
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The “Tough Road” of Inheriting Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Media: Taking Dunhuang Art Academy as an Example

Shiqi Tu¹ and Xinyu Jiang¹✉

¹*Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an 710000, China*

Corresponding Author: Xinyu Jiang, **E-mail:** 1599544042@qq.com

| ABSTRACT

Dunhuang intangible cultural heritage is an important form of Chinese traditional culture and the track of the accumulation of Chinese civilization. As a display platform for the export of Dunhuang culture, Dunhuang Art Academy has few scholars to study it. Therefore, based on the various opportunities and challenges posed by the works of Dunhuang Art Academy in the process of preservation, inheritance, and innovation, this paper takes the intangible cultural heritage of Dunhuang Art Academy as an example, focusing on the protection of inheritance, innovation realization in the digital society. The omni media development of Dunhuang Art Academy is discussed from four aspects: simulacra, education, media, and value realization, in order to obtain some new explorations and inspirations for expanding Dunhuang's intangible cultural heritage.

| KEYWORDS

Digitalization; simulacra; education; audiovisual; value realization

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1. Introduction

Art Academy was established in Dunhuang, which possessed a long history and abundant cultural intangible heritage resources. After nearly 30 years of development, Dunhuang Art Academy has grown from an academic institution composed of art groups around the world who are interested in researching and promoting Dunhuang culture to a cultural institution that covers 3,000 square meters, providing full artistic life services and art derivative services from all walks of life. With the continuous improvement of digital technology, it is more and more popular in our lives. “In our modern practice, combining the protection of intangible cultural heritage resources with the application of advanced new media technology to form cultural and creative products. It requires the integration of advanced new media and the needs of popular culture, which is the contemporary trend” (Chen & Fan, 2016). This article connects the existing innovation model of Dunhuang Art Academy and the feasible development trend in the future to explore the way for intangible cultural heritage to survive in the digital media era.

2. Innovative Practice of Dunhuang Art Academy

As a treasure for inheriting Dunhuang's intangible cultural heritage, Dunhuang Art Academy has a very high artistic research value. The innovative means it practiced provide a valuable reference for the inheritance of Chinese traditional art. In the context of the digital media era, innovative strategies such as the imitation skills of setting up branches and the cultivation of talents through education have brought new prosperity to the “marginalized” traditional culture.

2.1 Simulacra and Reproduction

The Beijing branch of the Dunhuang Art Academy was opened at the end of 2020, displaying dozens of Dunhuang murals to the public. There are two Re-engraved Dunhuang caves in the exhibition space, the Mogao Cave 3 and Yulin Grotto 25, respectively. The establishment of the branch will undoubtedly supply an aesthetic platform to mutually communicate with the public, who cannot appreciate the charm of Dunhuang art in person.

Benjamin proposed the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating make it a certainty that profound changes and impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful (Hu, 2022). The digital age is coming, and the entire technique of art will be transformed in this new situation to promote the prosperity of the world, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art. Dunhuang Beijing branch and the replicas in the collection are symbols of simulacra art, deconstructing the original artistic “aura”. In the digital post-modern media society, the boundaries between reality and non-reality are becoming more and more indistinct, and traditional art has been fundamentally changed by the rapid development of reproduction technology, reflecting an innovation that strives to break through the limits of art. Not only has it changed the way the public appreciates art, but it has also broken the boundaries between elegant and popular art, truly achieving that art is for people. Dunhuang Art Academy also realized it to spread Dunhuang murals widely by using clay materials and reproduction techniques, constantly exporting the most authentic and confident Dunhuang art culture, and digging out the road of revival for inheriting the Dunhuang cultural undertakings.

Although simulacra make art easy to comprehend, “Detaching the reproduced object from the domain of tradition, the works of art in the age of technological reproduction have lost their *echttheit*, history, and sanctity, and the multitude of replicas has substituted the unique existence” (Zhang, 2020). Thus, compared with an endowment of external variety, people should pay attention to the “live” inheritance of Dunhuang intangible cultural heritage. With Dunhuang culture as the core, other elements as auxiliary to serve the public that keeps the *echttheit*, so as to form a new “aura” of art in the digital age.

2.2 Study Tour and Education

Dunhuang Art Academy takes itself as a platform to connect intangible cultural heritage art and professional colleges and provides services such as creation, exhibition, and study tours for domestic and foreign artists. Not only can the better communication resources of universities be used to make the Dunhuang Art Academy carry out a wider range of communication, but also more high-quality and high-aesthetic talents with professional skills such as painting and sculpture can be attracted to Dunhuang to experience the intangible cultural heritage culture of Dunhuang Art Academy to join in so that its non-genetic inheritance not only has a high degree of a professional matching successor but also enables young people to propose communication strategies that are more in line with the characteristics of the times, all of which are of great significance to the non-genetic inheritance of Dunhuang Art Academy.

Dunhuang Art Academy not only cooperated with major universities but also launched a cultural activity on the search for Dunhuang in the educational software Kaochong app used by most college students. They jointly launched the activity of “setting up a flag to heaven”, soliciting dreams from college students across the country, and then launched it into the sky through satellite. Through investigation and statistical methods, we found that the Kaochong app collected the wishes of nearly 2000 college students. Through cooperation with Dunhuang Art Academy, it captured the hearts of at least one-third of the postgraduate students. At the same time, it is also a dynamic group of college students who better understand Dunhuang Art Academy and improve its popularity among young people. As well to the recent MBTI test that has become popular among young people, Dunhuang Art Academy has also combined this with intangible cultural heritage to make “if the images in the Dunhuang murals are also doing MBTI”. It is not difficult to find that Dunhuang Art Academy pays attention to the exchange and introduction of professional and skilled talents and focuses on the aesthetic education of the younger generation. Using digital media, it has carried out a series of aesthetic education teaching activities for young people.

As an intangible cultural heritage platform, Dunhuang Art Academy has always insisted on “bringing in” and “going out”. As a cooperation platform with universities, Dunhuang Art Academy actively cooperates with professional universities, using its strong cultural self-confidence to attract more people to inherit. As an educational platform, it adopts new media technology to focus on cultivating the aesthetic literacy of young people and helps them establish correct aesthetics.

3. Feasibility Exploration of Dunhuang Art Painting

Feng Jicai, a contemporary Chinese writer, once said, “Folk culture is dying out every minute.” In the wave of digital times, as well as under the impact of the modernization process, the intangible cultural heritage culture has been affected by various factors such as informatization, technology, and urbanization so that falling to the fringes of society. Dunhuang Art Academy has created, to some extent, a new model for production and communication, while the road is obstacle-packed and long. It should explore more artistic expressions which coincide with the current society to spread Dunhuang traditional culture effectively.

3.1 Transformation of Audiovisual Language in Works

According to Wang (2007), the regeneration of arts comes from classic artworks as a source of inspiration to inspire a new artistic generation. Dunhuang arts regeneration is to borrow the recognition of artistic value to show the beauty of Dunhuang art through expressions such as stage and screen, attracting widespread attention. Entering the era of digital media, the audiovisual language

of film and television is an important form of manifestation in the “z era”. As a result, with the help of film and television media, the secondary reconstruction of art is formed, and Dunhuang culture and art are deeply excavated and developed.

At the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, the performance of “The Thousand-hand Bodhisattva” performed by the deaf shocked the world, followed by a series of song and dance cultural performances related to Dunhuang, which promoted huge progress for the inheritance of Dunhuang culture. However, with the development of science and technology, the forms of artistic expression are diverse, and stage art can no longer meet the growing mental needs of people. This requires human beings to use modern high-tech film and television technology, such as variety shows, movies, and other forms of artistic creation, to attract the public.

As an art gallery, Dunhuang Art Academy contains countless excellent mural works. On the basis of being faithful to the original frescoes, these works are created by “objective copying of clay”, which is the closest material to Dunhuang frescoes, trying to realize a high degree of consistency with ancient frescoes in shape, spirit, verve. The sophisticated production process can become the material for the creation of documentaries, showing the extraordinary skills of craftsmen. In addition, contemporary audiences have also developed a new psychological expectation—the “aesthetic documentary” expectation (Huang, 2009). Because traditional documentary works use “reproduce documentary methods” to describe the documentary features of the subject in a rigid record, which is difficult to meet people’s psychological pursuit of “aesthetic documentary”. Therefore, it will be an important way to inherit Dunhuang culture.

The murals in Dunhuang Art Academy not only depict the daily life of ordinary laborers but also paintings of Buddha, gods, and so on. A variety of murals are precious materials for animation or film works. On the one hand, it helps the public to understand Dunhuang cultural knowledge and broaden their horizons; on the other hand, it improves the appreciation standard and aesthetic literacy of the recipients and brings aesthetic pleasure.

3.2 Value Realization in Works

Dunhuang’s intangible cultural heritage is unparalleled in terms of artistic aesthetics and social significance. Therefore, the reasonable value realization of these intangible cultural heritage works is also an important strategy for their own value dissemination and better inheritance.

In the past, the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage projects required a lot of investment in capital and human and material costs in order to obtain a certain dissemination effect. However, with the development of digital media and the emergence of digital collections (NFT), the excellent traditional Chinese culture has returned to the young group with a new look.

As a key to helping traditional culture burst into lasting vitality, NFT allows culture to travel through time and space and promotes more creative development and transformation among cultural freshmen with a new form of cultural innovation and an experienced method that young people are interested in. Among the countless collections collected by Dunhuang Art Academy, picking out one or two elements will be a nice creative point of NFT. In a context that conforms to public perception, Dunhuang Feitian refers to the God of Xiangyin painted in the Dunhuang Grottoes. The “flying sky” in all the caves is already equivalent to the cultural symbol of Dunhuang. Feitian is actually a product of cultural fusion and innovation - Indian and Chinese cultures merged for more than 1,600 years for a long time, and finally formed a Chinese cultural characteristic which is “flying”. And the Feitian Musicians in Dunhuang frescoes more embodies the integration with the nation. They not only have “flying” elements, but their different instruments like sheng, cymbal, flute, or Konghou undoubtedly do not highlight traditional Chinese music. Combining Feitian Musicians with NFT and using digital channels, “flying” elements be used to attract a larger audience, as well as traditional musical instruments, can be wrapped in them to promote traditional Chinese music culture. The whole collection has not only strong Dunhuang elements but also contains strong ethnic customs.

“Flying” elements can also be associated with spaceflight. As a launch base for multiple rocket satellites in Gansu, the ancients’ dream of flying in the sky was realized there. “Changzheng”, “Tianwen”, the 1600-year-old dream of flying from inspiration in murals. Combining Dunhuang murals with the aerospace industry, what it contains is not only a single function of value realization but a dream of an era. Connecting NFT with cultural communication will help to enhance the sense of national cultural identity. The core of the intangible cultural heritage digital collection is the classic cultural elements. Therefore, what it brings is not only the value of aesthetics and collection but also the mental enjoyment of traditional culture and playing a role in spreading and inheriting traditional culture.

4. Conclusion

“The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion.” Giddens (2000), who divided modernity into extensionality and intensionality, proposed that the modernity of digitalization in the current world is more profound than most sorts of change characteristic of prior periods. The

subsequent development of big data, new media, and the Internet has provided popular culture with an unprecedentedly prosperous digital world, which definitely enriches the forms of art. Dunhuang Art Academy has absorbed modern techniques and used high technologies such as reproduction to create a good epitomize of Dunhuang, inheriting Dunhuan's intangible cultural heritage effectively.

However, in order to make the intangible cultural heritage continue to succeed, many ways are required. In society, when the public is pursuing "beauty", people should not be limited by the traditional representation methods and aesthetic characteristics. It is necessary to grasp the aesthetic features of the masses and accept their aesthetic requirements, attracting public attention through film and NFT based on the inner echtheit to find uniqueness. Ultimately, creation in inheritance is employed by the artistic and cultural attributes of Dunhuang Art Academy.

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