



On Translation and Overseas Communication of Chinese Dunhuang Culture: A Review of *Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture*

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Abstract. The unique Dunhuang culture and the large volumes of well-preserved manuscripts have been drawing worldwide attention after its discovery in 1900. The translation of these key terms or concepts is vital for its overseas communication, which is no easy task for translators because of its close relation to Buddhism and other abundant traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese-English bilingual book *Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture* introduces Dunhuang in 5 categories reasonably and skillfully, serving as an effective and useful way to promote Dunhuang culture both domestically and overseas.

Keywords: Dunhuang · Key concepts · Translation · Communication

1 Introduction

Dunhuang, an ancient place with over 2000-year history (now a city in Gansu province) in Northwest China and a key term in Chinese Studies, carries deep cultural connotation in Chinese culture. Dunhuang culture is closely related to ancient Buddhism, concept of Buddhist art and Chinese beliefs between the 4th to 11th centuries in China. It covers various areas, such as religions, linguistics, art, custom, medicine, architecture, politics, economy, etc.

Since the beginning of 20th century, the cultural value of documents in Dunhuang grottoes, which were accidentally discovered in the Library Cave by a Chinese Daoist, has been highly recognized and appreciated. Thus, in the early 30 years in the 20th century, both overseas sinologists (e.g. Marc A. Stein (1862–1943); Paul Pelliot (1878–1945); Sergei F. Oldenburg (1863–1934)) and domestic scholars (e.g. the ceramic expert Chen Wanli (1891–1969); the historian He Changqun (1903–1973), and architect Liang Sicheng (1901–1972)) conducted several on-site explorations in Dunhuang.

As a result, several academic research outcomes had been yielded, mainly focusing on the art value of those sculptures, sutras and murals in the grottoes (see Fan 2000: 40–41). In 1944, Dunhuang Art Institute was established in China to protect its abundant culture, and now it has its name “Dunhuang Research Academy (DHRA)” that is responsible for protecting and researching Mogao Grottoes (a world heritage site) and other various

subjects. Dunhuang Studies (see Agnew et al. 2016; Ji 1998; Whitfield et al. 2015) has become an internationally prominent academic school. Communication between the West and the East on Dunhuang Studies needs to be strengthened, and this bilingual book (see Jiang 2019), with abundant key concepts, is a cultural bridge.

2 Book Structure and Content

The book *Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture* (2019), edited by Jiang Qiuxia and published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in China, covers a wide range of Dunhuang cultural elements laid out in Chinese-English format. These key concepts, with in total 258 bilingual terms and relevant brief explanation for each term, are divided into 6 parts: (1) cave architecture, (2) murals and sculptures, (3) music and dance, (4) designs and motifs, (5) literature and documents, and (6) religions. The book offers a unique channel for both domestic and overseas readers and scholars to explore the Dunhuang culture from essential cultural concepts, such as, just to name a few, *Yulin Caves/Grottoes* 玉林窟 (a.k.a *Yulin Temple* or *Ten Thousand Buddha Gorge*) (p. 3), *Dunhuang Painted Sculpture* 敦煌彩塑 (p. 26), and so on.

In the 1st part of the book, it introduces and explains 38 proper names related to Dunhuang grottoes and ancient Buddhist cultural. For example, the first part includes over 15 terms of famous caves, such as *Mogao Grottoes* 莫高窟 (the largest existing collection of Buddhist grottoes, with in total 735 caves, among which host more than 45,000 square meters of murals in 492 caves, and with 2,400 painted sculptures) (pp. 2–3), *Memorial Cave* 影窟 (a.k.a memorial chapels built to commemorate eminent Buddhist monks) (p. 12), and *Inverted Pagoda Cave* 倒塔窟 (a.k.a the Sumeru-like pillar cave) (p. 13). Besides, in this section, roughly 10 terms related to the components of those caves, and other 10 more terms of Buddhist architectures are introduced. For example, *Back Screen* 背屏 refers to the wide stone wall behind the Buddhist statue, and the its designs in *Mogao Cave* 196 are regarded as the most “splendid” example. (pp. 14–15) Moreover, *The Nine-Storey Tower* 九层楼, a 45-m high wooden facade at *Mogao Cave* 96, is one of the must-see scenes in Dunhuang, as it houses “the largest seated clay sculpture of Maitreya Buddha” in the world. (p. 20).

In both the 2nd and the 3rd parts, the topics in “Murals and Sculptures” and “Music and Dance” are separately divided into 3 subsections for each part because of their rich content. In part 2, *Dunhuang Murals*, as the key cultural heritages and principal art forms, are usually painted on corridors, ceilings, and walls. Murals depict many historic events and represent customs of the times. For example, *Bodhisattva Images* 菩萨像 are prolific and diverse, whose postures and characteristics differ from those in India and Southeast Asia. (see pp. 27–35) Among the painted images of Buddhas, that of the *Sakyamuni Buddha* 释迦牟尼佛画像 is one of the most attractive ones. Under this term, the book introduces the life of Siddhartha Gautama (565–486 BC) and his various images, either seated or standing, in the caves. Moreover, the murals also involve *Dunhuang Apsara* 敦煌飞天 (the representative images with over 1,000-year history, pp. 48–50), *Buddhist narrative painting* (e.g. *Xuanzang’s Quest for Buddhist Scriptures* 唐玄奘取经图, p. 60), *Jingbian painting* 经变画 (sutra illustration or sutra transformations, p. 54) and theme-based paintings. As for sculptures, the book incorporates concepts of wood-framed Buddhist statues, stone-core ones, three-dimensional ones, and so forth.

In the “Music and Dance” section, both records in Dunhuang literature and cave murals are introduced. In Dunhuang, more than 200 caves decorated with musical scenes, with about 40 kinds of instruments and 500 musical ensembles. Those instruments include “vertical flute”, “transverse flute”, “phoenix flute”, “*Xun* (clay instrument)”, “five-string *pipa*”, “vajra bell”, and various drums, etc. (see pp. 84–97) The concepts of choreography reflect ancient people’s social life, customs, manners, and religious beliefs. All these terms are accompanied with concise Chinese-English explanation.

In the 4th part, about 20 terms on Dunhuang decorative designs and motif are displayed. The ornamental patterns or decorations were mainly drawn on the walls or Bodhisattva sculptures within the caves, telling us ancient Asian peoples’ perception on art. For example, terms like “phoenix design 凤鸟纹 (p. 119)”, “aureole pattern 佛光图案 (pp. 120–121)”, “pomegranate dress 石榴裙 (p. 124)” and other geometric patterns constituted one part of the magnificent Dunhuang arts.

In the 5th and the last part, the editor presented about a dozen of ancient Chinese books found in Dunhuang caves and explained several key concepts related to religions. The term “Dunhuang Manuscripts 敦煌遗书” (a.k.a Dunhuang scrolls and Dunhuang documents, p. 126) describes location of the manuscripts (found in Mogao Library Cave 17), date (discovered in 1900), and their forms and content (mainly in four main categories, such as official writings and religious books). In Dunhuang Studies or Chinese Studies, those documents and cultural relics are indispensable primary sources, which include more than 25,000 bamboo slips of Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), about 200 copies of manuscripts on narrative literature, and other materials related to ancient literature. In the last two sections, ancient texts on Buddhism, TCM, and Nestorian canon are introduced, such as *Avatamsaka Sutra* 华严经 (a.k.a *Flower Garland Sutra*), *Annotations of Materia Medica* 本草经集注 (compiled during the Liang dynasty (AD 502–557)), *Nestorian Hymn to Jehovah* (written in Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) and found by Paul Pelliot at Dunhuang and then taken to Paris). (See pp. 129–141).

In the appendix part, a useful bilingual index of all terms, in the alphabetic order according to Chinese characters, are presented. As for the references, 14 books relevant to Dunhuang studies or Buddhist Studies, either in Chinese or English, are listed.

3 Further Discussion

In the context of “going out” of Chinese culture, the translation and communication of Chinese culture to foreign countries have received national attention and support. The “International Publishing Project of Classics of China” was launched in 2009 to help Chinese cultural classics “go global”, facilitate the communication of classics, and strengthen the interconnection of culture. At present, the annual average number of projects has reached more than 100, and a total of more than 1000 Chinese books have been funded for translation and publication.

The “Chinese Academic Translation Project” has been launched since 2011 to translate and introduce Chinese excellent academic monographs in multilingual form, including a number of books related to Chinese traditional culture. In 2020, the number of projects has been close to 200, and the field of material selection has been expanded to almost all fields of social sciences, involving more languages. The cooperation mode

between Chinese and foreign translators has been recognized and promoted at the national level. The cross-cultural communication between China and the west is being carried out on an unprecedented scale, the role of translation has been highlighted, and the effective mode of “going out” of Chinese culture has attracted widespread attention. (Bao 2013: 62–65).

The translation of Chinese traditional cultural classics has become an important topic in academic circles. At present, more than 50 relevant academic works have been published according to the data from the National Library of China in the past 15 years (2005–2020). In terms of types, Confucian classics, Taoist classics, Buddhist classics, medical classics, scientific and technological classics have received varying degrees of attention and research.

The translation and overseas communication of Dunhuang culture is no easy task, which is why more research is needed in this area. Dunhuang culture is a shining pearl in the crown of Chinese culture, which deserves more promotion and introduction, and its overseas communication cannot be separated from translation.

The theoretical value and practical significance of the research on the translation and introduction of Chinese Dunhuang culture are prominent. The study of Chinese cultural translation not only responds to the call of cross-cultural communication in the new era, but also undertakes the important tasks of “telling Chinese stories well” and “spreading Chinese voice” (Fu 2020).

Chinese Dunhuang key concepts condense and carry the core concepts of excellent traditional culture. Strengthening the translation and introduction of key concepts of Chinese culture is conducive to the integration of domestic research with the world, broadening and deepening the exchanges between different civilizations, and promoting “horizontal spread of culture” (Li 1990: 43).

The translation and introduction of the key concepts of Dunhuang culture, on the one hand, is to explore how to effectively translate and spread Dunhuang culture, on the other hand, for Chinese people, is also one of the effective ways to improve cultural consciousness and deeply understand the cultural connotation of China.

4 Conclusion

From those English terms and concise explanations (which are translated from Chinese), readers could find out that the book editors and translators mainly adopted the translation strategy of domestication, which aims to generate a clear description and better communication towards world-wide readers. It needs to be noted that the book does not provide any relevant pictures for those cultural concepts, and Chinese *pinyin* is only provided for a small part of key terms. Generally speaking, this book is indeed useful for readers who want to understand Dunhuang culture, core concepts of Dunhuang Studies and proper English expressions of those terms for better cross-cultural communication.

In recent several years, China’s traditional culture, including those preserved along with the “One Belt, One Road” areas, has been valued by Chinese authorities. Accordingly, Ministry of Education of China and other departments have funded many national-level academic projects to promote communication of Chinese culture in the world. Dunhuang culture is indispensable. Since 2015, a series of edited books entitled “Key

Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture (Chinese-English)” have been published by Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (see Li 2020), with the latest one (Volume 8) in 2020 (see Editorial board for Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture 2020), aiming for better communication of Chinese traditional cultural concepts in the world. As for this book, it supplements a Dunhuang cultural jigsaw to the international Dunhuang Studies in the way of bilingual terms and concepts. The book offers useful information for readers to grasp the beauty and centuries-old culture of Dunhuang.

Acknowledgments. This paper is supported by the Center for American Studies at Southwest Jiaotong University in 2022 [Grant Number: ARC2022005] and it is also supported by the Talents Introduction Project of Xihua University [Project Number: w222246].

Authors’ Contributions. The two authors contribute equally in this paper. Yifan Zhang writes the introduction and book structure part, while Yong Liang is responsible for the further discussion part as well as the conclusion part.

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