
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discussion on Two Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance Patterns: A Case Study of Dunhuang Painted Sculpture

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| ABSTRACT

The Dunhuang painted sculpture production boasts a unique hand-making technique with a long history, yet its inheritance is at stake with the change of times. How to make the painted sculpture technique be inherited is the issue we would like to conduct a depth exploration for. The paper has analyzed, compared, and summarized two protection approaches (i.e., a top-down pattern versus a bottom-up pattern) for the intangible cultural heritage (ICH), aiming to seek a proper direction to achieve an all-around inheritance of the painted sculpture technique. The top-down pattern is authoritative and systematical and is easy to manage and practice, whereas the bottom-up pattern is more flexible to prevail among folks to arouse their cultural identity and passion for traditional Chinese techniques. The painted sculpture technique will be lively again as long as the two approaches are integrated together to work towards the common objective.

| KEYWORDS

Painted Sculpture; Inheritance; ICH; Top-Down; Bottom-Up

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1. Introduction

As an important part of China's cultural heritage, the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is the art treasure condensed from the practices and creations of generations of people from different ethnic groups in China that can date back thousands of years ago. Recently, however, the protection and inheritance of the ICH have been greatly challenged. As such, the Party and government have become more emphatic over the protection affairs, and ICH inheritors from various fields are making unremitting efforts. Both the original pieces, regardless of the dynasty, and the production technique of Dunhuang painted sculptures are of significant artistic value. The popularization of modern collective education undermines China's traditional ways of inheritance and has placed most traditional techniques in a desperate situation of being lost. Thus, the protection and inheritance of the painted sculpture involve restoration and salvage but also passing the technique down to more people, thereby restoring and creating more pieces of painted sculpture work.

2. Painted Sculpture: One of the Chinese ICHs

2.1 History of Dunhuang Painted Sculpture

Located in the western frontier of the Hexi Corridor, Dunhuang was once an important place for the ancient Silk Road and is now a long-standing site for profound cultural deposits (Yang, 2012). Dunhuang painted sculptures have been everlasting since 366 AD. Most of them were spread among the folks in the image of immortals in Chinese Taoism. At present, there are more than three-thousand painted sculptures spreading across the regions around Mogao Grottoes and in the 557 grottos (e.g., Western Thousand Buddha Grottoes, Eastern Thousand Buddha Grottoes, and Yulin Grottoes).

The reference regarding sculptures in *Shazhoutujing* (a book for the images in the deserts) evinces that the production of clay sculptures had long been a profound and excellent tradition before Buddhism became popular in Dunhuang and that the industry had begun to take shape prior to the establishment of Dunhuang Grottoes. According to *A Request for Renovating the Niche for Buddha* by Li Ke (one of the unearthed relics in Mogao Grottoes), "In 366 AD, Yue Buddha (a Sramana) came to Mogao Grottoes, he was holy and peaceful, but persistent, without any desire. Often, he walked in the mountains holding his staff, and one day he came up to this specific hill and saw the golden light as if there were thousands of Buddhas there. As such, he built a cave for practicing Buddhism. Also, Master Faliang built another cave next to Yue Buddha's for a similar reason. The two monks with no known name or background were honored as the originators of Mogao Grottoes." Undoubtedly, the development of the grottoes and sculptures were grand¹. This specific artistic form of "shaping and painting" of Dunhuang painted sculptures has stretched across multiple historical periods and eventually constituted its unique artistic features. The technique reflects the personalities and characteristics of Chinese national culture and has had a significant influence on the grottoes and temples in northwest and interior China.

2.2 Aesthetics

Dunhuang sculpture art was derived from cliff inscriptions. While the stone in Dunhuang is naturally unsuitable for carving, the ancient Chinese craftsmen, in the light of local conditions, based on traditional Chinese clay sculptures and absorbed foreign patterns and techniques of carving to create terrific painted clay sculptures with rich regional characteristics after a long process of evolution. According to the sculpture form, there are Yuansu and Fusu. More specifically, Yuansu refers to those in three-dimensional shapes by which they can be admired from all perspectives (mostly the main body of a Bodhisattva or a King), whereas Fusu is similar to reliefs for ribbons, shawls, dresses, etc.

The technical content of Dunhuang painted sculptures involves skeleton, clay-producing, shaping, and painting, which are highly consistent with Dunhuang frescoes in the aesthetic appeal dimension. Both of them share a particular artistic style.

Dunhuang painted sculpture has absorbed traditional Chinese artistic experience to merge carving with color painting. Laying no emphasis merely on shapes or pigments, Dunhuang painted sculptures uphold the idea of "shape its appearance but paint its inherence" to realize the sculptures a proper sense of volume and a strong sense of art. Meanwhile, the masters were carving personalized sentiments into the sculptures, allowing them to tell the art of coloring vividly. As the frequent severe sandstorms and the large temperature difference in Dunhuang, the painted sculptures can be as new as they were thousands of years before must attribute to the particular technique, which is the precious experience accumulated by generations of Dunhuang artists for their prolonged and unremitting path of creation and practice.

2.3 Inheritance of the Painted Sculpture Technique

2.3.1 Impacted by Social Changes

While society continues to develop, many traditional techniques are replaced by industrialized technologies. The living space of traditional Chinese cultures and ICHs keeps shrinking since people's life is full of mixed information and convenient devices. The inheritance of the painted sculpture (as a traditional technique) relies on "learning from his father or a master"². To achieve some initial success, a large amount of time and financial support is required, but the reward is often no match for the pay. Desperately, the number of inheritors is decreasing.

2.3.2 Significance of Inheritance

A nation, an ethnic group, or a community is cohesive only if it has its own culture and values. And the national aesthetics, customs, emotions, and meanings involved in the ICH reflect the deepest connotation of Chinese national culture and play an important role in realizing cultural identity. It is of great significance to explore a direction that can truly protect and inherit Chinese ICHs.

2.3.3 Challenges

China has been in a prolonged situation of insufficiency for aesthetic education, and Chinese people are paying inadequate attention and passion to the ICH. The protection and inheritance of the Dunhuang painted sculpture technique cannot be achieved by several experts or scholars until more young people notice and love it and until a certain number of people are aware of, master, and study it to cultivate qualified inheritors. Unfortunately, the existing laws and institutions and the effectiveness of the safeguard measures concerning the ICH are insufficient.

3. A Top-Down Inheritance Pattern for the ICH

3.1 Features

The top-down inheritance pattern for the ICH refers to a capital-, technology- and talent-dominated inheritance pattern based on government policies and authoritative scientific research.

3.2 Advantages

3.2.1 Link the Inheritance Affairs to the Legal System

Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China came into force on June 1, 2011, marking the protection of the ICH is legalized (Cai, 2021).

3.2.2 Macro Coordination

The top-down pattern is led by the government and relies on the policy to form a top-down path to coordinate the resources for inheriting ICHs by a reasonable distribution of resources, thereby realizing the effective subsidence of capitals, technologies, and talents (Cao & Zhang, 2022). On the other hand, it integrates inheritance affairs into China's cultural strategy. "Building a cultural power" is an actual representation of China's cultural strategy (Fu, 2020). The ICH is rooted in people's lives, serving as one of the representative elements with ethnic characteristics of Chinese culture, whose inheritance is an essential part of making China a cultural power, revealing our cultural self-confidence, and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. At present, the Dunhuang painted sculpture technique has been rated as a provincial ICH and received financial assistance.

3.2.3 Contributions to International Exchange and Cooperation

China joined the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* by UNESCO in August 2004 and has been actively responding to the international safeguarding activities of the ICH since then. In the case of Dunhuang painted sculptures, China launched exchange activities for painted sculpture techniques with Nepal, India, and other countries supported by the "One Belt One Road" initiative (Chen & Liu, 2022).

3.3 Disadvantages

3.3.1 On China's Current Situation for the ICH

As early as the 1950s, Japan proposed the "intangible heritage" concept in the *Protection Law of Cultural Properties*. In 1967, Tunisia took the lead in releasing the Protection of Literature and Art and using its domestic intellectual property laws to protect its ICHs. However, China's laws concerning the ICH are within the scope of administrative law in nature, which means that they focus on macro guidance without detailed implementation guidelines. From a legal perspective, China's ICH laws generally lag behind global progress.

3.3.2 Limited Interactive Multi-Subject Participation

The mass is the creator of ICHs and the main body to protect and inherit them. The government- and research institute-dominated top-down protection pattern weaken the communication and interaction parts of the dissemination process.

3.3.3 Absence of an Incentive Mechanism Restrains Its Marketization

The general trend is the integration between culture and economy, yet the inheritance of the ICH can hardly gain immediate economic benefits, which is contrary to the general environment of the market economy. How to develop relevant products to allow the inheritors to acquire reasonable rewards from their work of inheriting ICHs to eventually form an effective incentive mechanism and a benign organic cycle is an urgent issue.

4. A Bottom-Up Inheritance Pattern for the ICH

4.1 Features

The bottom-up inheritance pattern emphasizes promoting ICHs in civil communities and the joint development among the inheritors.

4.2 Advantages

4.2.1 Higher Subjective Initiative Contributes to Dynamic Inheritance

The ICH has a typical folk character, and the inheritors have strong cultural consciousness. The inheritor-centered bottom-up inheritance pattern breaks the inherent shackles of being formatted and institutionalized to extend the width of the ICH inheritance with strong subjective initiative.

For example, Du Yongwei, a representative inheritor of Dunhuang painted sculpture (Dunhuang City, Gansu Province), initiated the ICH experiential tourism and a new model combining research and travel. In December 2018, Du planned and constructed the Mogaoli Artisan Village for sketch practice, research exchange, and cultural education to help the sustainable development and inheritance of the ICH culture through productive protection. Furthermore, the Mogaoli Artisan Village has united several universities in holding training classes and research-education classes, combining Dunhuang painted sculptures with modern fine arts teaching and eventually realizing great improvement in people's awareness of the ICHs (including Dunhuang painted sculptures).

4.2.2 A Pure Intention to Inherit May Inspire Cultural Identity and Resonance

The folk-directed protection and inheritance measures for the ICH can largely avoid speculation in the government support scenario. And the intrinsic pure craftsmanship is prone to trigger the mass's cultural identity and resonance for the ICH. In this case, Du Yongwei has told his experience in the past four decades of living in Dunhuang, learning from Dunhuang and inheriting Dunhuang many times in teaching and spreading the Dunhuang painted sculpture culture. Also, the couplet he wrote for the Mogaoli Artisan Village says that an unknown dab hand in the workshop inherited the thousand-year tour de force of Dunhuang, and many known masters in the school continued the never-withering spirit of Mogao. Such a simple but pure spirit can largely inspire the mass's praise and pursuit of craftsmanship and fully arouse their enthusiasm for ICH protection and inheritance.

4.3 Disadvantages

4.3.1 Absence of an Effective Restriction and Supervision System May Aggravate the Benefit Distribution

As for the operation of ICH tourism, some community-centered bottom-up inheritance mechanisms lack an appointed interest representation, by which ICH tourism has become an economic approach for some cadres.

4.3.2 Limited Influence

The influence and inheritance power are limited if depending only on folk culture shows or ICH product exhibitions by communities.

4.3.3 Limited Capital Investment

The full-round inheritance of the ICH requires a given level of capital investment and material guarantee, self-raised funds by the folks are far not enough.

4.3.4 Uncontrollable Degree of Industrialization

The industrialization of the ICH is controversial. Moderate industrialization is, of course, favorable, yet excessive industrialization is likely to lay much stress on economic benefits to destroy the ICH culture in an irreversible way. Given the absence of corresponding guidelines, the degree of industrialization of a folk-directed ICH inheritance may be uncontrollable.

Above, both the top-down mechanism and the bottom-up mechanism have their specific advantages and disadvantages but are not incompatible. During a process of social reconstruction, the protection and inheritance of the ICH require a united mechanism combining the top-down pattern and the bottom-up pattern.

5. Suggestions for Protecting and Inheriting the ICH

5.1 On China's Current Situation for the ICH

Given the existing problems in China's law system for the ICH, it is recommended to establish a "macro + micro, domestic + international, universal + regional" policy to perfect the law system. More specifically, it shall fit the local implementation guidelines with the macro administrative law to allow regional authorities to release their local ICH laws with regional characteristics and, at the same time, draw reference from advanced international ICH laws.

5.2 Building ICH Protection Scenarios and ICH Activity Platforms

The establishment of ICH protection scenarios shall rely on communities, museums, and ICH bases to form a specialized dissemination site for ICH protection. Moreover, the ICH inheritors shall positively release multiply public-oriented ICH cultural activities (e.g., performances, exhibitions, and lectures) to create an inclusive dissemination atmosphere for ICH protection (Ju, 2018). The Mogaoli Artisan Village, an ICH protection base for Dunhuang painted sculptures, is a favorable environment for the inheritance and development of the Dunhuang painted sculpture technique.

5.3 New Channels and Carriers of ICH Dissemination

WeChat public account and Douyin are favorable channels for ICH dissemination, expanding the audience group for ICH protection in some playful ways; for instance, *Glory Is Back* is a humanistic variety show produced by Aiqiyi and directed by Dunhuang Academy. Also, it is required to create more innovative ICH dissemination carriers; for example, relevant cultural and creative products can be developed by exploring traditional elements and considering consumer needs.

5.4 Increasing ICH Fiscal Subsidy

In 2016, the central government further enhanced its support for national ICH projects by increasing the allowance for representative inheritors of national ICH projects from CNY 10,000 to 20,000 per person per year. However, according to Du Yongwei, one of the representative inheritors, the allowance remains insufficient for the financial requirement of inheriting the painted sculpture technique. Thus, the policy needs further optimization.

5.5 Historic, Ecological, and Time Environments

Historic environment refers to the historical evolution of the ICH, ecological environment refers to the ecological condition around a specific ICH area, and time environment refers to compatibility with the international strategy. In the case of Dunhuang painted sculpture, the historic environment is the profound history of Dunhuang, the ecological environment is the local materials (e.g., woods, reeds, and mud) required for producing a painted sculpture, and the time environment is closely related to China's "One Belt One Road" strategy.

5.6 Promoting the Application of AI and Digital Technologies in the ICH

In a new era, the emergence of AR, VR, universal capture, and dynamic projection brings more possibilities to the collection and storage of the ICH. The integration between AI and the ICH is a necessary measure at the current stage. For example, immersive ICH experience museums can be built across China to demonstrate the ICH culture through playful panorama, digital interactive wall, multi-user table, air imaging, digital relic demonstration, sand table system, digital painting, CAVE virtual display, virtual "try-on" and the likes, thereby stimulating the mass's exploration desire for the ICH.

5.7 An Evaluation System for ICH Students

According to Article 19 in *Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage*, representative inheritors of national intangible cultural heritage should submit an inheritance report to the provincial department of culture and tourism. We believe such a management mechanism is proper, but an additional evaluation system for ICH students' learning status would be better. The learning status can both reflect the teaching situation of the ICH inheritors and mirror straightforwardly the young students' inheritance ability of the ICH. A benign evaluation system for ICH students is indispensable to truly inherit our ICHs from generation to generation.

5.8 Highlighting the Development of the ICH in Universities

When it comes to the effective inheritance and deep protection of the ICH, modern school education may be the most potential and practical way. However, the current "ICH protection in schools" practice remains mere visual demonstration or propaganda and has not acted as a long-effect routine systematically. Universities shall work closely with ICH inheritors to establish a distinctive development road of campus ICH education through classroom teaching, research lectures, art exhibitions, textbook writing, etc.

5.9 A Sound Management Mechanism (Including Evaluation, Supervision, and Normalization) and Benefit-Sharing System is Required After ICH Marketization and Industrialization

Given the diverse production attributes of ICH projects, it is unrealistic to define one standard industrialization mode for all. The industrialization of the ICH should be considered from both the economic and cultural dimensions. In other words, we should adhere to exploring the living and development space of the ICH in a new era's market actively while maintaining the integrity of the cultural ecology.

6. Conclusion

We suggest that there is no practical conflict between the top-down and the bottom-up inheritance patterns, for both of them aim to promote the inheritance of the ICH. In other words, they are two paths towards a common goal. The ICH inheritance practices in the future should consider the interaction, mutual feedback, and complementation between them. Again, the top-down pattern is a government-dominated mechanism in which the government may direct the inheritance process from the macro perspective by increasing fiscal subsidy and offering research support, whereas the ICH inheritor-dominated bottom-up mechanism emphasizes assisting the inheritance affairs fundamentally, making ICH inheritors as units to carry out ICH public lectures and research activities. We expect that the two patterns may merge into one joint force to realize a resonance in promoting the ICH inheritance and enabling China's national cultures to live long and grow strong!

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