A Combination between Traditional Art and Sci-Fi Art: The Mural Arts of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes with Cyberpunk Artistic Style

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Abstract

The Mogao Grottoes, located in Dunhuang of Gansu province, a northwestern city of China, is one of the most important artistic treasures in the world. As an essential transport hub station along the Silk Route, Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, and its mural arts, were profoundly influenced and nourished by Asian and European arts and cultures. Moreover, it has formed a unique style of Buddhist arts that not only contains the characteristics of traditional Chinese arts but also the specialty of exotic arts. This makes Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes and its mural arts to be the most typical representative and the earlier crystallization between Chinese arts and Western arts. However, its developing history is considered separated from modern life due to the core relationship with Buddhism from various designs and subjects. This led to the effect that, for modern people, the arts and cultures are incomprehensible. Based on this, this study employed a methodology of artistic fusion, theoretically and practically, to extract the structures and colors of Buddhist figures inside the grottoes. Then, redesigned them with the currently popular cyberpunk artistic style via designing technologies that shared the traits with sci-fi, future, and youth. As a result, a sort of fusion combined the mural arts elements in Mogao Grottoes with Cyberpunk artistic style was recreated, which featured the traditional style and the future style properly. As such, an active impact for a better understanding of the mural arts and culture on the young generation was stimulated. This expands the socio-cultural effects of the mural arts and culture in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes.

Keywords: Dunhuang, Artistic Style, Buddhism Arts, Cyberpunk, Mural Painting

傳統藝術與科幻藝術的結合：賽博朋克藝術風格的敦煌莫高窟壁畫藝術

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摘要

莫高窟位于中国西北城市甘肃敦煌，是世界上最重要的艺术珍品之一。作为丝绸之路上重要的交通枢纽站，敦煌莫高窟及其壁画艺术深受亚欧艺术文化的滋养，对他们产生了深远的影响。而且形成了独特的佛教艺术风格，既有中国传统艺术的特点，又有异域艺术的特色，这使得敦煌莫高窟及其壁画艺术成为中国艺术与西方艺术最典型的代表和较早的结晶。然而，由于各种设计和主题与佛教的核心关系，它的发展历史被认为与现代生活分离，导致现代人对其艺术文化的不理解。基于此，本研究将运用艺术融合的方法论，从理论和实践上对石窟 内佛像的结构和色彩进行提取，并通过具有科幻、未来、青春特征的设计技术，将其重新设计为当下流行的赛博朋克艺术风格。从而再现了莫高窟壁画艺术元素与赛博朋克艺术风格的一种融合，既具有传统风格，又具有未来风格。从而激发对年轻一代更好地了解壁画艺术和文化的积极影响，扩大敦煌莫高窟壁画艺术和文化的社会文化效应。

关键词：敦煌，艺术风格，佛教艺术，赛博朋克，壁画

Introduction

Dunhuang, locates in the Gansu province of China, used to be the most important transportation hub on the Silk Route and one of the four counties in Hexi established by Wudi, the emperor of the Han dynasty. As a crucial city in Hexi Corridor, Dunhuang was the first passing gate from China's hinterland to the West, and it, therefore, became a hub where Western cultures gather and enter China. Hence, in the thousands of years of Chinese history, each time foreign cultures are introduced to China, they have to arrive here initially so that the Chinese culture and arts in Dunhuang are affected and integrated with the characteristics of West Asia and Europe. Buddhism is also introduced to China in this way at the same time. Primarily, the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes are built by missionaries to spread the Buddhist culture. They dug caves on the rock walls of the Dunhuang desert used for living, chanting scriptures and explaining Buddhist theories to the believer. Then many of the Grottoes were formed one by one on the rock wall, which was named the Mogao Grottoes. As for the name, during my field trip, the local guide explains that, according to prevalent records, the Grottoes were named after the location where ultimately built above the desert. To spread the essence of Buddhist culture, the missionaries began to paint on the internal walls using the themes of Buddhism, containing story painting, sutra painting, donor painting, Buddha painting, vignette painting, and Buddhist sculptures and reliefs. To some extent, the discovery of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes shocks both the domestic and foreign countries and it is regarded as the treasury of Buddhist arts and cultures in the world.



Figure 1. Outlook of the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes (Source: the author's photograph)



Figure 2. Outlook of the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes (Source: the author's photograph)

Not only the amounts of Grottoes here are huge but also the documental materials are numerous. For the most part, the Buddhist culture and beliefs are presented. In terms of arts, the grottoes include the styles of artistic expression from the period of Beiliang to the Qing dynasty and also absorb the features of foreign arts such as European art and Western Asian art. In the whole long history, the Mogao Grottoes are valuable for the artistic research field because the distinguished painting styles and characteristics from different periods are all gathered in the Grottoes. From the perspective of cultural content, the mural arts of the Mogao Grottoes, which recorded the folk custom, science and technology, culture, and etiquette at that time in the form of painting, provides vital shreds of evidence for the study of arts and culture. Among those, mural painting is an integral part of the Grottoes' arts with two functions publicizing and explaining the doctrines and concepts of Buddhism through vivid figures; inspiring the believers with a strong decorative effect. In this way, from the perspectives of content and art form merging with the caves and statues, a relatively sound and dependent religious world is constructed so tight. Therefore, people would feel like they are entering a Buddhist country where "people can encounter Lord Buddha himself". Ultimately, an "inspired willingness (to Buddhism)" is shaped and guided the believers (Hu, 2019, pp.1-2). Hence, we can prove the significance of mural paintings in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, in which the illustrated figures were created elaborately to convey Buddhist doctrines and concepts to lead people into kindness, self-sacrifice, etc.

Nevertheless, as the Dunhuang in northwestern China is a remote location surrounded by deserts, and with such inconvenient transportation, the Mogao

Grottoes with its arts have not been recognized by the outside world for a long time despite some explorations were ever made by Buddhist and artistic researchers. So far, most of the research on the arts of Mogao Grottoes is set up on current works of literature and images, and they are confined to painting techniques, color materials, cultural research behind those murals, or the use of those arts in adapting to dramas as well as other stage performances. Besides, it is hard to see the arts applied in inventive activities and released relevant products in the market. In addition, the forms of art of Mogao Grottoes are associated with Buddhism and they present their symbols and characteristics as well as are comprised of complicated images and colors. These limitations hinder the application of the current innovation to inherit the Mogao Grottoes' art.



Figure 3. The location of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes (Source: the author's photograph)

This study does not only attempt to combine the mural arts of Mogao Grottoes with the current popular artistic form through a series of technologies like Photoshop but also hopes that, through this research project, a suitable communication and vector can be found to strengthen the young generations' knowledge on the artistic connotation of Dunhuang's arts which is one of the purposes of this study. The other purpose of the study is to promote more relevant persons to further the study of Grottoes and produce more innovation.

The topic of this study starts with the author's previous study on the caisson patterns in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes. It was found that the dresses, expressions, and colors of Buddhist figures in the Grottoes, changed from time to time displaying the timeline of Dunhuang's arts development. It is safe to say that there are

influences of foreign cultures and the development of the mural arts in different periods.

Therefore, this study is divided into two stages. The first stage focuses on the Buddhist figures' images of Dunhuang's murals, and the second stage is about the redesigned works simply and popularly to cater to the youth.



Figure 4. The Mural in the No. 249 Grotto in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes
(Source: the author's photograph)

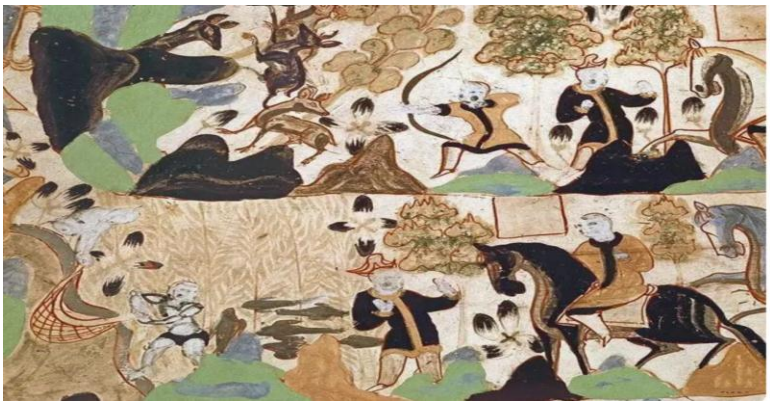


Figure 5. The Mural in the No. 296 Grotto in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes
(Source: the author's photograph)

Literature Review

As mentioned above, the previous theoretical research on Dunhuang's arts and culture has gained some fruits on the patterns and figures of the art. It was found that the main characters in murals were usually comprised of worldly figures like emperors and subjects, women, children, and religious figures like Bodhisattvas,

Apsaras, and Sakka. Most of the religious figures' images were derived from the murals of Buddhist figures, which are influenced deeply by Buddhism. They present singularity and variability in appearances and manners.

The characters in Dunhuang's murals underlined the proportions, structures, and postures of figures that aim to present the beauty of bodies and postures. This characteristic is different from the other characters in ancient Chinese figure paintings, which tend to wear loose clothes to hide their body shapes. Moreover, the images of apsaras, soaring into the sky and waving sleeves to dance, illustrated the rich imagination of the painter (Ma, 2017, pp.1-2). In ancient India, the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were used to shape the figures of aristocrats according to their beauty standards at that time. In the Buddhist scriptures, the characteristics of Buddha statues are described in many ways, such as "thirty-two appearances" and "eighty good qualities", and this reflects the aesthetic thoughts of ancient India. However, Gandhara, a region of northern India, due to the embodiment of ancient Greek culture, had formed an extraordinary aesthetic standard for India. When Buddhism was introduced to China, it initially imitated the forms of Buddha statues from India and Central Asia. After the Sui and Tang Dynasties, Chinese characterized Buddha statues were gradually shaped, not only in faces but also in clothes. It provides a fusion of foreign Buddhist arts and local Chinese arts. At the same time, in the long-term prosperity and development of Buddhist arts, Chinese painting arts had also been strongly stimulated, and progressing rapidly (Zhao, 2020).

Some artists stated that artistic images originated from people's daily life but they mean more than just normal living. As an artistic expression rather than a reproduction, it would be appropriate to exaggerate and fantasize to create an ideal god and one's world of creativity and artistry. Thus, the Buddhist murals in Dunhuang tended to deploy the artistic techniques of exaggeration and distortion to create interesting artistic images. Painting in the form of Dunhuang's mural arts, through the techniques of exaggeration and deformation, expresses the beauty of masculinity and femininity. It can be seen in many figures of Bodhisattva with a graceful, gentle, and quiet outlook in Dunhuang's murals. They present feminine beauty in some parts of bodies in an exaggerated and deformative way. For instance, the figures of Bodhisattva looked merciful and were deeply loved by people. They were generally designed to wear flower crowns, flying clothes, waist-long skirts, shoulder-long scarf streamers, and baring the breast, hanging chest carcasses, wearing wrist ornaments. Their faces were solemn but gentle, and their bodies were plump, looking graceful and gentle with elegant beauties. However, through the same concept, the images of

strong men are generally depicted differently. They did not wear helmets and wore a long official bun on their hair, were shirtless, wore war-skirt on their waists, wore flying ribbons, and with bare feet. They also tended to show muscles and bones, with fierce appearances, round heads, big bellies, and bulging eyes, all of which display men's absolute strength (Du, 2021).

In this study, the Buddhist figures in the murals of Mogao Grottoes were perceived as the creative subjects, adhering to the original artistic images and aesthetic images of the Buddhist figures in the Grottoes. They ingeniously were combined with the modern popular elements to form a new visual aesthetic experience.

Methodology

In this study, a research method in literature analysis and exploratory testing was employed to discuss the redesigning of Dunhuang's mural art with the combination of the cyberpunk art style, especially through the forms of digital artistic painting or collages. In other words, the murals that were created in the past and were separated from modern society were rebuilt into the futuristic artistic style.

The style of cyberpunk inclines to the color sheds like dark tone colors, fluorescent purple or fluorescent blue, these characteristics represent the artistic effects in a whole sense of futuristic and technology spheres. The combination between Dunhuang's art and this style creates an integration of the past and the future in artistic works. It brings a special visual sense, gains the eyeballs of the youth, and furthers their understanding of the mural arts of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes.

Regarding the fact that all of Dunhuang's mural art might not appropriately be redesigned with the cyberpunk art style, therefore, this study selected the most suitable Buddhist figures from Dunhuang's murals to be redesigned properly. By gaining suggestions from the field interviewing and relevant researchers there, the parts of classic murals of Buddhist figures were finally determined to be the target for the recreation. Besides, utilizing digital painting, collaging, material organizing, and redesigning, the new form of the murals' presentation was created so that more people can comprehend Dunhuang's art better as well as use it for further research.

In this study, caves No. 14 and No. 9 of Mogao Grottoes were chosen as the objects of the recreation. Caves No. 9 was built around 892 B.C. during the late Tang Dynasty. The selected character was Apsaras-a classic role in the murals of Mogao Grottoes. They are derived from ancient Indian mythology and are the two minor gods of the Brahmin religion, namely Kandavas, and Sonara. Kandavas also known as the god of incense is transliterated from Sanskrit, meaning the god of song. Sonara is

also a Sanskrit transliteration, meaning the god of heavenly joy. Hence, Apsaras is their collective name. Heaven, in the Buddhist concept, not only refers to the kingdom or palace of heaven but is a respectful appellation to the gods, for instance, Jixiangtian and Thirty-three days, etc. As a result, in the Chinese translation of Buddhist scriptures, it is appropriate to use the word "Feitian (Flying Sky)" specifically to indicate the people living in the palace of heaven, who offers worship, dances, and music to the Lord Buddha (Li, 2013, pp.325-327). Apsaras can be found in the murals of many dynasties, and bring people the beauty of Buddhism Paradise via the painting's stories.

In addition to the figures' positioning, the selected parts from the murals in this study also included their shaping and composition, for example, the composition of Feitian (Flying Sky) was in a diagonal composition with smooth and complete lines and unified colors. Sound composition and image were conducive to being redesigned in the later stage.

The cave No. 14, was initially built in the late Tang Dynasty, and then was rebuilt in the Song and Qing Dynasties. The selected patterns and characters included Shiyimian Guanyin (The-eleven-faces-Guanyin), which is located on the south wall of the cave. Shiyimian Guanyin implies the generally-known meaning of the erasing of evil and guiding good beings to Buddhism. In this painting, the lines are smooth, and the colors are intact, especially the performing technique, which is the drawing of water ripples to show the Lord Buddha's light behind the head part of the statue. This brings people a sense of movement that the light of the Lord Buddha statue has been expanded outward from the statue itself and sparks like waves in a river. The painting style reflects the highest point of painting technique in the late Tang dynasty.

Located in the west wall and the north wall, are Kong Kim (Jin Gang) Hufa (Protector) that were selected as well regarding their completion of the preservation, and they would be conducive to being reconstructed and redesigned later. The selections of ancient paintings to be redesigned are based on their popularity and the completion of preservation. For recreation, it is useful and effective for people to accept and recognize well-known figures, and also acknowledge their philosophic implications in the Buddhist stories. These are significant for the modern young generations.



Figure 6. The Mural in the Cave of No.14 (Source: Li, 2013)



Figure 7. The Mural in the Cave of No.14 (Source: Li, 2013)



Figure 8. The Mural in the Cave of No.9 (Source: Li, 2013)

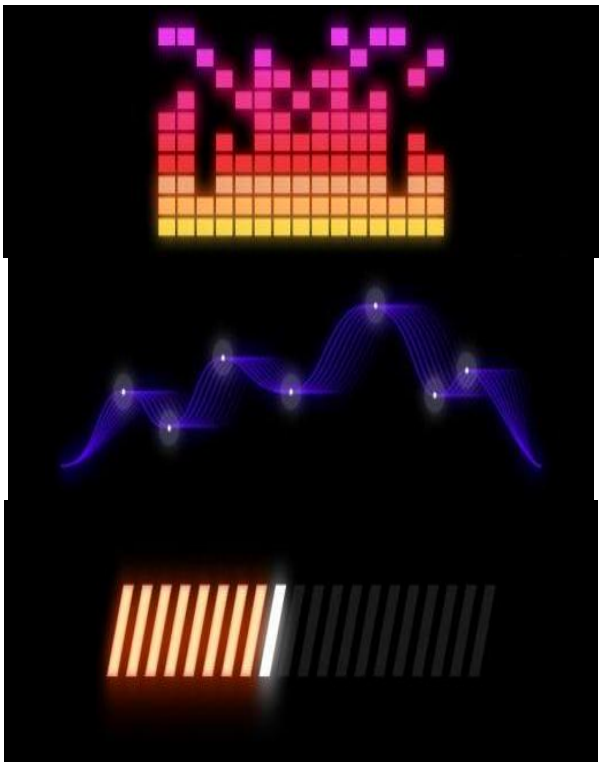


Figure 9. The Elements with the Style of Cyberpunk Artistic Style (Source: the author)

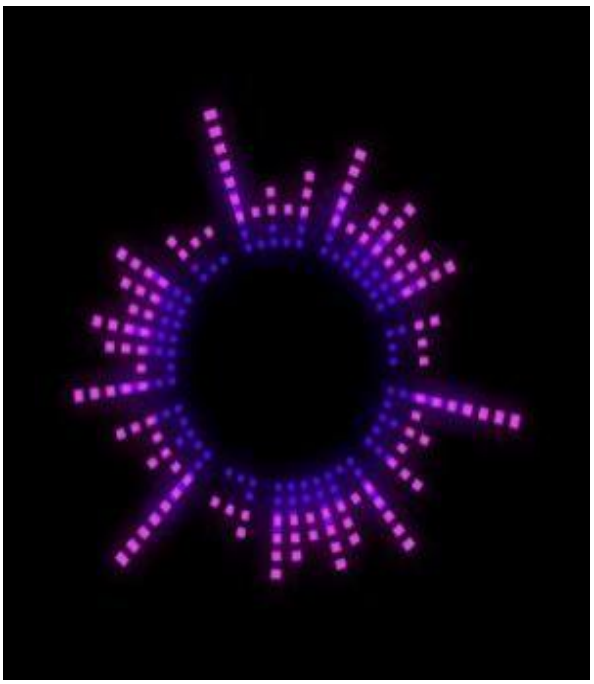


Figure 10. The Elements with the Style of Cyberpunk Artistic Style (Source: the author)

New design of the figures in murals combined with cyberpunk artistic style

Cyberpunk is one of the popular artistic styles used to represent the futuristic sense with the tone of colors such as dark tone colors, dark purple, fluorescent glow purple, green, blue, etc. A series of colors that collide with one another allows priority to produce visual effects at a high intensity, high saturation, and high brightness. This aims to convey a sense of science and technology to people. The style is now very popular and widely used, especially in short videos, interaction design, and metaverse scene construction.

However, the mural art of Mogao Grottoes is like a calm old man who sleeps soundly and has experienced and seen the civilization for the past thousands of years, but still is unweakened. Regarding the fact, this study attempts to combine the two ultimate art styles with an expectation to see a new way of expressing the old mural arts at Mogao Grottoes that could be comprehended and appreciated by the youth.

Based on the rationale above, this study employed technical instruments including -but not limited- Photoshop, C4D, and Pixso to retain the original elements of the painting along with their characteristics. Caves No. 14 and 9, building in the Tang Dynasty, were selected as samples. In the caves, there are mural paintings with exquisite painting techniques, smooth painting lines, and full of details and colors. As

the Shiyimian Guanyin gives people a sense of kindness for all living beings, Chinese painting arts also emphasizes “care of both spirit and shape”, therefore, preservation of the charm of the painting is the primary goal.

When applying the cyberpunk artistic style to the mural painting, dark color tones, fluorescent purple, fluorescent blue, and other colors could be well blended. With this, the paintings could be combined with cyberpunk artistic style without affecting their original artistic conception. In addition, the picture can present a spatial sense through different levels of brightness of the colors. As for the recreation of the paintings in Cave No.09, a design of continuous patterns was used in the combination of English letters. Popular colors were applied for the redesigning process as well as composed ways to design a new composition of the ancient murals in Mogao Grottoes.

In the new designs, this study tended to retain the original Buddhist figures with their characteristics with the adjustments of background, colors, and compositions. As an example, in picture 10, the original water wave pattern in the old painting is replaced with the technical nimbus in the cyberpunk artistic style, and the graphic elements with strong sensitive light are added to the background. In this way, the painting can be distinguished easily and it reflects modern scientific and futuristic senses. In picture 11, the classical Buddhist figures’ image of Kong Kim (Jin Gang) was newly composed in dimetric structure by adding bright English fonts and changing the outlook from traditional to fashionable one. Yet, the characteristics of his eyebrows and eyes are retained, so that the picture could be recognized easily.

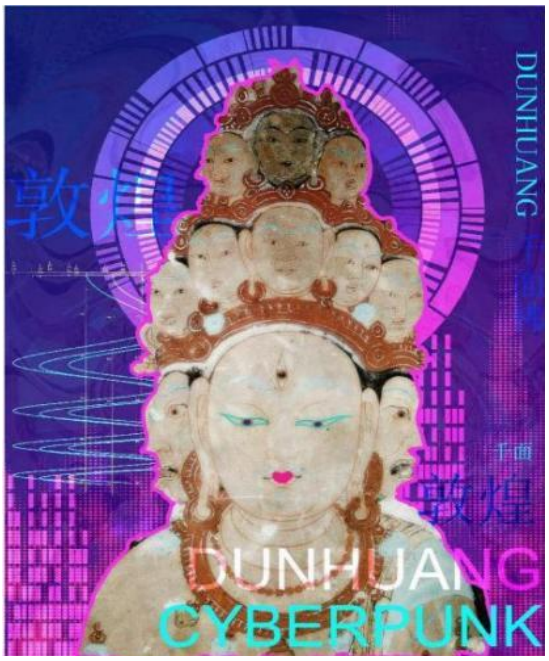


Figure 11. Redesign of the Mural with Cyberpunk Artistic Style (Source: the author)



Figure 12. Redesign of the figure of Kong Kim with Cyberpunk Artistic Style (Source: the author)



Figure 13. Redesign of the Mural with Cyberpunk Artistic Style (Source: the author)

Conclusion

As a world-class tangible cultural heritage, the mural arts of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes are precious treasures in the world. They demand not only good protection and inheritance but deeper research on the culture and arts. During my field survey, Du Yongwei, a relevant artist, pointed out that "Dunhuang arts should be open to those who favor it and desire to learn about it because only in this way, young people could acknowledge the artistic meaning of it and could understand the significance of the inheritance". When redesigning the murals by designing technologies, it was found that the combination of the two kinds of artistic styles is accessible and leads to the sustainability of such artistic works. In the subsequent research study, this redesigning work was appreciated by young people and applied by many young artists.

Originally, such inventive designs can attract the eyes of young generations, who are not familiar with the mural arts of Mogao Grottoes, and help them gain basic knowledge about it. Then, through the classic Buddhist images, the redesigned works can inspire many more people who are interested in the art and want to learn more about it. This can help to promote and spreading of Buddhism culture as well as mural arts. On the one hand, religion brings us a better perception of the truth of religion by taking advantage of art or illustrating the truth of religion with images.

Nevertheless, with the increasingly weak acceptance of Buddhism in Chinese society, Dunhuang's arts as a religious art, are gradually separated from modern society. Yet, they exist as a form of art independently and are worthy of knowing by the youth.

The recreation of Dunhuang arts with the Cyberpunk artistic style is an inventive way that is based on the survey and analysis of youths' favors. However, there are many ways and carriers to present, spread and inherit Dunhuang arts, such as interaction technology, VR, new media design, fashion design, and so on. Those of which, can integrate traditional art with new trends, thus carving a new path to inherit and spread Dunhuang arts.

Originality and body of Knowledge

To preserve the art of Mogao Grottoes from generation to generation, artists or designers need to constantly create and discover new design methods that can be appreciated by modern people, and display the stories of Mogao Grottoes through their own designed artworks.

More importantly, the person who is interested and wants to redesign and inherit the arts of Mogao Grottoes should have adequate knowledge about the figures and

their backgrounds, due to the different orientations of styles. Moreover, not all of the elements selected from the Grottoes are appropriate to be combined with the cyberpunk artistic style. Therefore, in the future, more alternative designing should be practiced and developed to embed the traditional Dunhuang arts into modern society.

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