

REVITALIZING THE DUNHUANG CULTURAL HERITAGE: STRATEGIES AND PATHWAYS



<https://doi.org/10.24412/2181-1784-2025-26-534-541>

Zheng Jie

PhD Candidate in Management, Associate Professor

*“Silk Road” International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage,
Samarkand City, Republic of Uzbekistan, 140104, 17, University Boulevard.
Beijing City University, Haidian District.100094, Beijing China.*

Email: 3843895@qq.com

Orchid ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0908-4399>

Annotation. *This paper takes Dunhuang cultural heritage as its research subject. It is divided into five parts: the introduction, an overview of Dunhuang’s main cultural heritage, an analysis of the fundamental principles for revitalizing cultural heritage—including the principles of protection priority, living utilization, integration into daily life, and integrated development—a detailed examination of various revitalization methods such as digital technology, cultural creative products, art exhibitions, film and television works, and performing arts, and finally, the conclusion.*

Keywords: *Dunhuang Cultural Heritage, Revitalization Strategies.*

摘要 本文以敦煌文化遗产为研究对象，共分为五个部分：引言、敦煌主要文化遗产概述、文化遗产活化的基本原则分析——包括保护优先、活化利用、融入日常生活和融合发展的原则，对数字技术、文化创意产品、艺术展览、影视作品和表演艺术等多种活化方式进行详细探讨，最后为结论部分。

关键词: 敦煌文化遗产，活化策略。

1. Introduction

Dunhuang, a crucial hub on the ancient Silk Road and a confluence of diverse civilizations, carries the historical memory and wisdom of a millennium of cultural exchange between East and West. The cultural heritage represented by the Mogao Caves is not only a cultural treasure of the Chinese nation but also a common spiritual wealth for all humanity. With the deepening implementation of the cultural power strategy and the continuous advancement of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, the protection and utilization of cultural heritage have become essential pathways for promoting outstanding traditional Chinese culture and enhancing national cultural soft power. This paper aims to systematically review the revitalization

practices of Dunhuang's cultural heritage, explore paths that align with the unique characteristics of Dunhuang culture, meet the demands of contemporary development, and fulfill the needs of the people, providing theoretical reference and practical guidance for the sustainable development and innovative inheritance of Dunhuang's cultural heritage.

2. Overview of Dunhuang Cultural Heritage

Dunhuang culture originated in the strategic Gansu corridor of the Silk Road, has undergone millennia of historical sedimentation, and is predominantly based on Han culture. It primarily refers to the culture formed in the Dunhuang region from the 4th to the 14th century, represented by the Mogao Caves. It is a unique regional culture born from the convergence of multiple ethnic cultures and represents a distinctive civilizational achievement on the Silk Road. Dunhuang culture encompasses material, spiritual, and social life aspects, possessing both regional and global significance.

The cultural heritage of Dunhuang includes five main categories: ancient cultural relics in the Dunhuang area, cave art (such as the Mogao Caves, Western Thousand Buddha Caves, and Yulin Caves), Dunhuang murals, Dunhuang painted sculptures, and artifacts unearthed from the Dunhuang Library Cave. Ancient cultural relics primarily include sections of the ancient Great Wall, Han Dynasty bamboo slips, and artifacts from various periods. The unearthed objects reflect the historical changes and cultural development of the Dunhuang region. In terms of cave art, the Mogao Caves are the core of Dunhuang's cultural heritage. They represent the highest achievement of Chinese Buddhist art from the 4th to the 14th century and, together with the Western Thousand Buddha Caves and Yulin Caves, form a complete system of Dunhuang cave art. The existing Dunhuang murals cover approximately 45,000 square meters and systematically preserve authentic Chinese paintings from the 4th to the 14th century. The murals include figure paintings, landscape paintings, architectural paintings, decorative paintings, etc., and also reflect many aspects of ancient social life and customs, earning the description as a "museum on walls." Dunhuang painted sculptures are an important component of this heritage, including statues of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, disciples, and various heavenly kings and guardians. The sculptures from different periods demonstrate the multicultural nature of Dunhuang culture.

3. Fundamental Principles for Revitalizing Dunhuang Cultural Heritage

3.1 Protection-Oriented Principle

The "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics" proposes that cultural heritage protection must adhere to the principle of "prioritizing protection, emphasizing rescue, utilizing rationally, and strengthening

management.” Given the non-renewable nature of Dunhuang’s cultural heritage, any revitalization and utilization must be premised on its scientific protection. Efforts should be based on the current state of Dunhuang’s cultural heritage to deeply explore its value, maximize the preservation of its authenticity and integrity, and achieve sustainable development.

3.2 Integration into Daily Life Principle

Cultural heritage originates from life and maintains close connections with contemporary society. The revitalization and utilization of Dunhuang’s cultural heritage should integrate it with real life, guided by the public’s spiritual and cultural needs. This involves creating products that combine practical value with aesthetic appeal, beloved by the public, to meet both material and spiritual cultural demands.

3.3 Integrated Development Principle

In the current era, integrated development models between cultural heritage and various industries are increasingly mature. On one hand, it is essential to deeply explore the outstanding cultural elements within Dunhuang’s heritage for creative transformation. On the other hand, the historical, cultural, artistic, scientific, and economic values of Dunhuang’s cultural heritage should be thoroughly excavated to foster innovative integrated development across fields such as tourism, research and study, education, and cultural creativity.

4. Research on Revitalization Strategies for Dunhuang Cultural Heritage

4.1 Digital Technology Revitalization Strategies

The Dunhuang Academy has conducted comprehensive digitalization of the Mogao Caves caverns, murals, and painted sculptures using techniques such as high-precision photography, image processing, and 3D reconstruction. By the end of 2022, high-precision data collection for 290 caves, the production of panoramic tour programs for 162 caves, and the 3D reconstruction of 7 major heritage sites had been completed. These digital resources are made accessible to global visitors through the “Digital Dunhuang” resource library, achieving the digital preservation and widespread dissemination of cultural heritage.

In terms of visitor experience, the Dunhuang Academy has introduced augmented reality (AR) technology experience projects, such as the “Flying Apsaras Special Tour,” enabling the viewing of “artifacts outside the caves,” significantly enriching the tourist experience. The “Flying Apsaras Special Tour” employs a display method that interweaves physical cave visits with virtual experiences, complemented by detailed professional guide services. This allows visitors to appreciate the exquisite murals and painted sculptures of multiple

physical caves while using handheld terminals to experience virtual scenes of flying apsaras and panoramic cave views, achieving a blended reality experience.

4.2 Performing Arts Revitalization Strategies

Several highly successful performing arts works have been developed based on Dunhuang's cultural heritage. First, the indoor situational experience drama "See Dunhuang Again." This production selects five typical scenes from Dunhuang's long history and culture, using six key characters to weave the narrative thread, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in Dunhuang and Silk Road culture. Second, the large-scale desert live-action performance "Dunhuang Spectacular." This show relies on Dunhuang's cultural landscapes such as the Mogao Caves and the Crescent Spring, integrating cutting-edge creative concepts and stage art techniques to recreate the Crescent Spring and an outdoor digital Mogao Caves stage, reviving the former prosperity of the ancient Silk Road. Third, the cave-style immersive experience drama "Music in Motion: Dunhuang." This performance brings ancient Dunhuang musical instruments and scores "out" of the murals, comprehensively showcasing the charm of Dunhuang's millennia-old ancient music culture. Fourth, the large-scale situational sound and painting drama "Thousand-Handed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin." Based solely on the "Thousand-Handed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin Sutra Illustration" from Cave 3 at the Mogao Caves, this piece is performed by 50 hearing-impaired dancers and visually impaired musicians and singers through music, dance, multimedia, and other forms, innovatively narrating the folk tale "Miaoshan Saves Her Father." The artists present a visual feast with distinct Dunhuang characteristics, profound humanistic sentiment, and unique artistic aesthetics, demonstrating exquisite skill and boundless emotional power.

4.3 Cultural Creative Product Revitalization Strategies

Dunhuang cultural creative products combine elements of Dunhuang's cultural heritage with modern design concepts to create innovative products with unique charm and cultural significance. The variety of Dunhuang 文创 products is extensive, possessing both cultural value and modern aesthetic appeal, popular among young people, and effectively promoting the revitalization of Dunhuang's cultural heritage.

The first category is artwork themed on Dunhuang murals. This mainly includes hanging paintings, mural reproductions, sculptures, and ornaments. These products draw inspiration from the Mogao Caves murals or images such as Buddhas, flying apsaras, and the nine-colored deer, created through high-precision reproduction or artistic creation into exquisite hanging paintings, mural

reproductions, sculptures, and ornaments. They possess ornamental and collectible value and are suitable for decorating homes or public spaces. The second category is cultural stationery and office supplies. This includes notebooks, notepads, document storage bags, tapes, stickers, rulers, stamps, etc. These office items are printed with Dunhuang mural patterns or elements, being both practical and artistically pleasing. The third category is clothing, accessories, and bags. This primarily includes scarves and shawls, clothing and bags, and accessories. The fourth category is daily necessities and home decorations. This includes tea sets and tableware, home decorations, etc., such as Dunhuang-style table lamps, cushions, and rugs, adding a touch of cultural atmosphere to the home environment.

4.4 Art Exhibition Revitalization

In recent years, the Dunhuang Academy has meticulously curated a series of high-quality exhibitions. These exhibitions not only showcase the unique charm and profound depth of Dunhuang culture but have also attracted a large number of visitors, enhancing the visibility and influence of Dunhuang's cultural heritage. In terms of themes and content, the exhibitions mainly fall into three categories. The first category is Dunhuang cave art exhibitions. These primarily display artistic treasures such as murals and sculptures from the Mogao Caves, allowing visitors to experience the unique style and exquisite craftsmanship of Dunhuang cave art up close through careful selection and layout. The second category is Dunhuang historical and cultural exhibitions. Using various forms such as artifacts, images, and text, these provide a comprehensive introduction to Dunhuang's historical and cultural background, significant historical events, and figures, giving visitors a deeper understanding of Dunhuang. The third category is thematic exhibitions, such as the "Dunhuang Costume Culture Exhibition" and "Dunhuang Buddhist Art Exhibition." These focus on specific areas of Dunhuang culture, offering visitors more specialized and in-depth viewing experiences.

These high-quality art exhibitions utilize modern technological means like holographic projection and VR technology to create immersive environments, allowing participants to feel as if they are in Dunhuang a thousand years ago, experiencing the charm of ancient culture. Simultaneously, academic lectures and workshops are held in conjunction with the exhibition content, inviting experts and scholars to provide explanations and demonstrations, thereby disseminating knowledge about Dunhuang's cultural heritage.

4.5 Film and Television Works Revitalization

Common forms include films, TV series, variety shows, animations, documentaries, and more. Works based on Dunhuang cultural heritage are mainly divided into four categories: documentaries, animations, film and television dramas,

and variety shows. Documentaries primarily include CCTV's large-scale documentary "Dunhuang," NHK's "The Silk Road," "Dunhuang Mogao Caves - The Full Picture of Beauty", "Dunhuang School of Painting", "Dunhuang Celestial Musicians", the Dunhuang section of "HeXi Corridor", "World Heritage in China - Mogao Caves", "Keeping Watch over Dunhuang" etc. Animations mainly include "The Nine-Colored Deer" and "The Boy Jia Saved the Deer" produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, "The Legend of Dunhuang" and "Mogao Glory" directed by Tang Bohua. In film, the earliest representative is the 1982 musical dance drama film "Along the Silk Road". It is an extension of Dunhuang murals, possessing both dance artistic value and modern cultural significance. Other films and TV series related to Dunhuang include "The Last Emperor," "The Touch," "The Children of Huang Shi," "Dunhuang Love," etc. Furthermore, Dunhuang cultural heritage has also appeared in variety shows, such as the 2019 CCTV Spring Festival Gala dance program "Flying Apsaras of Dunhuang," variety shows like "National Treasure," "Lecture Hall," and "Dunhuang on Stage!" bringing Dunhuang cultural heritage into countless households.

4.6 Community Participation Revitalization

The Dunhuang Academy offers various research and study courses, including experiential, in-depth research, and theme-based customized classes, through platforms like the Mogao Grottoes Study Center. These are taught by professional research travel instructors, providing visitors with opportunities to gain an in-depth understanding of Dunhuang culture. Areas under Dunhuang City, such as Yueyaquan Town, focus on cultivating intangible cultural heritage inheritors and community participation. Through training courses, seminars, and activities introducing intangible heritage into schools, they enhance public recognition, pride, and honor towards intangible heritage, promoting the inheritance and development of Dunhuang's cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically explores the revitalization practices of Dunhuang's cultural heritage. Research indicates that digital preservation and display, cultural and tourism integration innovation, and community participation in inheritance constitute the three pillars of revitalizing Dunhuang's cultural heritage.

Current practices demonstrate that successful cultural heritage revitalization needs to adhere to the following principles: balancing protection and utilization to ensure the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage; combining tradition and modernity to achieve contemporary cultural transformation through innovative means; and multi-stakeholder collaboration, forming a cooperative mechanism

guided by the government, supported by professional institutions, and involving society.

Future revitalization of Dunhuang's cultural heritage should focus on the following directions: First, deepen technological integration, utilizing cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence and the metaverse to expand revitalization pathways. Second, strengthen international dialogue, enhancing the global influence of Dunhuang culture through cooperative research, joint exhibitions, etc. Third, innovate communication mechanisms, building a targeted and precise communication system. Fourth, improve policy support to provide sustained backing for cultural heritage revitalization. In summary, the revitalization of Dunhuang's cultural heritage is a systematic project requiring long-term persistence. Only through innovation within protection and development through innovation can the millennium-old Dunhuang culture radiate vibrant vitality in the new era, making greater contributions to cultural inheritance and mutual learning among civilizations.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gao Fei. Research on the Value Evaluation of the Industrial Heritage of the Middle East Railway from the Perspective of the Heritage Corridor [D]. Harbin Institute of Technology, 2018.
- [2] UNESCO General Conference. Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage [EB/QL]. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-ch.pdf>
- [3] Su Hui. Research on the Motivation and Strategy of “Activation” of Cultural Heritage Resources [J]. Resource Development and Market, 2018, 34(01): 99~102.
- [4] China Government Website. Cultural Relics Protection Law of the People's Republic of China [EB/QL]. http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2002/content_61821.htm
- [5] Yu Xuecai. Heritage revitalization: a win-win path for protection and utilization [J]. Architecture and Culture, 2010(05):16-20.
- [6] Wei Yuanyuan, Huang Juyun. On the survival and revitalization of folk sports in the protection of intangible cultural heritage - taking the flower basket lantern dance in Pudong, Shanghai as an example [J]. Sports Research and Education, 2014, 29(06):74-79.
- [7] Wu Bihu. Protection and revitalization of traditional villages based on rural tourism [J]. Social Scientists, 2016(02):7-9.

[8] Long Maoxing, Long Zhenfu. Research on the revitalization of historical and cultural heritage in tourism development - taking the Tang Paradise as an example [J]. Tourism Overview (Second Half of the Month), 2013(03):14-16.

[9] Wu Bihu, Xu Xiaobo. Traditional villages and tourism revitalization: theoretical and legal analysis [J]. Journal of Yangzhou University (Humanities and Social Sciences) Academic Edition), 2017, 21(01): 5-21.