

From Copying to Promoting: A Study on the Cultural Education Value of Zhang Daqian's Artistic Practice in Dunhuang

Zhu Qian

School of Geographic and Geomatics Sciences, Neijiang Normal University, Neijiang 641100, Sichuan, China

*Correspondence Author, gs65731@student.upm.edu.my

Abstract: *Zhang Daqian's artistic practice in Dunhuang from 1941 to 1943 marked a crucial phase in his career, as he traced the origins of Chinese national art traditions beyond his previous study of traditional painting. Following the logical thread of "copying—promoting—educating," this paper examines Zhang Daqian's practical process — from cave exploration and mural copying to the organization of his works and their presentation in public exhibitions — and analyzes the cultural education value embedded in this process. The study argues that Dunhuang mural copying enabled Zhang Daqian, through direct practices of observation, identification, and replication, to deepen his understanding of ancient Chinese painting traditions, advancing him from technical study toward a holistic comprehension of the historical trajectory and aesthetic values of national art. Through organization, reproduction, and public exhibition, his copied works transcended the spatial constraints of the cave sites, transforming a personal artistic endeavor into socially oriented cultural dissemination and endowing Dunhuang art with broader public cultural significance. Zhang Daqian's journey from copying to promoting demonstrates that the educational value of excellent traditional Chinese culture is progressively generated through the study of classics, embodied practice, and public promotion. The educational logic manifests in three dimensions: deepening cultural cognition through engagement with canonical works, consolidating cultural identity through artistic practice, and cultivating cultural responsibility through dissemination. This case provides a concrete practical reference for transforming China's traditional cultural resources into educational resources.*

Keywords: Zhang Daqian, Dunhuang art, Copying, Promoting, Cultural education.

1. Introduction

Dunhuang art serves as an important visual resource for understanding the ancient Chinese painting tradition and the development of Chinese civilization. Since the beginning of the 20th century, with advances in the investigation, research, and conservation of the Dunhuang caves, Dunhuang art has gradually entered the realm of modern scholarship and public awareness. Zhang Daqian resided in Dunhuang from 1941 to 1943, where he conducted cave surveys, examined murals, and produced systematic copies as part of his in-depth study of Dunhuang art. Subsequently, he presented these copied works in public exhibitions, allowing Dunhuang murals to reach a wider audience. In recent years, as Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang investigation notes, cave sketches, and related materials have been systematically compiled, scholarship has increasingly addressed specific aspects of his work, including cave surveying, numbering systems, field records, and copying methods (Zhao, 2025). However, the question of how Zhang Daqian transformed his personal study of Dunhuang into public cultural dissemination—and the cultural and educational implications of this process—has yet to be fully explored. This article examines Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice as a case study, tracing his trajectory from individual artistic study to public cultural dissemination through cave investigations, mural copying, and public exhibitions. It further analyzes the cultural and educational value embedded in this trajectory from "copying" to "promoting"—specifically, how traditional art, through in-depth study and public dissemination, can be transformed into an educational resource that cultivates cultural identity and awareness of heritage transmission.

2. Copying and Tracing the Origins: Recognition of Traditional Culture in Zhang Daqian's Artistic Practice in Dunhuang

2.1 Journey to Dunhuang: Artistic Exploration and the Rediscovery of Tradition

Zhang Daqian's journey to Dunhuang was not an incidental artistic excursion, but rather the culmination of his long-term study of traditional painting and his sustained pursuit of the origins of Chinese painting. In the first half of the 20th century, amid the convergence of Eastern and Western art concepts and the modern transformation of Chinese painting, the re-recognition of China's national art tradition became a pressing concern in the art world (Li, 2024). Zhang Daqian extensively copied works from various dynasties in his early years and had accumulated a deep understanding of the traditions of the Song and Yuan dynasties, particularly the literati painting of the Ming and Qing periods (Feng, 2019, p. 22). However, as his artistic practice deepened, his focus gradually extended to earlier periods. The extensive murals from the Northern Dynasties through the Song and Yuan periods preserved at Dunhuang provided rare material resources that enabled him to engage with early figure painting, religious painting, and heavy-color art. In 1941, when Zhang Daqian arrived in Dunhuang, he completed a significant transition: from studying existing scrolls and ancient painting manuals to examining the cave paintings themselves, and from indirect study of ancient masters through later copies to direct on-site investigation (Zhang, 2025).

The artistic style presented in the Dunhuang murals also prompted Zhang Daqian to re-examine the historical

constitution of Chinese painting traditions. The solemn and rich figure depictions, varied line drawings, vivid color schemes, and grand yet cohesive compositions were markedly different from the Ming and Qing literati paintings with which he was previously familiar. This led him to recognize that Chinese painting is not limited to the ink-wash idiom of the literati tradition, but encompasses a much richer array of historical forms. Thus, the significance of his Dunhuang journey extended beyond the pursuit of any particular technique, pointing toward a re-understanding of the origins and development of ancient Chinese painting and the national art tradition. Dunhuang thus became a crucial ground for Zhang Daqian to expand his artistic vision and trace the roots of tradition.

2.2 Copying Dunhuang: Mural Investigation and Reconstructive Copying Practice

After arriving in Dunhuang, Zhang Daqian and his disciples first conducted a systematic survey and organization of the Mogao Caves, and, based on their cave investigations and mural identification, selected representative works for copying (Zhang et al., 2025). This combination of on-site investigation, visual research, and painting practice differentiated his Dunhuang activities from ordinary sketching or field trips for artistic inspiration. His copying covered a wide range of subjects—Buddha figures, bodhisattvas, flying apsaras, donors, sutra illustrations, and decorative patterns—spanning multiple historical periods. The sustained and intensive on-site study enabled Zhang Daqian to identify the artistic characteristics of Dunhuang murals from different periods through comparative analysis, and to grasp the formal principles of ancient murals in terms of figure structure, line work, color relations, and composition.

In terms of method, Zhang Daqian predominantly employed what came to be known as “reconstructive copying”—that is, while preserving the basic composition and structural relationships of the murals, he restored certain faded or damaged areas to present a relatively complete visual form. This method involves the artist's subjective judgment and cannot be equated with objective reproduction in the sense of modern conservation. The extent of restoration has also been a subject of debate. However, from the perspective of artistic study, reconstructive copying requires the copyist to analyze the original formal structure, line arrangement, and color relations of the murals in depth, and to grasp their internal logic through repeated practice. Therefore, Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang copying was not merely a record of the murals' visual appearance, but also an important practice through which he entered into the language of ancient painting and grasped traditional artistic methods.

2.3 From Technical Skill to Artistic Understanding: Study of Dunhuang Art and Deepening of Traditional Understanding

Through his long-term study of Dunhuang, Zhang Daqian gradually expanded his understanding of traditional painting from specific techniques to a holistic comprehension of the historical trajectory of Chinese art. The figure paintings, religious paintings, and heavy-color tradition preserved in the Dunhuang murals enabled Zhang Daqian to discover artistic

resources far more ancient and abundant than those of the literati tradition that had dominated Chinese painting since the Song and Yuan dynasties (Guan, 2021), further broadening his historical perspective on the Chinese painting tradition. Line drawing, modeling, and color application were no longer merely formal techniques; they became specific entry points for understanding the aesthetic concepts and artistic methods of ancient painting. The significance of Dunhuang for Zhang Daqian lay in the way it transformed “copying ancient works” from an exercise in imitating a particular master or school into a pursuit of the diverse traditions of Chinese painting as a whole.

This understanding was not derived from theoretical reasoning alone, but was gradually formed through long-term observation, comparison, and copying. When faced with specific murals, Zhang Daqian had to discern the proportions of figures, the flow of drapery folds, the gradations of color, and the chronological differences between various paintings, translating abstract art-historical knowledge into tangible, comparable practical experience. The significance of copying thus evolved from “learning the techniques” to “understanding the principles”: not only learning the expressive methods of ancient painting, but also grasping the historical logic behind the formation and development of the tradition. Dunhuang thus transformed from a site of technical study into a crucial resource for Zhang Daqian to reconceptualize the national artistic tradition.

3. From Copying to Promoting: The Public Cultural Transformation of Zhang Daqian's Artistic Practice in Dunhuang

3.1 From Copying to the Organization and Representation of Dunhuang Art

The significance of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang copies lies not merely in their number—over two hundred works—but in the way they transformed the original mode of existence of the Dunhuang murals. Murals that were originally scattered across different caves and bound to specific spaces were transformed through copying and compilation into relatively autonomous pictorial forms, enabling the figures, color relations, and compositions of Dunhuang murals from different periods to be viewed and compared side by side. The copies thus became not merely records of Zhang Daqian's personal study, but independent visual documents in their own right.

Moreover, the organization and representation of these copies transformed the original conditions under which Dunhuang murals could be viewed. The murals are intrinsically tied to the cave space, and their viewing has long been constrained by geographical distance and the site's physical conditions. Through copying, these images were converted into pictorial works that could be independently preserved, transported, and exhibited, thereby expanding how Dunhuang art could be viewed and understood, and paving the way for the copies to enter the public cultural sphere. Thus, Zhang Daqian's copying practice began to extend beyond individual artistic study toward cultural representation with a public orientation.

3.2 From Cave to Exhibition: The Public Dissemination of

Dunhuang Art

Building on this foundation, Zhang Daqian proceeded to exhibit his copies in Lanzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Shanghai, and other cities, bringing cave art that had long been largely inaccessible to the public into new channels of visibility. The copies brought together murals from different caves and periods, enabling the public to gain a direct visual understanding of Dunhuang art without traveling to the site. In this way, the dissemination of Dunhuang art transcended the spatial constraints of the caves, creating a new conduit between Dunhuang and the public via the copies.

More importantly, public exhibitions transformed the public character of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice. At the grottoes, copying had primarily served the artist's personal research and study. Once these works entered exhibition spaces, they could generate new cultural understanding through viewing, interpretation, and exchange (Heruti and Yahya, 2024; Li et al., 2024). Zhang Daqian was thus no longer merely a copyist of Dunhuang art, but gradually became a mediator between the grotto art and modern society. Public exhibitions were pivotal in facilitating this transformation, enabling his Dunhuang practice to transcend the bounds of individual artistic endeavor and assume a more clearly defined public cultural significance.

3.3 From Artistic Dissemination to Cultural Promotion: The Rediscovery of National Art's Value

After the Dunhuang copies entered public view, their significance no longer lay merely in the display of the artworks themselves, but extended to a reassessment of the national artistic tradition. Dunhuang, a cultural heritage site long removed from the social mainstream, re-entered the cultural consciousness of modern society through the copies and exhibitions. The public was able to grasp the historical depth and artistic achievements of ancient Chinese art through vivid and tangible visual images. As this awareness spread, Dunhuang art ceased to be a subject of interest solely for a small circle of researchers and artists. It gradually became an important cultural resource through which the broader public could engage with traditional Chinese art. Its historical and aesthetic significance were brought into sharper focus through the process of dissemination.

This change signals that Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice extended from artistic dissemination to cultural promotion. Through the copies, the public encountered not only the mural images themselves, but also the ancient artistic traditions and cultural memories embodied in them. Zhang Daqian transformed his personal discovery and understanding of Dunhuang into a cultural expression directed toward society, enabling Dunhuang art to gain renewed recognition and attention in modern public spaces. In this way, his practice carried cultural significance that transcended the mere display of artworks, laying the groundwork for further discussion of its cultural and educational value.

4. Cultural Education: The Educational Value of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang Artistic Practice

Cultural heritage education is not limited to the transmission of historical knowledge; it also involves understanding cultural values and extending them into practice (Kisler, 2026; Li, 2026). Experiential cultural Participation, moreover, contributes to deepening cultural understanding and identity formation (Yatim et al., 2025). The contemporary significance of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice lies not in the mere replication of his copying methods or exhibition formats, but in the trajectory in which it moved from classical study and artistic practice to public dissemination. This trajectory provides a concrete model for transforming traditional culture from cognitive understanding into value identification and commitment to transmission. Accordingly, this article elucidates the educational value of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice on three progressive levels: cultural cognition, cultural identification, and cultural responsibility.

4.1 Deepening Cultural Cognition through Classical Study

Cultural identity is first established based on an authentic understanding of tradition. Zhang Daqian's understanding of Dunhuang art did not derive from abstract knowledge alone, but was gradually developed through long-term field investigation and copying. When examining specific murals, he approached ancient painting through figure depiction, line work, color relations, and composition. By comparing works from different periods, he expanded his understanding of the historical trajectory of Chinese painting. Thus, Dunhuang was no longer merely an abstract cultural symbol, but became an artistic tradition that could be observed, analyzed, and understood.

Compared with the passive acceptance of established conclusions, the study of classics, comparative visual analysis, and artistic practice enable young people to grasp the historical context, aesthetic aspirations, and creative intelligence of traditional art through concrete forms. Existing research on art education has also noted the distinction between art appreciation and active Participation, regarding the latter as an important means of examining learners' cognitive, individual, and social development (Schneider and Rohmann, 2021). Therefore, the value of classical study lies not only in acquiring relevant knowledge, but also in enabling learners to establish a more concrete cognitive connection with traditional art through actual Participation (Liu et al., 2023), laying the foundation for the formation of cultural identity.

4.2 Consolidating Cultural Identity through Artistic Practice

Cultural cognition must be further transformed into understanding and affirmation of one's own cultural values if a genuine sense of cultural identity is to be formed (Zhang et al., 2025). The significance of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang journey lies in the fact that his understanding of tradition was consistently grounded in concrete artistic practice. Through repeated copying, examination, and comparison, Dunhuang art was no longer merely a historical relic. Still, it gradually became an important reference point for his understanding of the Chinese painting tradition. By personally engaging with and experiencing the tradition, his understanding of the

richness and creativity of ancient Chinese art deepened from formal understanding to value affirmation.

Research has shown that aesthetic education practice can extend value education from the classroom to the field of practice, further transforming cognitive understanding into emotional experience and value internalization. Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice exemplifies this process: continuous copying led him from "knowing that" to "knowing why" with respect to the tradition, and cultural identity thus acquired a solid foundation grounded in personal experience. This indicates that the formation of cultural identity cannot rely solely on value proclamations, but requires the learner to gain personal experience through actual Participation, establishing an inner connection with the tradition in the process of "doing" and "realizing" (UNESCO, 2024). Therefore, the implication of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice lies not in treating copying itself as an educational end, but in emphasizing the understanding of traditional values through authentic artistic Participation, thereby enabling cultural identity to acquire a more solid experiential foundation.

4.3 Fostering Cultural Responsibility through Public Dissemination

A further deepening of cultural identity finds expression in the conscious practice of inheriting and promoting culture. Zhang Daqian did not confine the results of his Dunhuang investigations and copies to his personal artistic experience. Rather, he brought them to the public through curating his works and organizing public exhibitions, transforming his personal understanding of Dunhuang art into cultural content accessible to a wider audience. In this process, his role evolved from that of a learner of traditional art into an interpreter and disseminator of Dunhuang art, and cultural identity thus acquired a practical orientation toward society.

This transformation is significant for contemporary cultural education. Young people should not only be learners and advocates of traditional culture, but also its active interpreters and disseminators. Cultural responsibility is not a mere verbal affirmation of values. Still, it lies in translating identification into concrete action, enabling traditional culture to gain wider understanding and achieve broader dissemination in new social contexts. Zhang Daqian's progression from personal study to public dissemination exemplifies the crucial leap from knowing the value of cultural heritage to transmitting it. Only by completing this leap can cultural cognition, cultural identification, and cultural responsibility form a progressive relationship from the inside out, and can China's excellent traditional culture truly become a living resource that connects individual spiritual growth with the transmission of cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

The significance of Zhang Daqian's artistic practice in Dunhuang transcends the boundaries of his personal artistic career. His practice marked a transformation from individual study to public dissemination. Through copying, curation, and exhibition, cave art entered modern society, endowing what had been a personal artistic exploration with a public cultural

character. "From copying to promoting" thus embodies the trajectory of traditional art moving from individual study to public engagement. Zhang Daqian not only reconceptualized the national artistic tradition through his study of the classics, but also expanded the social impact of Dunhuang art through modern exhibition practices, transforming Dunhuang from a subject of professional research and artistic study into an important medium through which the public could engage with Chinese traditional culture. This historical practice offers valuable insights for understanding the educational value of traditional culture. Whether traditional culture can truly serve an educational function depends on whether it can be internalized into individual cognition, emotion, and action through in-depth study, embodied practice, and active dissemination. Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice is significant in this regard: the study of classics formed the basis of cultural cognition, engagement with tradition fostered the formation of cultural identity, and the shift from individual to public dissemination transformed this identity into cultural responsibility. Therefore, the case of Zhang Daqian's Dunhuang practice offers not a replicable educational model, but rather an educational paradigm worth considering: through a genuine and sustained connection between the individual and tradition, China's excellent traditional culture can be transformed from historical remains into cultural resources that contribute to the shaping of contemporary spirit and the formation of values.

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