



Zhang Daqian's Spirit of Dunhuang Inspires Contemporary Rethinking of Intangible Heritage

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Abstract. To preserve and transmit Dunhuang's non-heritage in contemporary China, the renowned painter Zhang Daqian travelled to Dunhuang to duplicate and conserve the murals of the Mogao Caves. Through an analysis of his four behaviours, while he was painting at Dunhuang, Zhang Daqian's humanistic approach to the protection and preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (referred to as ICH) is explored in this article. This will prompt a reconsideration of contemporary ICH to draw lessons from the past and forge a new direction for ICH.

Keywords: Zhang Daqian · Humanism · Dunhuang frescoes · Intangible Cultural Heritage

1 Mogao Cave Murals at Dunhuang and Mr Zhang Daqian

1.1 Dunhuang Frescoes

In Jiuquan, Gansu Province, the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang were constructed in the second year of the pre-Qin Dynasty (366 AD) and were large during Northern Liang. [1] The murals from Dunhuang make up a sizeable portion of the Mogao Caves' artistic legacy and illustrate the diversity of Buddhist, Taoist, and secular life in northwest China between the fourth and eleventh centuries AD. Its painting methods were mainly passed down through the Chinese heritage from the Qin and Han dynasties, but they also independently incorporated Central Asian and Indian painting traditions.

1.2 The Genesis of a Trip to Dunhuang

From February 1941 until December 1943, Zhang Daqian dedicated himself to reproducing the murals at the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang and the Yulin Caves in Anxi. [2] His travel to Dunhuang was motivated by various factors, including the prevailing political climate and emerging creative movements.

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From his point of view, Zhang Daqian began his painting studies by copying the brushwork of the ancients, which required a detailed understanding of Chinese painting. There are two major systems: scroll painting using the brush as a tool and ink and mineral pigments on paper or silk. The other is the art of fresco painting in palaces, caves, temples, and tombs. The history of Chinese painting can only be studied with the frescoes of caves and temples.

In terms of societal background, modern Chinese intellectuals urgently needed a national cultural resurrection, and they were most accepting of the Renaissance that had taken place in Europe. The Mogao Caves, where numerous paintings and sculptures have been preserved, are the ideal example of Dunhuang, a treasure mine of art that had been dormant for generations. The Tang dynasty was regarded by intellectuals of the period as the “height of ancient Chinese art,” or Dunhuang art, due to its incredible strength and free-wheeling political outlook.

Nevertheless, by any measure, Zhang Daqian’s visit to Dunhuang was indisputable in its preservation and promotion of Mogao Cave murals and Buddhist culture. As an early Chinese art intellectual, Zhang Daqian pioneered non-genetic inheritance.

1.3 The Original Trip of Mr Zhang Daqian to Dunhuang

A great master of Chinese painting named Zhang Daqian set out from Chengdu in May 1941 in search of the origins of Chinese painting, overcoming all challenges and impediments to getting at the coveted Dunhuang. When he arrived in Dunhuang, Zhang Daqian was awestruck and delighted by the more than 10,000 murals and thousands of colourful sculptures in the Mogao Caves.

With such a glorious and magnificent cultural heritage, Zhang Daqian developed the idea of preserving and spreading the art of grotto relics. He wanted to copy and disseminate Dunhuang’s murals. He then comprehensively inventoried, numbered, examined, studied, and copied the Dunhuang murals. He also repeatedly extended his original time at Dunhuang, staying for three years.

In May 1943, Zhang Daqian was falsely accused of leaving Dunhuang. However, several academics have recently examined whether Zhang Daqian harmed the murals at Dunhuang. The most influential of these is Li Yongqiao’s article, “History Cannot Be Distorted - Zhang Daqian Did Not Destroy the Murals at Dunhuang,” [3] which claims that Zhang Daqian did not destroy the murals at Dunhuang. Zhang Daqian, whose primary accomplishment was replicating Dunhuang murals, is widely recognized for his contribution to the study of Dunhuang art.

While there, Zhang Daqian persisted in calling for better protection and administration of Dunhuang. He also planned several events to highlight the importance of Dunhuang art and its preservation after the copying was completed. These projects were the first to look at Dunhuang artwork in modern China. They helped Dunhuang by opening the door for modern conservation research on Chinese cave art.

2 The Humanism of Zhang Daqian's Trip to Dunhuang, a Pioneer of ICH

2.1 Ten Thousand Miles to Dunhuang - Spirit of the West

You must travel the entire Hexi Corridor, a distance of many thousand miles, on your route to Dunhuang in the West. Zhang Daqian's son Zhang Xinzhi remembers his father stating, "Can we be like Tang Sanzang and still not reach the western paradise?" when faced with hardship and peril, with people imploring him not to do so.

White rice, spinach, and tofu were considered luxuries due to the paucity of vegetables. However, white noodles and chilli sandwiches were staples of the diet. Despite this, Zhang Xinzhi recalls that his father, Zhang Daqian, reportedly bankrupted a private bank and spent a lot of money and material resources copying Dunhuang murals. He even took out bank loans. He had to paint at night while using paraffin lamps. The finished pieces were subsequently returned to Chengdu for a display, and the revenues were used to cover his significant expenses in Dunhuang.

Despite the hardships, Zhang Daqian's spirit of travelling to the West demonstrates the importance he attached to Dunhuang culture and Buddhist art, as well as his strong sense of mission and responsibility for the culture of his country. Zhang Daqian was one of China's early non-genetic inheritors, fully embodying his lofty artistic pursuits and profound artistic training as a great master of his generation.

Similarly, countless contemporary non-genetic inheritors have gone to great lengths to leave their hometowns and loved ones to shoulder the responsibility of preserving culture out of love and respect for culture and art. As they pass on their skills, they also take on the responsibility of guarding and promoting China's distinctive traditional culture. They are sowing the seeds of ICH to a broader land area so that more young people can understand and learn about these unique traditional cultures.

2.2 Rite of Passage to Buddha - Spirit of Learning

According to Zhang Xinzhi's memoirs, his father, Zhang Daqian, met several notable young Tibetan painters at the Tal Monastery and was very impressed with their methods for exploring and learning new things, including how they made their canvases, processing their mineral pigments, and painted.

Zhang Daqian was keen to visit the Tal Temple during his stay in Lanzhou. During his visit, Zhang Daqian was amazed to find several Tibetan lamas painting Buddha images on several cloth frames with excellent brushes and vibrant colours. These lamas were Tibetan artists a Buddhist studio had invited in Regong to paint for the temple. Zhang Daqian knew little about Buddhist painting at the time. When he learned it was a thangka, he was curiously and particularly interested in the cloth used for the painting, the precious Indian mineral pigments and the leaf-tipped brush made from wolf's hair. For a long time, Zhang Daqian dwelt on the fact that colour in Chinese painting needed to be more durable and that the unique painting materials, rare pigments that hardly faded, and unique techniques used by Buddhist artisans were not found in traditional Chinese painting. He, therefore, actively sought advice from these monks and observed their painting techniques.

Zhang Daqian saw the chance encounter with the thangka as a fortunate happenstance. As a result, he and Tibetan artists have swapped painting techniques, and he has learned many various types of artistic expression from them. His painting technique was altered by Tibetan Buddhist art, which also advanced his creative process. As can be observed in his later works, Zhang Daqian paid more attention to the way line and colour were combined and the more profound mood of his works. In particular, the use of five inks and six colours, as well as gold, blue, and green, has transformed his landscapes from the simplicity and calm of the past to enormous and expansive ones.

The visit to Dunhuang by Zhang Daqian was a pivotal moment in his artistic development and a significant contribution to the study of the city. As a pioneer in preserving ICH, it is evident that Zhang Daqian appreciates ICH, can actively learn to transmit it and uses it as a reference element to include in his paintings in novel ways. Modern inheritors of ICH should take inspiration from the demonstrated attitude of exploration and learning. Based on the transmission and preservation of ICH, the ICH is revamped to appeal to more young people and raise money for ICH preservation.

2.3 Devotion to the Promenade - Spirit of Art

Because of his passion and enthusiasm for art and culture, Zhang Daqian, a representative of the non-genetic heirs, has been able to transmit painting and skills. Because of this technique, “academic” experts are unable to transmit and preserve the tradition. Zhang Daqian asserts that restorative reproduction was used to create mural copies. The original forms of the fading and oxidized murals were discovered by extrapolating from the experience of the painter. The historic Dunhuang frescoes were restored by Zhang Daqian, who also recreated the process used to make the painting.

On canvas, recovery and duplication are likewise quite labour-intensive. A non-traditional paper splicing technique has also been discovered and preserved. The large canvases used by Zhang Daqian were mainly made by Tibetan lama painters, similar to the method used to sew cloth. The mural needed to be reproduced in its original size, so finding a large canvas that fits was a real headache. Sewing the canvas in the usual way will inevitably leave seam marks, which will significantly affect the effect of the painting. In the Tang Dynasty, a unique coating material was used to glue the canvases together so that the seams would be invisible. After searching, Zhang Daqian eventually discovered that there were still lamas in the Tal Monastery in Qinghai who had mastered this ancient technique; after effort, he finally had a Tibetan lama make a large canvas for him. The canvas is made by boiling wool for a long time, turning it into a gel, and then adding raw and cooked plaster to the mixture and applying it to the seamed canvas. After drying, the canvas was sanded and polished several times with smooth pebbles, and this operation was repeated several before Zhang Daqian’s requirements were met.

By imitating the paintings, Zhang Daqian hoped to learn how the ancients painted. He locates frescoes and items from the same era before replicating each so they can be compared and improved. Before sketching the lines, he would constantly study the figures’ faces, hands, feet, and other body parts in the original frescoes.

In reproducing Dunhuang murals, he used the basic modelling techniques of traditional line drawings, such as flowing water, clothes, rocks, orchids and leaves. Also, he created line drawings characterized by the expression of changing landscapes. The

silhouette of the form is based on the facial expression, pose, structure and skin tone of the figure, and the clothes are drawn as fluctuations of the body. For example, in “Sheng Tang Jiyue day”, four figures are depicted, each holding a musical instrument, a lute, a bell drum, a cymbal and a reed, with tall, voluptuous bodies and soft, s-shaped poses. The figures are drawn in pencil with smooth, stippled lines and are painted in vibrant colours, green, blue, red, yellow and black.

2.4 Buying a National Treasure for a Heavy Price - Spirit of Patriotism

Zhang Daqian brought Dunhuang culture and art back into the public eye, taking his reputation far beyond. He still loves his country, and as he works to protect the Chinese treasures of his homeland, he also searches for rare Chinese treasures that have mistakenly entered foreign countries.

When the Indian authorities learned of Zhang Daqian's visit to Dunhuang and his rich reproductions at the Hong Kong exhibition in September 1949, they invited him to come and exhibit. This was the first overseas exhibition of Dunhuang's murals, showcasing the art of Dunhuang to the world. Before he left, Zhang Daqian instructed his wife, Zeng Qingrong, and his son, Zhang Xinzhi, to give the government the 200 Dunhuang murals left at home if he could not return. Many collectors offered high prices for these paintings on more than one occasion, but Zhang Daqian politely declined. The murals were later given to the Sichuan Museum, fulfilling Zhang Daqian's wish.

While abroad, Zhang Daqian also attached great importance to finding lost Chinese relics, even going to buy them. In 1952 he discovered a group of Dunhuang relics and sutra scrolls lost abroad, which he bought without hesitation at great expense. Subsequently, he handed over to the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. In 1963, Zhang Daqian asked someone to return to China to present three Chinese treasures for a penny. The three national treasures were the painting of “Xiao Xiang” by Dong Yuan and “Han Xizai Night Banquet” by Liu Daoshi of the Southern Tang Dynasty.

From 1941 to 1959, Zhang Daqian held nine “Copies of Dunhuang Murals” exhibitions. The five exhibitions held before 1949, mainly the three in Chengdu, Chongqing and Lanzhou, were primarily intended to promote Dunhuang murals and evoke a strong sense of national cultural identity and patriotic fervour among the public. In the anti-Japanese salvation, Zhang Daqian's paintings made the public realize that if the Chinese nation lost its traditional national culture, it would lose its national spirit and the basis of cohesion and national unity. Therefore, promoting traditional culture, preserving its essence and reviving the spirit of national resistance had become an urgent time requirement. Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang mural copying exhibition was in line with this trend.

This shows the importance of preserving intangible cultural assets to protect traditional Chinese culture and the need for its wide dissemination worldwide. China's ICH development necessitates an openness and global perspective. At the same time, fostering multicultural contacts is the only way to advance friendly relations and mutual understanding between nations. Then it will be possible to value ICH.

3 Rethinking Contemporary ICH

3.1 Types of ICH

The term “ICH” refers to the norms, knowledge, expressions, and practices that communities, groups, and individuals regard as belonging to their cultural heritage. This encompasses arts like music and dance as well as oral traditions, festivals, rituals, conventional wisdom, and handicrafts.

Unlike tangible cultural heritage, such as buildings, artefacts, and monuments, ICH is not physical and cannot be touched or seen. It is often transmitted orally or through performance and plays an important role in shaping people’s identities and communities.

Of these, ICH can be divided into two categories: traditional cultural expressions, such as folklore activities, performing arts, and traditional knowledge and skills. Cultural spaces, i.e. the place where traditional cultural activities are held regularly or where traditional cultural expressions are concentrated, both spatially and temporally.

The ICH’s scope also encompasses expressions from these related cultural spaces as well as oral traditions like language as a cultural carrier, traditional performing arts, folklore practices, rituals, and festivals, traditional folk knowledge and practices about nature and the cosmos, traditional handicraft skills, and oral traditions.

3.2 The Heirs of ICH

Countless contemporary non-genetic inheritors, out of respect for culture and love of art, have shouldered the responsibility of protecting culture in spite of everything. Therefore, the most important thing to protect intercontinental bleeding is to protect the bearers, and only by protecting the bearers can true preservation of intangible culture be achieved. The bearers themselves are a very central form of the people who have contributed significantly to the preservation and succession of national cultural traditions, and who are the creators of history.

And in the majority of ICH’s domains, inheritors play a crucial role as ICH’s bearers and transmitters. With their superhuman abilities and spirituality, inheritors not only preserve ICH’s living heritage but also play a crucial role in the “relay race” that passes ICH from one generation to the next.

These outstanding heirs of ICH have made cultural choices and cultural innovations to carry on the tradition with their power, which plays a significant role in the transmission, protection, continuation and development of ICH beyond the ordinary. For example, in the transmission of ancient intangible culture, Hua Tuo and Sun Simiao were the originators of the traditional medicine line, Lu Ban was the ancestor of the wood and stone construction industry, and so on.

Together with the abilities that are passed on, non-genetic successors are also taking on the duty of protecting and advancing China’s distinctive traditional culture. In order to increase the number of young people who are aware of these distinct traditional cultures and to further the distinctive Chinese traditional culture, more global seeds are being planted in a wider area.

3.3 Inheritance and Protection of ICH

Living cultural heritage is the ICH. They are “alive” in nature in both the physical forms they take and the spiritual implications they convey. For those tangible products, the process of making them is a crucial component of ICH; for the ideological conceptions that ICH carries, it is not simply a physical thing or a system of symbols but also a priceless spiritual treasure.

ICH is a living cultural heritage. Both the material forms they present and the spiritual connotations they carry are “living” in nature. For those tangible objects, their production process is an essential ICH; for the ideological concepts carried by ICH, it is not only a concrete object or symbolic system but also a spiritual treasure.

Using foreign nations’ rich experience to strengthen ICH protection is possible. For the conservation of folklore, Germany, for instance, has passed the Intangible Heritage Protection Act. This unique law sets explicit provisions for protecting various forms of intangible property. The Paris Convention also outlines detailed guidelines for safeguarding tangible and ICH across multiple nations.

To better develop cultural confidence, we must generally think critically, insist on using the past for the present and removing its dross and utilize the centuries-old culture of the Chinese people to produce spiritual richness.

3.4 Innovation and Development of ICH

Therefore, creative thoughts and methods are needed to create China’s ICH. Culture needs to be altered and developed creatively to introduce the “basic” arts to the public. The culture of Dunhuang will provide a new dimension to civilization and offer the necessary spiritual guidance. For this reason, we must think about improving society through our predecessors’ priceless legacy.

On the one hand, we must thoroughly examine the national and humanistic spirit ingrained in Chinese civilization, imaginatively rebuild it according to the traits of the new era, and transform outmoded means of expression into fertile ground for realising fundamental socialist values. For instance, when incorporated into corporate culture, the historic craft spirit of excellence is changed into the model worker’s spirit.

On the other hand, we need to be skilled at fusing traditional crafts with cutting-edge technology to give traditional handicrafts a fresh start. For instance, businesses can receive guidance to create artistic and innovative items that satisfy the particular needs of consumers while also being functional.

China has fewer original works with distinctive traits than other countries, which may be more helpful in enhancing the country’s soft power in the cultural sector. For instance, the Mogao Caves gained more notoriety and visibility around the world thanks to the 29th International Congress on Ancient Monuments, which was successfully held. [4] As a complete museum integrating the display of cultural objects, research and exchange, education and popularization, the Mogao Caves Art Exhibition Hall was constructed.

ICH is being actively protected by the state, which is also aggressively promoting the incorporation of non-traditional cultural projects into tourism development under the guise of “integrating culture and tourism.” Jiuquan, as an illustration, has produced businesses such as the Shazhou Night Market and the “Impressions of Mingsha Mountain and the Crescent Moon Spring” show.

4 Concluding Remarks

An analysis of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang paintings reveals four humanistic spirits concerning the preservation of intangible heritage: the spirit of travelling to the West despite the hardships, the spirit of learning through exploration, the spirit of devotion to art, and the patriotic spirit of caring for one's country.

This spirit is still held in high regard as a cultural treasure by the ICH of Dunhuang practitioners and protectors of today. Consequently, it is possible to think of intangible cultural assets as a component of cultural demands, which are ranked higher in Maslow's hierarchy of requirements. At the same time, the protection of intangible cultural assets is not only an important condition for the transmission of great traditional culture in a modern context, but also a key step in implementing cultural confidence and raising national awareness.

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