

ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTIC AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AVALOKITESVARA CROWN IN DAZU ROCK CARVINGS

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Abstract

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings. As a crucial component of Song dynasty Buddhist art, the Avalokitesvara crown, through its intricate decorations and unique design, reflects the integration and development of religious beliefs, folk customs, and artistic styles in the Bashu region during the Song dynasty. The research first examines the structure and form of the Avalokitesvara crown, highlighting its diverse expressions within Buddhist art. Secondly, it explores the decorative features of the crown, underscoring the symbolic significance and aesthetic value of its elements. Lastly, the study examines the cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown, analyzing its cultural integration, secularization tendencies, and the pursuit of naturalism and aesthetics within Song dynasty society. This research not only deepens the understanding of the Dazu Rock Carvings but also offers new perspectives for the cultural and creative industries on integrating traditional artistic elements into modern design.

Introduction

With the continued advance of globalization and modernization, traditional cultural heritage faces unprecedented challenges and opportunities. These cultural heritages not only stand as witnesses to history but also serve as essential foundations for cultural identity in modern society. Against this backdrop, the Dazu Rock Carvings, serving as an outstanding representative of Chinese Buddhist art, hold a significant position in the world's cultural heritage due to their rich historical connotations and unique artistic value, making them a focal point for research and preservation efforts (Briciu & Briciu, 2020).

Located in the Dazu District of Chongqing, the Dazu Rock Carvings may not be as renowned as the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang, or the Yungang Grottoes in Datong. However, their exquisite carving techniques and diverse subject matter, particularly the artistic achievements in Avalokitesvara statues, grant them a unique status in the history of Chinese grotto art (Liu, 2023). Among these, the design of the Avalokitesvara crown integrates various artistic elements, including intricate plant motifs, jewelry adornments, and geometric patterns. These elements not only enhance the crown's aesthetic appeal but also reflect the cultural fusion and evolution that Buddhist art underwent during the processes of localization and secularization in China (Yang, 2020). Additionally, the Avalokitesvara crown, exemplified through its elaborate and intricate carvings, profoundly embodies the societal recognition of the values of compassion and maternal virtues at the time (Xiao, 2022). These features make the Avalokitesvara crown highly emblematic and artistically significant within the Dazu Rock Carvings.

In the design of the Avalokitesvara crown, motifs such as vine scrolls, rosette patterns, lotus patterns, and foliage motifs are particularly common. These elements, through winding lines and symmetrical compositions, create a grand and layered visual effect (Liu, 2023). Furthermore, the jewelry patterns in the crown, such as triangular ornaments, cubic jewel boxes, and trefoil shapes, influenced by foreign cultures, demonstrate the innovation and fusion

of Buddhist art at the intersection of Western and Central Plains cultures (Liu, 2023). It is precisely these unique artistic characteristics that make the Avalokitesvara crown an element of significant research value within the Dazu Rock Carvings. These decorative elements not only possess exceptional aesthetic appeal but are also highly complex in form, typically characterized by symmetrical compositions paired with lotus motifs, thereby enhancing the fullness and three-dimensionality of the entire statue's visual effect (as illustrated in Figure).



Figure 1 Peacock King (Mahamayuri), Cave 155, Beishan (Southern Song Dynasty)

Figure 2 Sun-Moon Avalokitesvara, Cave 136, Beishan (Southern Song Dynasty)

Source: Dazu Rock Carvings Line Drawing, Peng Ziren



Figure 3 Bead-Bearing Avalokitesvara, Cave 136, Beishan (Southern Song Dynasty)

Figure 4 Water-Moon Guanyin (Avalokitesvara), Cave 113, Beishan (Southern Song Dynasty)

Source: Dazu Rock Carvings Line Drawing, Peng Ziren

Although existing studies have explored the overall artistic characteristics, historical background, and significance of the Dazu Rock Carvings within Buddhist art, in-depth research on the specific artistic features of the Avalokitesvara crown and its cultural value in modern commercial design remains insufficiently explored. Most current research predominantly focuses on surface-level descriptions, lacking a comprehensive analysis of the crown's aesthetic form, cultural connotations, and potential for modern applications (Liu, 2023). However, with

the burgeoning growth of the cultural and creative industries, the integration of traditional artistic elements of the Avalokitesvara crown into modern design has emerged as a critical area of inquiry (Briciu & Briciu, 2020; Zhou, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to conduct a systematic analysis of the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown. By doing so, it not only deepens the understanding of the Dazu Rock Carvings but also provides new perspectives for the development of the cultural and creative industries, thereby achieving the dual objectives of cultural heritage preservation and innovative development.

Literature Review

The Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings not only showcases exquisite carving techniques but also encapsulates various aspects of religious beliefs, cultural integration, and social life in the Song dynasty. The unique artistic features and rich cultural connotations of the Avalokitesvara crown have made it a focal point of academic research. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the artistic expression and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown, this section provides a systematic review of existing research, focusing on artistic expression, cultural integration, and religious and historical symbolism.

Artistic Expression of the Avalokitesvara Crown

The artistic expression of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings demonstrates a high degree of technical integration and innovation. Yang (2019) conducted a detailed analysis of the carving techniques in the Dazu Rock Carvings, highlighting how the design of the Avalokitesvara crown skillfully incorporates high relief, low relief, and line carving techniques. These techniques not only impart the sculptures with pronounced three-dimensionality and spatial depth but also intensify the realism and visual impact of the statues through intricate details such as folds in clothing, strands of hair, and facial expressions. Yang (2019) further notes that these techniques reached unprecedented heights in the representation of the Avalokitesvara crown, making it a masterpiece of Song dynasty Buddhist sculpture. Additionally, Smith (2020) explored the Avalokitesvara crown from the perspective of decorative elements, particularly emphasizing the diversity of plant motifs, jewelry adornments, and geometric patterns. These decorative elements not only enhance the visual appeal of the crown but also reflect the cultural integration and innovation that Buddhist art underwent during its localization in China. Smith (2020) pointed out that the decorative style of the Avalokitesvara crown is distinctive in global Buddhist art, serving not only as a representative work of Chinese Buddhist art but also as an artistic manifestation of the fusion between Eastern and Western cultures. However, despite these studies' in-depth exploration of the crown's techniques and decorative features, existing literature has not sufficiently addressed the cultural connotations behind these artistic expressions. For instance, how the intricate decorative elements of the Avalokitesvara crown reflect the religious beliefs and aesthetic inclinations of the time remains underexplored. Further research should investigate the connection between these artistic features and the religious symbolism and societal roles of Avalokitesvara, revealing the deeper cultural significance of the crown.

Cultural Integration and Religious Symbolism

The Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings is not only unique in its artistic expression but also represents significant cultural integration and religious symbolism, deserving further exploration. Wang (2020) studied the diverse religious elements within the Dazu Rock Carvings, noting that the design of the Avalokitesvara crown incorporates cultural features from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. This cultural fusion not only enriches the

religious significance of the crown but also diversifies its artistic expression. The integration of Confucian ethics and Daoist concepts of longevity within the crown makes it a vivid representation of the syncretism of the three teachings. Jones (2018) further analyzed the religious symbolism of the Avalokitesvara crown, arguing that its intricate carvings are not merely visual representations of Buddhist doctrines but also a microcosm of the coexistence of diverse beliefs in Song dynasty society. Additionally, Jones (2018) decoded the symbolic meanings of the Avalokitesvara crown, finding that it not only conveys Buddhist ideals of compassion and salvation but also expresses Daoist aspirations for immortality and emphasizes filial piety and benevolence in Confucian ethics. The intertwining of these multiple symbolic meanings makes the Avalokitesvara crown not only an object of religious worship but also a concentrated expression of social culture and thought. However, existing research on the cultural integration and religious symbolism of the Avalokitesvara crown tends to focus on its surface phenomena, often lacking in-depth analysis of its cultural background. For instance, how the design of the Avalokitesvara crown was influenced by the political and social context of the time, and the relationship between these complex backgrounds and the crown's symbolism, have not been adequately explored in current literature. Future research should focus more closely on these deeper cultural backgrounds, unveiling how the Avalokitesvara crown, through its artistic expression, reflects the complex cultural dynamics of Song dynasty society.

Multiple Manifestations of Historical and Cultural Significance

The Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings holds significant meaning not only on religious and artistic levels but also in terms of its historical and cultural value, making it an essential area of research. Qu (2020), in studying the details of the Avalokitesvara crown's attire, posture, and expressions, pointed out that these details not only faithfully record the social life and cultural practices of the Song dynasty but also provide valuable material evidence for understanding the development of craftsmanship at the time. Qu (2020) particularly emphasized the design of the Avalokitesvara crown's attire, arguing that these designs not only reflect the fashion trends of the time but also showcase the exceptional achievements of Song dynasty craftsmen in carving techniques and artistic expression.

Baker (2019), from the perspective of historical documents, explored the cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown, arguing that it is not only a representative of religious art but also a key resource for documenting the social structure and cultural evolution of the Song dynasty. Baker (2019) noted that through the study of the Avalokitesvara crown, one can gain a better understanding of the social hierarchy, ethical values, and cultural practices of Song dynasty society. These findings not only augment the historical value of the Avalokitesvara crown but also offer fresh insights into the social transformations of the Song dynasty.

Although these studies have revealed the historical and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown, existing literature still lacks analysis of how these meanings are expressed through artistic forms and symbols. For example, how the attire and posture of the Avalokitesvara crown reflect the social stratification and cultural trends of the time has not been fully addressed in current research. Future studies should focus more on the interaction between these cultural symbols and their social background, revealing the multiple cultural significances of the Avalokitesvara crown in Song dynasty society.

In summary, through a review of the literature on the artistic features and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown, it is clear that while existing research has provided an important theoretical foundation for understanding the Dazu Rock Carvings, many key aspects remain underexplored. Specifically, the relationship between the artistic expression of the Avalokitesvara crown and its cultural connotations, as well as how it expresses the complex

cultural dynamics of Song dynasty society through artistic symbols, have not yet been fully uncovered.

Therefore, this study aims to conduct a systematic analysis of the artistic features and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings, addressing gaps in existing research. In particular, this study will delve into the multiple meanings of the Avalokitesvara crown in terms of religious symbolism, cultural integration, and historical documentation, further deepening the understanding of the Dazu Rock Carvings. Additionally, this study will investigate the potential applications of the Avalokitesvara crown in modern cultural and creative industries, combining traditional artistic elements with contemporary design concepts to explore innovative and heritage-preserving paths for cultural heritage.

Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of the Avalokitesvara Crown

The Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings is not only an outstanding representative of Song dynasty Buddhist art but also reflects the integration and development of social, cultural, and religious beliefs of the time. The crown not only highlights the visual sanctity and solemnity of Avalokitesvara but also imbues the artwork with profound cultural and religious connotations through its intricate decorations and complex design.

Structure and Form of the Avalokitesvara Crown

The structure and form of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings are diverse and can be categorized into types such as the high crown, futou crown, Huabuddha crown, and lotus crown. These crowns not only represent the solemnity and sanctity of Buddhism but also incorporate elements of folk culture from the Song dynasty (See figure 5).

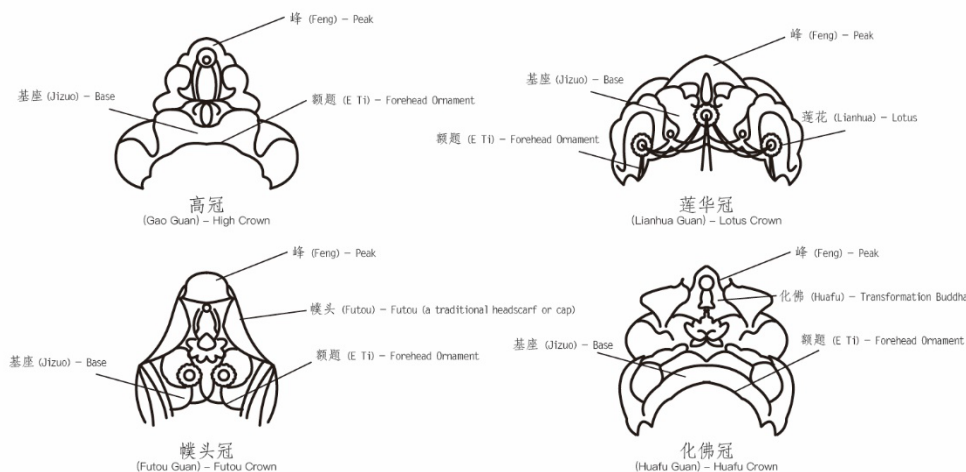


Figure 5 High Crown, Lotus Crown, Futou Crown and Huafo Crown Structure Diagram, drawn by the author

1. The high crown is one of the most prominent forms of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings. The high crown comes in two shapes: cylindrical and base-supported. The former has a flat or mountain-shaped top, while the latter features a "mountain peak" decoration on the base. The height and shape of the high crown not only enhance the majesty of the Avalokitesvara image but also symbolize its extraordinary sacred status (Xiang & Long, 2020).

2. The futou crown (a traditional headscarf or cap), derived from traditional headwear of the Song dynasty, is widely used in the design of the Avalokitesvara crown. The futou crown

typically wraps the head in a soft cloth, adorned with jewelry. This design not only reflects the everyday life of the people but also embodies the secularization of Avalokitesvara images (Xiang & Long, 2020). This crown exemplifies the Song dynasty's blending of daily life with religious beliefs.

3. The Huabuddha crown (Transformation Buddha) features a central Buddha figure on the top of the crown, symbolizing Avalokitesvara's identity. The design of the Huabuddha crown often includes complex patterns such as vine scrolls or cloud patterns, showcasing Buddhist doctrines of compassion and wisdom while also reflecting the artistic innovations pioneered by Song dynasty craftsmen.

4. The lotus crown is primarily adorned with lotus motifs, symbolizing the purity and sanctity of the Buddhist Pure Land. The lotus crown takes various forms, often combined with vines and scroll patterns to create a richly layered visual effect. This crown serves as both a religious symbol and a reflection of the Song dynasty's pursuit of the Buddhist ideal of the Pure Land.

Through the analysis of the structure and form of the Avalokitesvara crown, it becomes evident that these crowns not only visually manifest the sanctity of Avalokitesvara but also convey the Song dynasty's understanding of the integration of religious and secular cultures through their intricate designs.

Decorative Features of the Avalokitesvara Crown

Building on the structural and formal characteristics of the Avalokitesvara crown, we now delve into its decorative features to reveal the unique visual appeal of the crown. The decorative features of the Avalokitesvara crown are fully expressed in the Dazu Rock Carvings, demonstrating the exceptional achievements of Song dynasty craftsmen in carving techniques and artistic innovation.

1. Floral and plant motifs, such as lotus, peony, and vines, are widely used in the decoration of the Avalokitesvara crown. These motifs enhance not only the aesthetic appeal of the crown but also imbue it with profound symbolic significance, often used to express Avalokitesvara's compassion and wisdom. For example, the intricate floral patterns on the crown of the Shuiyue Avalokitesvara in Beishan of Dazu showcase the craftsmen's innovation and skill in decorative art.

2. Jewelry adornments such as pearls and gemstones are extensively embedded in the Avalokitesvara crown. These adornments not only enhance the crown's visual effect but also symbolize the sanctity and nobility of Avalokitesvara. This decorative approach, through the use of luxurious visual elements, further emphasizes the importance of the Avalokitesvara crown in Buddhist art.

3. Geometric patterns, such as triangles and squares, also play a significant role in the design of the Avalokitesvara crown. These patterns serve not only a decorative purpose but also symbolize the fusion of foreign and indigenous cultures, reflecting the exchange and coexistence of diverse cultures in Song dynasty society.

Through an in-depth analysis of the decorative features of the Avalokitesvara crown, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of its status in Song dynasty Buddhist art and its contribution to the overall artistic style of the Dazu Rock Carvings.

Cultural Significance of the Avalokitesvara Crown

The cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings is profound, as it serves not only as a symbol of religious art but also as a reflection of the multifaceted social and cultural life in the Sichuan region during the Song dynasty. Through

its diverse designs and decorative elements, the Avalokitesvara crown exemplifies the intricate nature of Song dynasty culture and the adaptation of Buddhist art to local contexts.

Firstly, the Avalokitesvara crown exhibits a high degree of cultural compatibility. The design of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings integrates various cultural elements, including traditional decorative styles from the Central Plains, such as Tang-style vine patterns and cloud motifs, as well as geometric patterns influenced by foreign cultures, like the geometric motifs from the Sassanian Empire and the bead patterns from Greek art (Xiang & Long, 2020). The application of these decorative elements on the Avalokitesvara crown not only enriches its artistic expression but also reflects the diverse cultural integration that Buddhist art underwent during its localization in China. This cultural compatibility epitomizes the open and inclusive cultural environment of the Song dynasty, making the Avalokitesvara crown a symbol of coexistence among diverse cultures (Liu, 2018).

Secondly, the form and decoration of the Avalokitesvara crown are deeply influenced by the folk culture of the Song dynasty. The crown designs in the Dazu Rock Carvings, such as high crowns, floral crowns, and futou crowns, were inspired by the fashionable attire of women in the Sichuan region during that time (Xiang & Long, 2020). These designs and decorations not only preserved the high chignons adorned with flowers popular among women of that era but also expressed the secularization of aesthetic preferences through intricate floral and plant motifs (Zhang, 2017). This trend towards secularization bridged the gap between religion and ordinary people, making the image of Avalokitesvara more relatable and accessible to the general public (Zhao, 2016).

Furthermore, the decorative style of the Avalokitesvara crown reflects the Song dynasty's pursuit of nature and aesthetics. The crowns in the Dazu Rock Carvings are often adorned with natural floral elements such as lotus flowers, vines, and scrolls, which not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the crown but also endow it with profound cultural symbolism (Xiang & Long, 2020). The use of these natural elements illustrates the Song dynasty's reverence for nature and their pursuit of romantic and humanistic expression in religious art (Li, 2019).

Lastly, the cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown is also evident in its role in the localization, nationalization, and secularization of Buddhist art. The Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings is not only an outstanding example of Buddhist sculpture but also a product of the fusion between Chinese local culture and Buddhist art. The feminization and popularization of the crown's design reflect Buddhism's gradual adaptation to and integration with local Chinese culture, becoming an integral part of popular beliefs (Wang, 2020). Through the design of the Avalokitesvara crown, Song dynasty artisans successfully combined Buddhist doctrines with local culture, creating a form of religious art with distinct regional characteristics.

In conclusion, the Avalokitesvara crown is not only a significant artistic element within the Dazu Rock Carvings but also a concrete manifestation of Song dynasty social culture. Through its diverse forms and decorations, it exemplifies the integration of folk culture and religious beliefs in the Sichuan region during the Song dynasty and plays a crucial role in the localization of Buddhist art.

Conclusion

This study systematically analyzed the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings, leading to the following key conclusions:

Cultural Compatibility and Multicultural Integration: The design of the Avalokitesvara crown incorporates various cultural elements, showcasing the diversity and

openness of social culture in the Sichuan region during the Song dynasty. By incorporating and adapting decorative elements from both the Central Plains and foreign cultures, the Avalokitesvara crown became a symbol of multicultural coexistence, demonstrating the rich cultural integration that Buddhist art underwent during its localization in China.

Trend Toward Secularization and Popularization: The form and decoration of the Avalokitesvara crown were deeply influenced by local folk culture of the Song dynasty, indicating a shift in Buddhist art from aristocratic exclusivity to popular accessibility. The secularized design of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings bridged the gap between religion and the common people, making the image of Avalokitesvara more approachable and relatable. This reflects the trend toward the secularization of Buddhism in Song dynasty society.

Natural Aesthetics and Cultural Symbolism: The decorative style of the Avalokitesvara crown embodies the Song dynasty's reverence for nature and aesthetics. The extensive use of natural floral and plant motifs not only enhanced the artistic beauty of the crown but also infused it with profound cultural symbolism. This design style reflects the aesthetic pursuits of Song society and illustrates the romantic and humanistic expression in religious art.

Localization of Buddhist Art: The feminization and popularization evident in the design of the Avalokitesvara crown illustrate the gradual adaptation of Buddhism to and its integration with local Chinese culture. Through the design of the Avalokitesvara crown, Song dynasty artisans successfully combined Buddhist doctrines with local cultural elements, creating a form of religious art with distinctive regional characteristics, further advancing the localization of Buddhist art.

In summary, this study not only deepened our understanding of the Avalokitesvara crown in the Dazu Rock Carvings but also provided new insights applicable to modern cultural and creative industries. By analyzing the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of the Avalokitesvara crown, this research offers theoretical support for integrating traditional artistic elements into contemporary design, emphasizing the critical role of cultural heritage in innovation and preservation. Future research could further explore the application of the Avalokitesvara crown across different cultural contexts and its specific implementation in modern design, thereby promoting the continuous innovation and protection of cultural heritage.

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