs, G., 1969); Goldmann posited a homology between artistic form and the mental structure of social groups: there is a homologous relationship between economic structure, group consciousness, and literary creation (Goldmann, L., 2013). However, it must be clearly stated that this paradigm’s interpretation of the social mirror remains at the level of formal correspondence—such as surface-level correlations where the portrait sequence reflects social hierarchy, and costume symbols map identity differences. It struggles to reveal the dynamic mechanisms of power operation and the logic of cultural symbol reproduction, just as Bourdieu criticized “reducing the social to a visible topology”: “To reduce the social world to a visible topology is to forget that it is also the site of symbolic struggles over cognition. (Bourdieu, P. & Richard, N., 1992)”

4.2 The Guiyijun Case: The Hierarchical Mirror in Costume Symbols

During the late Tang Guiyijun period (848-1036), Dunhuang became a de facto independent regime. Powerful families, with the Jiedushi at the core, accumulated vast wealth by controlling the trade routes of the Hexi Corridor. Cave excavation and image creation became central means for them to demonstrate ruling legitimacy. As various social strata deepened their Buddhist faith, warriors facing the fear of fleeting life and unpredictable fate in war placed their existence and career advancement upon illusory Buddhist beliefs (Chen, S. Y. & Zhao, S. J., 2016). Furthermore, emperors or commanding generals often attributed military victory to Buddhism, which could also serve as a tool for controlling troops, making the Guiyijun Jiedushi a significant category among Dunhuang donor identities. The following uses details of headwear in donor portraits to illustrate the hierarchical mirroring of costume symbols:

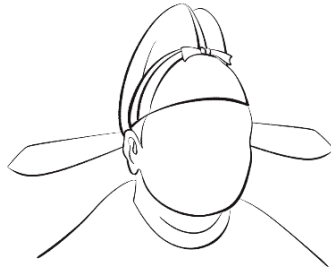


Figure 1. Cave 156, Donor Portrait of Zhang Yichao. (Source: Self-drawn)

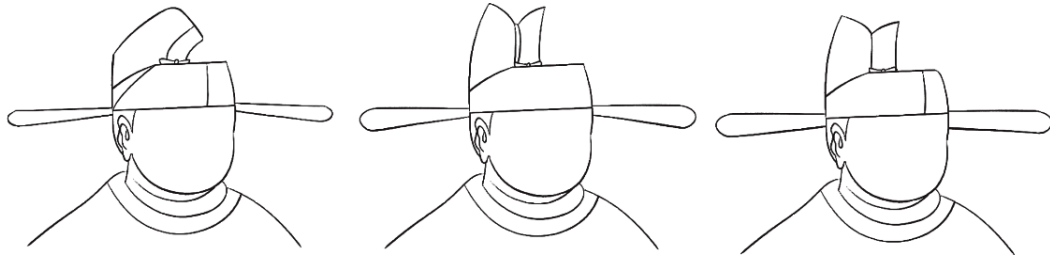


Figure 2. Cave 98/244/428, Donor Portrait of Cao Yijin. (Source: Self-drawn)

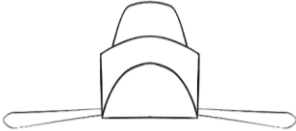
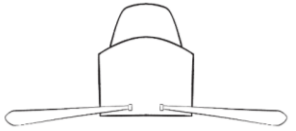
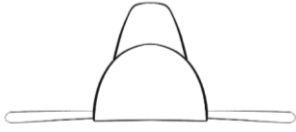
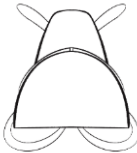
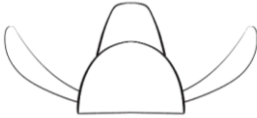
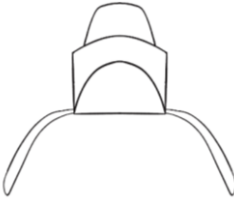
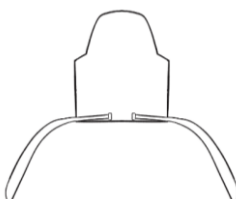


Figure 3. Portrait of Emperor Zhenzong of the Song Dynasty (Source: Self-drawn)

The “futou” worn by the Jiedushi can be seen as a costume symbol with visual political implications. As a commissioned provisional official, the Jiedushi was originally a temporary post appointed by the court, lacking an inherent rank. However, in the donor portrait of Zhang Yichao on the south wall of the corridor in Dunhuang Cave 156, the futou he wears is more elevated than the common “flat-top small style,” with a distinct depression in the middle (see Figure 1), belonging to the “style of various military princes” format (Cui, Y., 2020). According to *the Old Tang Book·Records of Carriages and Dress*, this form of futou was “bestowed internally upon noble ministers of the celestial court,” carrying clear identity and power symbolism. Therefore, Zhang Yichao’s use of such a futou was essentially a symbolic appropriation of Tang central authority by local power—achieving a “legitimacy graft” for his rule through the language of dress. By the Five Dynasties period, futou forms diversified, appearing in styles such as straight flaps, crossed flaps, upward-flaring flaps, and curled-upward tips (see Table 3). Among these, the straight-flap futou (also called flat-flap or extended-flap), with its two flaps extending straight outward, gradually became common dress for both ruler and officials. This form appears not only in Zhang Yichao’s portrait but also widely in Cao family portraits. For example: the donor portrait of Cao Yijin on the south wall of the corridor in Dunhuang Cave 98 wears a futou; the surviving portrait of Cao Yijin in Cave 244, wearing a brown round-collar robe, under-collar, and holding a handled censer, also sports extended-flap futou; his donor portrait on the south wall of the corridor in Cave 428 likewise wears

extended-flap futou and a red round-collar robe (see Figure 2). Compared to other forms, the extended-flap futou carried stronger political symbolic meaning. Its widespread use during the Five Dynasties directly influenced the official dress system of the Song Dynasty, becoming the formal shape of the Song official hat. In extant Song Dynasty emperor portraits (see Figure 3), all are depicted wearing extremely long and thin extended-flap futou, further reinforcing the continuity and authority of this garment as a symbol of power and ritual.

Table 3. The Form of Futou in the Five Dynasties

Form	Front	Back
Square-top Futou with straight, extending flaps		
Round-top Futou with straight, extending flaps		
Futou with crossed flaps		
Square-top Futou with upward-flaring flaps		
Round-top Futou with curled-upward tips		
Square-top Futou with curled-upward tips		

Corresponding to this is the “subordination of headgear” among attendants. Compared to the Jiedushi, officials, and male donors from scholar families, attendant donor figures in cave frescoes often occupy subordinate positions: they typically follow higher-status donors, serving functions such as holding objects or forming part of the ceremonial guard. The futou forms of attendant donor figures differ from those depicted in portraits of the Guiyijun Jiedushi, officials, and scholar-family male donors; the extended-flap or upturned-flap futou of official dress are absent, replaced by new variations, such as the Upward-Flaring Flaps (see Figure 4) and the futou without flaps (see Figure 5). The headgear styles in attendant donor images of the Five Dynasties period were diverse. Beyond various modifications based on the futou, there were also many hats derived from ethnic minority costume traditions, indicating the social practice of “using non-Han youths as servants” at the time (Cui, Y., 2020), a practice related to the Guiyijun being a Han-led local regime.

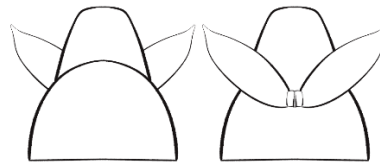


Figure 4. Futou With Upward-Flaring Flaps (Source: Self-drawn)

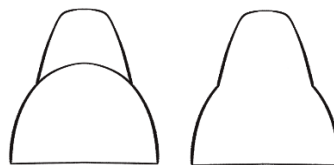


Figure 5. Futou Without Flaps (Source: Self-drawn)

The above analysis shows that, from the perspective of art sociology, Lukács's "totality" and Goldmann's "homologous structure" theories together form the core framework of the "art-society" paradigm—artistic form is seen as the static crystallization of social structure, i.e., the surface-level mirroring where portrait sequences map social hierarchy and costume symbols correspond to identity differences. However, this formal reflection theory has inherent limitations: while it can explain the differential order of dress between the Jiedushi and attendants in Dunhuang donor portraits from the Guiyijun period, it cannot penetrate the appearance of this visual topology to reveal the dynamic nature of power operation. When the "art-society" paradigm reduces differences in dress to a static hierarchical mirror, it is powerless to analyze the collusive mechanisms of symbolic production. This poverty of explanatory power precisely demonstrates that only by turning to the "art-sociology" paradigm's investigation of dynamic collaboration and identity performance can one deconstruct the power struggle boiling beneath the kasaya.

5. The "Art-Sociology" Paradigm and the Internal Construction of Identity Performance in Dunhuang Donor Portraits

5.1 The Broadening of Endogenous Structure

This chapter aims to achieve a paradigmatic shift in research methodology, moving from the "Art-Society" approach, which focuses on the reflection of macro-social structures, to the "Art-Sociology" approach, which concerns the collective collaboration within artistic production. The rationale for this shift stems from the special nature of Dunhuang donor portraits themselves: they are not isolated creations driven purely by aesthetics, but rather "collective activities" involving multiple actors within a specific social field.

Becker, in his groundbreaking work *Art Worlds*, fundamentally overturned the traditional art-sociological paradigm centered on the genius artist. He emphasized that "art is not created by individual genius but is a collective product accomplished through the conventionalized cooperation of a group of people." The core of this "Art-Sociology" paradigm lies in deconstructing the collaborative network behind artistic production. This network includes not only painters and donors but also material suppliers, religious ritual specialists, cave excavators, and even later maintainers. Each participant plays a specific role within this "art world," collectively contributing to the final form and meaning generation of the work. Compared to the "Art-Society" paradigm discussed in Chapter II—whose limitation is capturing only the surface mirroring relationship between artistic form and social hierarchy (e.g., costume symbols corresponding to identity differences)—Becker's theory targets the internal generative mechanism of identity performance. In the Dunhuang context, when powerful families sought to construct their authority through donor portraits, the power symbols in these images (such as specific crowns, garments, or sequencing) were essentially not direct reflections of social structure but rather "conventionalized products" achieved through negotiation, compromise, and cooperation among multiple actors.

This theoretical framework also resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's "field theory." Bourdieu, in *The Field of Cultural Production*, emphasized that the production of artworks depends not only on the artist's individual "habitus" but is also strongly regulated by the institutionalized "logic of the field" (Bourdieu, P., 1993). In the context of Dunhuang's powerful families, the identity performance in donor portraits was realized precisely through multiple negotiations involving religious ritual, social hierarchy, and material resources. In other words, their power symbols do not simply mirror an external social structure but are endogenously produced through

multi-party collaboration and institutionalized convention. In the cross-cultural context of art history, similar models of “collective production” have been widely discussed: Michael Baxandall, in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, pointed out that Renaissance artistic practice was deeply embedded in social, economic, and religious contractual relationships, and the interaction between artist and patron constituted a key mechanism for image generation (Baxandall, M., 1972). This perspective also provides a reference for understanding the “collectivity” of Dunhuang donor portraits.

Therefore, Becker’s “Art-Sociology” paradigm not only reveals the production logic of donor portraits but also promotes a shift in research perspective from “surface mirroring” to “internal mechanisms.” If “Art-Society” primarily concerns how images reflect pre-existing hierarchical orders and identity symbols, then “Art-Sociology” further reveals the pluralistic negotiations and institutionalized logic involved in the production process of these symbols. This broadening of “endogenous structure” marks a move in art historical research from a static “theory of representation” to a dynamic “theory of generation.”

5.2 The “Field” Power Displayed by the Guiyijun in the Caves

The relationship between the Guiyijun regime and the local Buddhist monastic community can be deeply interpreted from the perspective of Becker’s *Art Worlds* theory, viewing it as an “Art-Social” production network built upon collective action and negotiated cooperation. Take the example of Cao Yuanzhong and his wife, the Lady of Liang State (née Zhai), organizing the repair of the Northern Colossus at Mogao: “The Maitreya Northern Colossus, established long ago, had its lower two layers of timber damaged and broken,” having fallen into disrepair over the years. The personnel for the repair came mainly from 12 monastic temples in Dunhuang, each contributing 20 monks; additionally, there were 56 carpenters and 10 plasterers, totaling 306 people working over 12 days (Wutian, S. & Xiao, Y., 2022). This project was far from a simple religious act or technical repair; it was a highly organized social collaboration and political authority performance, reflecting the close institutional cooperation and mutual construction of power between the Guiyijun regime and the Buddhist monasteries.

First, in terms of personnel composition, this repair brought together 20 monks from each of 12 monastic temples, plus 56 carpenters and 10 plasterers, totaling 306 people working collaboratively over 12 days. While 300 people may not seem large, the Cao-family Guiyijun territory consisted of merely “two prefectures and six towns,” with a total population likely around forty thousand at most (Zheng, B. L., 2004), including the elderly, weak, sick, and disabled who lacked labor capacity. This scale indicates that the Guiyijun regime possessed strong social mobilization and resource coordination capabilities. The monastic community, in turn, was not a religious force detached from secular politics but institutional actors deeply embedded in the local power structure. As Becker stated, artistic production relies on a “cooperative network” composed of multiple roles, including both the artists directly executing the creation (painters, sculptors, carpenters) and the sponsors providing legitimacy, funding, and organization (donors), as well as the institutional sustainers (the monastic group). Here, the monks not only provided religious sanctification but also practically played roles in labor allocation, technical supervision, and ritual assurance, becoming indispensable “conventional cooperators” in Dunhuang artistic production.

Secondly, such projects also had strong political symbolic functions. Cao Yuanzhong, as the Guiyijun Jiedushi, initiating cave repairs during a “fasting month summer retreat” with his wife, itself demonstrates the close integration between the regime leadership and Buddhist rituals. The act of repair was both a public declaration of religious faith and a reaffirmation of political authority—by maintaining Mogao, a Buddhist sacred site, the Guiyijun rulers strengthened their legitimacy and moral prestige as “defenders of the Dharma.” The monastic group’s response to the regime’s call, sending significant manpower to participate in the construction, can be seen as an expression of political identification and social cooperation, i.e., artistic production is the result of interaction and negotiation among multiple forces within the field (Huhn, T., 1996). In this process, the Buddhist space (Mogao Grottoes) and religious act (repairing for merit) became the “Front Stage” for the Guiyijun regime’s performance, used to consolidate its ruling legitimacy; while the monks, by providing professional and sanctity support, became key groups sustaining the operation of this “art world.” This repair event clearly shows that Buddhist artistic production during the Guiyijun period was far from an individualized religious act but a highly structured collective practice, reflecting close institutional ties and resource reciprocity between the regime and the monasteries.

5.3 The Dramaturgical Framework: The Power Backstage of the Buddhist Worship Frontstage

Starting from the perspective of Becker’s “Art-Sociology” and introducing the concepts of “Front Stage” and “Back Stage” from Erving Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory, we can provide a more dynamic and structural analysis of the crown symbols of the Jiedushi and attendants in Dunhuang caves during the Guiyijun period.

“Front Stage” performance and authority construction: The Jiedushi’s futou as a legitimacy symbol. The futou

worn by the Jiedushi in donor portraits—particularly the “style of various military princes” in Cave 156’s Zhang Yichao portrait and the “extended-flap futou” in the Cao family caves—constitutes a highly ritualized “Front Stage” setting. According to Becker’s theory, such symbols are not autonomous artistic choices but “conventionalized cooperation” adopted collectively by the various actors in the art world (including the Jiedushi himself, painters, costume consultants, etc.) after understanding political-ritual conventions. In the “Front Stage” performance, such futou are intentionally designed as visual statements of political legitimacy. Goffman called such performances “given expressions,” i.e., deliberately conveyed normative images. They invoke the Tang central bestowal system (“bestowed internally upon noble ministers of the celestial court”), symbolically grafting the identity of the local Jiedushi onto central authority, thereby conveying the image of “legitimate ruler” to the audience (including Dunhuang populace, neighboring regimes, and future worshippers). Particularly noteworthy is that the extended-flap futou gradually evolved into a symbol used by both ruler and officials during the Five Dynasties and was integrated into the official dress system of the Song Dynasty. This indicates that such visual strategies were not merely individual acts but the result of collective cognition and cultural negotiation of an era—a typical example of a “conventionalized product” within the art world.

Symbolic negotiation and power logic in the Back Stage: Compared with the “Front Stage”, in the “Back Stage,” more complex symbolic manipulation and power negotiations are hidden. Dunhuang painters likely had to balance the Jiedushi’s wishes, religious rituals, available models, and practical technical conditions. For instance, choosing the “style of various military princes” or “extended-flap futou” required painters not only to know their ritual significance but also to possess the technical skill to depict these forms, and may even have involved negotiations over symbolic meaning with monks or literati. Between his rise to power in 914 and 924, a decade falling within the Later Liang period of the Five Dynasties, Cao Yijin built his merit cave, Cave 98, at Mogao. During this time, Cao Yijin sent tribute missions to the Central Plains twice, attested by documents P.4638V and P.2945. The first was unsuccessful, but the second succeeded; however, Cao Yijin was not formally invested as Jiedushi, meaning the legitimacy of the Cao regime was not officially recognized. Under these circumstances, Cao Yijin perhaps adopted another method to demonstrate the existence of his regime’s legitimacy: the construction of Merit Cave 98. This monumentally significant building served to mark the beginning of the Cao-family Guiyijun regime. Such “given-off expressions” constitute what Goffman called “unmeant gestures” of the performance, revealing the essence of local magnates using Buddhist space to perform secular power. During the decade when Cao Yijin’s regime lacked official recognition, it was precisely this monumental Buddhist construction that demonstrated the regime’s legitimacy and also signaled the start of the Cao-family Guiyijun. This was a strategy for maintaining regime stability in the absence of official acknowledgment (Shao, Q. J., 2017).

5.4 Deconstructing Dunhuang Donor Portraits Through the Connotations of Dramaturgy

5.4.1 Symbolic Manipulation and Role Upgrade

Powerful families used transgressive visual symbols to break through ritual frameworks, reconstructing the religious “donor” role into that of a spokesperson for secular authority, achieving a symbolic upgrade of identity claims. In the main chamber murals of Dunhuang Cave 98, a group of aristocratic donor figures wearing mianliu crowns and ceremonial robes can be seen, their attire referencing the royal ceremonial dress system of the Tang or even Zhou dynasties (Sha, W. T., 2005). This attire far exceeded the standards appropriate for ordinary officials or local military figures, possessing clear symbolic transgression. Within the highly regulated context of ritual culture, the mianliu crown was originally exclusive to the Son of Heaven. Its appearance in a Buddhist cave illustrates the strategic manipulation of Buddhist image resources by the Guiyijun aristocratic families: utilizing the donor position within Buddhist art, they reshaped the image structure originally presented as “benefactor” into a representative portrait of secular power, thereby achieving an imagistic “upgrade” of identity. Furthermore, research points out that one male figure among the donors on the south wall of Cave 98 has attire and gestures closer to a “court attendee” than a “Buddha worshipper,” hinting at a covert transformation of secular court ritual into Buddhist patronage ceremony (Rong, X. J., 2015). Through such image strategies, the Cao family of the Guiyijun or their allied nobility intentionally translated the role of “religious devotee” into “spokesperson for the local order” or “protector of Buddhism,” thereby crafting an image of secular authority under the guise of religious legitimacy.

5.4.2 The Primacy of Subjective Experience

The power symbols in the portraits are essentially the externalization of the collective self-perception of the Guiyijun elite—their transgressive visual practices are not merely an objective social mirror but a concrete declaration of the subjective will of local magnates who “saw themselves as feudal kings.” The images in Dunhuang Cave 98 do not passively record social hierarchical relationships but actively express the subjective experience and political self-awareness of the local elite. Cao Yijin and his successors controlled the Guiyijun for a long period, maintaining local stability amidst changes in the Central Plains regimes. This experience fostered

a consciousness structure of “seeing themselves as feudal kings.”

During the phase when the Cao family held the Guiyijun in the Five Dynasties and early Song, two arrangement patterns for donor figures appeared in surviving paintings from Dunhuang: “person-to-person opposition” and “person-to-Buddha opposition.” Among these, “person-to-Buddha opposition” is a compositional form that breaks traditional visual conventions; the donors depicted in this layout usually have special status. These images indicate that they did not attempt to “efface” their identity within the Buddhist space but, under the cover of Buddhist authority, sought to flaunt the legitimacy and glory of their own power structure. In this sense, the cave is not merely a container for religious worship but a visual platform for the collective cognitive structure of the local elite. The images become a medium for their self-narration; their image practice is not “reflecting society” but “creating meaning”—that is, redefining their role within the borderland politico-religious landscape.

5.4.3 The Mechanism for Bridging the Performance Gap

To bridge the inherent tension between the donor’s “devout worship” and “power declaration,” the painters of Cave 98 employed a series of subtle visual rhetorical strategies. The core involved systematically enveloping and absorbing secular symbols with Buddhist motifs, thereby reconstructing acts perceived as “transgressive” into the natural expression of “Dharma-protecting” merit. A key example is the canopy above the inscription cartouches of the donor portraits in the corridor and on the east wall: in the corridor and east wall sections of Cave 98, canopy images are painted above the cartouches of some donor portraits. Beyond its practical function of providing shade, the canopy, following its eastward transmission with Buddhism and integration with Chinese culture, was gradually incorporated into the Buddhist visual expression system. Originally mostly seen symbolizing the power and status of secular emperors and generals, it thus appeared in Buddhist images, becoming an important visual element highlighting their sacredness and lofty status (Shao, Q. J., 2017). Through this visual transformation, power transgression no longer appears abrupt but manifests as the externalization of dignified merit. Additionally, through compositional design, the painters created “orientation” or “reliance” relationships of subordination between the donors and deities like Bodhisattvas and Guardian Kings, visually establishing an order of “the secular subordinated to the Buddha-Dharma.” All these together constitute a typical “front-backstage” functional distribution: the murals present a devout religious statement on the “front stage,” while simultaneously and quietly accomplishing a political declaration of power “backstage.”

6. Conclusion

This paper, through the dual perspectives of art sociology, has revealed the dialectical logic of power reproduction in Dunhuang donor portraits. The “Art-Society” paradigm, represented by Lukács and Goldmann, while capable of deconstructing the “hierarchical mirror” of futou-headgear in Mogao donor portraits, can only capture the “static topology” of Guiyijun social structure, unable to explain the deeper transgressive motives within the murals. The introduction of Becker’s “Art-Sociology” paradigm shifts the research towards the “dynamic social network”—when painters adorned inscription cartouches with canopies and monks tacitly allowed dragon robes into the Buddha cave, power symbols became the “conventionalized products” of multi-party compromise within the art world, confirming Becker’s core proposition that “all art is collective action.” Thus, Dunhuang donor portraits transcend being a simple “social mirror,” becoming the “visual genealogy where powerful families stored power.”

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Glossary of Chinese Characters

Futou 幞頭	Emperor Renzong of Song 宋仁宗
Guiyijun 歸義軍	Jiedushi 節度使
Mogao Cave 莫高窟	Mianliu 冕流
Jingyou era 景祐年	

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