
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Dunhuang Intangible Cultural Heritage Colored Sculptures on the Outcome of Multi-ethnic Cultural Integration in Buddhist Art

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ABSTRACT

Dunhuang is one of the most important historical transportation hubs on the silk road. A major transport artery connecting east Asia, south Asia, west Asia, and Europe. There is a diverse population that lives and trades here, establishing the foundation for future diversification. The Dunhuang art is influenced by a wide variety of cultures and religions, but this paper will focus on the influences of Buddhism. Buddhist art was created with the purpose of pilgrimage and visual representations of Buddha. An ancient, local technique known as the Dunhuang color sculpture has been passed down from generations for thousands of years. Due to its malleability, this technique is stronger, more durable, and weather-resistant. The objective of the study is to find the impact of the Dunhuang intangible cultural heritage colored sculpture on the multi-Ethnic cultural integration of Buddhist art from four perspectives: (1) integration of multi-Ethnic in Dunhuang; (2) Buddhist sculpture representation; (3) colored sculpture; and (4) problems faced by intangible cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS

Dunhuang; colored sculpture; Buddhist sculptures

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1. Introduction

Dunhuang was an important transportation hub on the silk road. The route connects eastern Asia, south Asia, west Asia, and Europe. As a result of Zhang Qian's travels to the west, solidifying the Han dynasty's political position, Xiong Nu and Qiang are separated by the Hexi Corridor. Until the end of the Yuan dynasty, advanced maritime technology acted as an alternative to transportation, and the West Asia region experienced rapid military conflict during the Ming dynasty, lead the closure of Dunhuang. Later the Qing government recovered the territory and immigrated 2405 households to Dunhuang. And there are a variety of races of people living and trading here, which creates a foundation for future diversification. For more than 1000 years, the Dunhuang Mogao Caves have been created and repaired. There are more than 2000 colored sculptures and 45,000 square meters of frescoes on the walls. The Mogao caves contain a wide variety of scripts in various languages. The majority of art heritages are associated with Buddhism. Buddhist art has strong religious background, and many characteristics of Buddhist figures are described in the scripts. Therefore, we can easily identify a buddha or a bodhisattva. However, this is a challenge for the artist. They understand the solemnity of buddha and require to make their artwork with beauty. Dunhuang is one of the important findings of Buddhist art. From the artworks, we are able to discover the evidence of multiple cultures' characteristics. The colored sculpture is a combination between the local environment and foreign cultures. Therefore, it is important to spread the process of creating a colored sculpture.

2. Integration of Multi-Ethnic in Dunhuang

"Dunhuang was an invaluable gateway for cultural exchanges and human migration between the ancient Central Plains and Western Regions (centered around Xinjiang)" (Xiong, Tao, et al., 2022). People from different regions communicate with their cultures and lifestyles. "A recent study of the middle Hexi Corridor population proved most Heishuiguo males had migrated from Middle and Lower Yellow River regions, while females were mostly natives (Xiong, Du et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the Heishuiguo

population inherited a Central Plains tradition. Mass migration of individuals not only impacted the genetic structure of the Hexi population but also resulted in changes in local subsistence strategy (Chen et al., 2019). There are many different cultures and religions integrated into Chinese culture, but this paper will concentrate on the Buddhist influences.

At present, the majority of the art at Mogao caves is religious in nature. Buddhism became a “commodity” that was exported from India to other regions around the globe. Buddhist art was created to facilitate pilgrimages and show devotion to Buddha through visual images of the Buddha. Religion affects the speed of communication. Spreading its ideas breaks down cultural barriers and promotes communication for the purpose of combining cultures. As Buddhism brought to China revolutionary thought and ideas, it promoted the development of Chinese philosophy, ethics, language, literature, arts, religions, popular belief, etc. In addition, as Buddhism is not culturally bound, it also uses and adapts to the local culture and thought (Guang, 2013).

Buddhism was not accepted by indigenous people when it was first introduced to China. After interacting with the local culture and the emperor’s esteem, Buddhism became widespread in China. “Buddhism has not caused any conflict with hosting local culture but absorbed local cultures wherever it has been transmitted. As a result, it has become Chinese Buddhism with Chinese cultural elements in the last 2,000 years” (Guang, 2013).

3. Buddhist Sculpture Representation

Fang (2010) argues that without Buddhist art, Chinese arts would not have been so immensely flourished during the Han to Wei dynasties, and some sub-fields in Chinese arts might have never been developed...Many Buddhist images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Arahats, as well as other figures in Dunhuang ... show the development of Buddhist art from imitating Indian style to pure Chinese ones (Guang, 2013). The Chinese Buddhist art, highly influenced by the traditional Indian representation of colored clay sculpture in Mogao Caves, follows the international styles of the buddha. The superhuman form still exists, with tube-like limbs and a round head. Elongated ears and a larger lower lip. However, when studied in detail, the characteristics of the Chinese Han people are visible in the sculpture. For example, straight black hair, and the hand is not exactly the same as the meditation mudra of buddha sculpture in India. This Buddha has a hand posture similar to how the Han people showed respect for others. It shows how Buddhism was introduced to China and both cultures integrated.

4. Colored Sculpture

The intangible cultural heritage of colored sculptures is significant since they combine the wisdom of old times with the skills of ancient cultures. It had historical significance. Cultural heritage has an emotional attachment. Making a colored sculpture depends on the conditions of the environment. Creating a colored clay sculpture begins with finding a wood stick that has a similar shape and using it as the foundation of the sculpture. Then, combine the mud and dry grass to build the body. After this, mix the mud and soft sand to add layers and create the different parts of the sculpture.



Figure 1. Meditation Buddha Statue, Cave 259, Northern Wei

Source: Art and Archaeology (n.d.).

It is difficult to create a sculpture with divine charm, the expert explained. The artist creates the impression that Buddha has meditated and finally found his answer. Buddha is smiling, and the mussels are smiling too.



Figure 2. Cave 45, Tang
Source: China Discovery (n.d.).

The proportions of the figures are accurate, and the clothes are magnificent. The peak of Buddhist sculpture in China. Buddhism originated in India and arrived in China. Combining the Western aesthetic with the Central Asian aesthetic. Therefore, we can see the variety of artwork today.

5. Intangible Cultural Heritage – Colored Sculptures

The climate in Dunhuang is very dry since it is in the desert. This is essential to the preservation of the artworks in Dunhuang. Some old techniques mentioned in the fresco are being protected and recovered by the local government and community. The sculptures in the Mogao Caves date back thousands of years. Back in the old days, their wisdom led to the creation of this sculpture. Through three generations of development, the intangible cultural heritage of making colored sculptures has been recovered.

Du Yongwei inherited Dunhuang's intangible cultural heritage, colored sculpture. From his description, the Dunhuang color sculpture is an ancient, local technique that has been handed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. This technique is more malleable and has the advantage of being stronger, more durable, and more resistant to weathering. Many of the Mogao caves in Dunhuang have survived for thousands of years because of the dry local climate and unique production techniques. This merit and characteristic is the key to the inclusion of Dunhuang's color sculpture production techniques on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List (Du, 2019).

Colored sculptures are an intangible cultural heritage that can be difficult to spread. Although the techniques are recovered, spreading their results to the public is a priority for them. However, most people are unable to start using these techniques. In the school, there were many art students but not many classes in traditional techniques. The lack of attention to traditional art has left traditional skills untouched, and few students are willing to specialize in them.

In ancient times, manual skills were the source of livelihood for the people. Having mastered the skills, the craftsman earned a salary or food and naturally passed those skills on to others. In each generation, the skills were continuously improved in order to better meet the needs and increase convenience. If technology and survival are linked, there is no day when no one learns. In comparison with modern times, machines have replaced manual labor, and the industrialized industrial chain has greatly improved efficiency and economic development processes. Modern people can survive without learning traditional skills, so learning non-traditional skills is no longer necessary.

Back in the old days, there was no school for the general public, so children could learn traditional skills at a young age. Nowadays, with the establishment of fundamental education, children are under a lot of competitive pressure to learn, so few people spend time mastering traditional skills. Traditional skills are less used in today's life because they do not follow the fast-paced lifestyle.

6. Conclusion

This paper provides a brief Dunhuang historical background, and the Buddhist art of colored sculpture in Dunhuang shows the combination of multiple cultures. The historical artifacts have been protected, and technologies have been used effectively. More people know Dunhuang and put in their passions to spread the cultural heritage. Open to the public on social media and

cooperating with other institutions helps more people know the colored sculptures. However, the problem of intangible cultural heritage—colored sculptures still exists. They need more effective ways to disseminate traditional techniques. Since the audiences are limited in knowing about this, there are no conditions to study these skills. These traditional techniques of creating colored sculptures need people to learn. Universities or secondary schools could create classes and provide students opportunities to learn traditional methods by hand. At the same time, it provides chances for related major students to travel to Dunhuang. With certification or credit to increase their willingness to be a part of the intangible cultural heritage colored sculptures.

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