Front. Lit. Stud. China 2026, 20 (3): 347–365
DOI 10.3868/s010-021-026-0016-5

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Cross-Cultural Communication of Dunhuang Culture: Research Concepts and Practical Strategies

Abstract Dunhuang culture is an important part of the shared historical memory among the countries surrounding western China and those along the Silk Road. Strengthening the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture meets the needs of the times by promoting exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, demonstrating the distinctive features of Chinese civilization, and sharing China's experience in the protection of cultural relics. This work urgently requires theoretical breakthroughs and innovative practice in areas such as intersubjective communication, *zhong*-media communication, and circle-based communication. Intersubjective communication respects the diversity of civilizations, *zhong*-media communication emphasizes transcending traditional media, and circle-based communication focuses on the fluctuating shifts between the center and the periphery. These three communication approaches are independent yet interconnected, and are organically unified in bringing fine traditional Chinese culture to the world. Strengthening coordination among communication subjects, prioritizing the internet, advancing high-quality cultural products alongside improving market mechanisms, and using targeting area and country audience research as a breakthrough point can enhance the influence, communicative capacity, appeal, and permeative influence of Dunhuang culture's cross-cultural communication.

Keywords Dunhuang culture; cross-cultural communication; cultural value; Chinese culture

In northwestern China, at the western end of the Hexi Corridor in Gansu Province, stands Dunhuang, a city with a history of a thousand years. Buddhism was introduced from India to China in the first century CE, and over time, more people in Dunhuang became Buddhist believers. As a result, the building and patronage of Buddhist caves became common practice. From the 4th to the 14th century, generations of artisans carved Buddhist caves in this region. Their work left the Chinese people of today major cultural treasures, including the Mogao Caves, the West Thousand Buddha Caves, and the Yulin Caves. The

Translated from 现代传播(中国传媒大学学报) (*Modern Communication [Journal of Communication University of China]*), 2025 (8): 66–75

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Mogao Caves, located beside the Dangquan River 25 kilometers southeast of Dunhuang, contain 492 numbered caves, house about 45,000 square meters of murals and more than 3,000 painted sculptures, as well as five wooden eaves for caves from the Tang and Song dynasties. In 1900, a Daoist priest surnamed Wang discovered more than 70,000 manuscripts in what is now Cave 17 of the Mogao Caves. This discovery opened up the Library Cave, one of the greatest archives of Dunhuang history and culture. In the 1990s, excavations of the Xuanquan Han Slips and other cultural relics revealed the flourishing scene of eachange between China and the Western Regions more than 2,000 years ago. These finds added another rich source of evidence for studying Dunhuang's history, geography, and culture. Together, these concrete, perceptible, material, and immaterial forms of existence constitute the foundation of what is now called Dunhuang culture. This culture has gained new significance and value over time through its modern history: the looting of Dunhuang cultural relics more than a century ago, the efforts of earlier generations to defend and preserve them, and the achievements of scholars and heritage workers, as well as the spirit of perseverance they demonstrated, in protecting Dunhuang cultural heritage under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese government.

In general, Dunhuang culture includes several key elements. First, in terms of carriers, the main body consists of the Dunhuang manuscripts, the Dunhuang Han Slips, and heritage sites in Dunhuang and surrounding areas that have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, such as the Mogao Caves, the Xuanquan Posthouse Site, and the Yumen Pass Site. Second, Dunhuang culture has a broad connotation. It includes cave architecture, painted sculptures, and murals that reflect Buddhist culture, as well as religious scriptures, official and private documents, Chinese works in the four traditional bibliographic categories, and documents in non-Han languages. Spanning both ancient and modern materials, it touches upon a wide range of fields, including art, religion, philosophy, history, geography, society, language, literature, ethnic studies, architecture, science and technology, and archaeology. Third, Dunhuang culture has a long historical span of approximately two thousand years. It began with the establishment of the Xuanquan Posthouse during the eras from the late Yuanding 元鼎 to the early Zhenghe 征和 under the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty 汉武帝 (111–92 BCE). It continued with the carving of the Mogao Caves in the second year of the Jianyuan 建元 era of the Former Qin (366). In modern times, especially after the founding of the People's Republic of China, archaeological research and heritage protection have further extended and enriched Dunhuang culture. Together, these elements provide the value and logical starting point for the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture.

1 Cross-Cultural Communication of Dunhuang Culture: An Imperative of the Times, a Drive of Culture, and a National Calling

The cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture is an intrinsic imperative for promoting dialogue and coexistence among all civilizations and for empowering the building of a human community with a shared future. "A human community with a shared future" is an important ideational public good that China has offered to the world. In 2013, President Xi Jinping 习近平 put forward the conception of building a human community with a shared future. In 2021, 2022, and 2023, he further deepened and expanded this conception through the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. The goal of building a human community with a shared future has been written into China's major political documents, such as the Resolution of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC and the report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC, making it part of the Party's program of action for the current stage. It has also appeared for several consecutive years in relevant United Nations General Assembly resolutions.

Jointly building the Belt and Road Initiative reflects China's sustained practice, over more than a decade, of building a human community with a shared future. By August 2023, China had signed cooperation documents on the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative with 152 countries. A number of major projects, such as the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Railway and Chancay Port, have promoted economic and social development in Southeast Asia, South America, and other regions. At the same time, many smaller yet practical projects, such as Luban Workshops, have benefited ordinary people in many countries in Central Asia, South Asia, and Africa. However, globalization has faced headwinds in recent years. Zero-sum thinking has spread widely, and the theory of the "clash of civilizations" has gained renewed attention. Under these circumstances, it is increasingly important to tell China's stories well through culture in cross-cultural communication.

As a representative example of Chinese culture, Dunhuang culture carries the cultural genes of the Chinese nation and embodies the nation's spiritual lifeline and distinctive identity. Dunhuang culture incorporates "a way of seeing the universe as a unity between human and nature, of seeing the world as needing peace among countries, of seeing society as requiring harmony in diversity, and of seeing people as inherently good" (Xi 2019, 113). These values are closely connected with the conception of a human community with a shared future, which is rooted in the thought of harmony and convergence, "all under Heaven are of one family," and harmony among all nations. The conception of a human community with a shared future rejects the idea that a strong country must seek domination and breaks through a paradigm of interaction based on binary opposition. In this sense, it naturally resonates with the internal texture of Dunhuang culture, which values good-neighborliness, mutual assistance, harmonious coexistence, and win-win cooperation. The international reach of Dunhuang culture can help strengthen trust and confidence in neighboring, bilateral, and multilateral relations and bridge differences that arise in cooperation. Dunhuang culture is also an integrated expression of the Silk Road culture and embodies the essence of the Silk

Road spirit. Therefore, increasing Dunhuang-themed artistic performances, art exhibitions, and book exhibitions in countries along the Silk Road, and intensifying communication about Dunhuang culture in these countries, can enhance its affinity and influence among local people. These efforts can, in turn, promote mutual learning among civilizations, cultural integration, and people-to-people connectivity, and empower the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture is a necessary requirement for showcasing the intrinsic qualities of Chinese civilization and strengthening China's cultural soft power. In recent years, major progress has been made in the cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture. Its discourse system, communication capacity, and communication effects have all improved significantly. For example, the video game *Black Myth: Wukong* 黑神话：悟空 and the animated film *Ne Zha 2* 哪吒之魔童闹海 have generated strong responses worldwide, marking partial breakthroughs in the cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture. However, Chinese culture's global influence, appeal, and market share have not yet fully matched China's political influence and economic strength in the world. For this reason, it is especially urgent to promote the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture and use it to support the development of Chinese cultural soft power.

Exploring and communicating the connotation of Dunhuang culture—harmonious coexistence and all-embracing inclusiveness—can help the international community better understand the openness and inclusiveness of Chinese culture. As an important part of Chinese culture, Dunhuang culture reflects the main line of traditional culture from the Central Plains while also being a culture of plural coexistence under that tradition. It has absorbed cultural elements from many ethnic groups in Gansu, Qinghai, Xizang, Inner Mongolia, and other regions of China and has also incorporated cultural elements from Central Asia, West Asia, and India. The Dunhuang documents preserve manuscripts written in the scripts of China's ethnic minorities and those of various peoples across Asia and Europe. These include texts in Old Tibetan, Old Uyghur, Sogdian, Khotanese, Turkic, Sanskrit, and other languages and scripts. Documents in Tangut, Mongolian, Phags-pa, Syriac, and other scripts, found in the northern area of the Mogao Caves, clearly show the all-embracing inclusive character of Dunhuang culture. Many forms of exchange and integration between Chinese and other cultures deeply shaped the formation and development of Dunhuang culture, as reflected in the Hu style of clothing, food, music, and dance in ancient Dunhuang, as well as medicine, science and technology, sports, and health practices. The artistic creation of the murals and painted sculptures in the Mogao Caves also reflects this process of cultural exchange, integration, and innovation. The image of the Flying Apsaras, for example, is one expression of how Chinese and foreign cultures came together in Dunhuang culture (Li 2023, 16–19).

At the same time, exploring and communicating Dunhuang's role as an important passageway in the history of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries can help the international community carry forward the Silk Road spirit and follow a path of mutual

benefit and win-win cooperation. Jiang Liangfu 姜亮夫 argued that "silk products of the Han Dynasty could be sold along the Silk Road as far as distant Syria in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Paper was also transmitted to Europe from Dunhuang and Yumen, through Turpan and Samarkand, and then through Persia" (Jiang 1956, 1). The more than 30,000 Xuanquan Han Slips, together with other unearthed cultural relics, provide rich materials for studying political, economic, military, diplomatic, and cultural exchanges between China and Central Asia during the Western and Eastern Han dynasties. They also offer concrete evidence of the existence of postal institutions in Han-dynasty China and further confirm the historical existence of the Silk Road.

Dunhuang culture belongs not only to China but also to the world. It is an important part of the shared historical memory among the countries surrounding western China and those along the Silk Road. Through cultural tourism, digital exhibitions, online displays, and other forms of communication, Dunhuang culture can present the international community and people around the world with a wealth of objects, vivid details, and moving works of art. These materials show that Dunhuang art, bamboo and wooden slips, and documents spanning more than a thousand years provide concrete evidence of the prominent continuity and peaceful nature of Chinese culture. Any culture influences people first at the local, micro, and individual levels before gradually reaching wider communities and the cultural whole. When people from different countries encounter and engage with Dunhuang culture, they will be touched by it to varying degrees. If such engagement can be achieved with international internet users, readers, audiences, and tourists, it will foster a rich shared cultural experience.

Cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture is also a key path to sharing the Chinese approach to protecting cultural heritage and participating in the structural adjustment of the global civilization system. In his report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC, Xi Jinping pointed out that "the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing humanity" (Xi 2023, 9). The support provided by Dunhuang Academy to Southeast Asian and Central Asian countries in cultural heritage archaeology and conservation is a strong practice of this requirement.

In today's world, countries of the Global South are working to promote economic and social development. At the same time, they are carefully learning from the experiences and lessons of earlier-developing countries, devoting more attention and resources to cultural development. In particular, as they expand land development and accelerate industrialization, they urgently need experience and solutions for protecting and using cultural heritage above and below ground, as well as in territorial waters. Such experience can help them find optimal ways to balance the conflicts that arise during development. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, and especially since the initiation of reform and opening up, China has accumulated rich experience in the cultural field. This includes technologies

accumulated in the archaeology of Dunhuang cultural relics, the conservation of earthen sites, mural restoration, digital communication, and the development of the cultural tourism industry, as well as experience gained in cave temple management. All of these are urgently needed by Global South countries.

As Global South countries have a shared historical destiny with China, pursue the common goal of achieving modernization for themselves, and face bottlenecks such as shortages of resources, technology, experts, and management experience, they sincerely welcome and are willing to engage in practical cooperation in cultural heritage conservation work offered by Dunhuang academic institutions. This includes academic exchanges, professional training, joint archaeological projects, and restoration programs. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the international cooperation carried out by Dunhuang Academy and other specialized institutions in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and other regions has strongly shown that only by strengthening exchange and cooperation in the protection and use of cultural heritage can countries achieve mutual benefit, speed up development, and improve people's well-being. It has also shown that only by responding seriously to the needs of Global South countries and by contributing China's experience in cultural heritage conservation can we better promote the ideas of solidarity and mutual trust, equality and mutual benefit, inclusiveness and mutual learning, and win-win cooperation. People of different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds can share the Silk Road spirit of peace and development. In doing so, they can promote the common cultural progress of Global South countries and contribute to a more inclusive and pluralistic global cultural landscape.

Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, China has attached great importance to the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture. Marked by the Silk Road (Dunhuang) International Cultural Expo, cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture has achieved breakthroughs in scale, influence, and other aspects, reaching a new level. Overall, however, regular and sustained cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture started relatively late, has a weak foundation, and lacks sufficient experience. There are still only a limited number of participants involved in the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture. A sound mechanism has yet to be established to include individuals, owners of small and micro enterprises, foreign residents in China, and international students—all of whom are active on social media and video platforms—as participants in cross-cultural communication. Regarding communication audiences, the following problems remain: The target groups are not clearly defined, priorities are not sufficiently focused, and basic information about recipient audiences is still incomplete. In terms of communication content, overall design and targeted planning are still lacking. When it comes to communication methods, the means and channels remain relatively limited, and social media and streaming media have not yet been used in a fully integrated way. These problems require continuous improvement through practice.

Today, academic research on the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture should be guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a

New Era. It should also take the outlook on human civilization as its guide and promote fine traditional Chinese culture and the common values of humanity. Exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations carry profound connotations. They reflect the inherent texture of national character and world significance and embody an outlook on human civilization based on equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness. This outlook emphasizes that civilizations are diverse and colorful. It is precisely because of this diversity that humans need exchanges and mutual learning. Such exchanges should not be based on the supremacy of one civilization or the denigration of another. This outlook on human civilization also stresses that all human civilizations are equal in value. Civilizations should not be ranked as higher or lower, superior or inferior. It further emphasizes the inclusiveness of civilization: All achievements deserve respect and should be cherished, regardless of the civilization. As long as we uphold a spirit of inclusiveness, we can reduce "clashes of civilizations" and achieve harmony among civilizations. Only in this way can the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture, along with mutual learning among countries and nations, encourage people to appreciate the beauty of each culture and share the beauty together. They can guide people forward with greater awareness and confidence and help them reach the ideal state of peaceful development and win-win cooperation.

2 "Intersubjective Communication" of Dunhuang Culture: Concept, Model, and Practical Implications

Intersubjective communication draws on the concept of intersubjectivity. Unlike Cartesian philosophy of subjectivity, which privileges a single "self," intersubjectivity places greater emphasis on the formation of understanding and consensus among subjects through interaction. Communication is a process of "dialogue" and "encounter," rather than a one-way flow or inculcation of information. Cultural differences should not be understood through an either-or binary, and cultural diversity itself should be regarded as a basic value. Through mutual outward engagement, different cultures can achieve mutual understanding, mutual learning, and integration. This is the basic connotation of intersubjective communication.

Generally speaking, the real subject of cognition and practice is the human being—that is, the social human being who practices historically. As a subject, the human being may exist as an individual subject, a group subject, or a social subject. Dialectical materialism holds that the subject has agency and that the agency of practice and the agency of consciousness or cognition constitute two aspects of the subject's agency. The culture created by human beings cannot directly act upon the material world, but it can influence the subjects who transform the world—that is, human beings themselves. This emphasizes that the agency of practice forms the source of the agency of consciousness or cognition and also forms the underlying logic of intersubjective communication. A subject has its own independent connotations, values, and forms of expression and has clear boundaries in relation to other subjects. Subject A and subject B, as well as multiple subjects in multilateral relations, regard one another as

independent subjects both physically and in terms of consciousness or cognition. Each of them possesses subject agency. Once they come into contact with one another, intersubjective interaction emerges.

Intersubjective interaction is diachronic. Regardless of the size of a country, nation, or community, the extent of the geographical space in which it lives, or whether a culture is original or derived through communication, long-cycle interaction will always take place. Convergence and differentiation form the main contradiction and unity within such interaction. The relative strength of the elements within a cultural structure rises and falls while maintaining a mutual balance, thereby creating stability in cultural development. Intersubjective interaction is also synchronic. Each culture has a complete internal structure and the capacity for renewal, while multiple cultures coexist with one another, forming a diverse and inclusive ecosystem of human culture. From a macro perspective, this means intersubjective communication must uphold cultural diversity and the equal value of all cultures. It must respect the historical and cultural traditions, languages and scripts, religious beliefs, customs, culture and arts, and innovation and creativity of all countries and nations, while accommodating cultural differences. In the present era, the Chinese people, who have achieved full independence and self-reliance in political, economic, and cultural terms, will certainly engage in equal exchanges and mutual learning with the cultures of all countries and nations worldwide, guided by the common values of humanity: peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom. From a micro perspective, intersubjective communication means that, in the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture, we need to pay greater attention to the needs of tourists, audiences, and readers for knowledge, beauty, novelty, and enjoyment. We should also pay more attention to their experiences and feelings, strengthen interaction, and strike a good balance between knowledge and entertainment. This is reflected specifically in exhibitions, guided interpretation, artistic performances, reading-sharing sessions, and news reporting. For example, in cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture, two prominent obstacles to effective communication are cultural background and language. Explaining the differences between Buddhism and Christianity to Western audiences, while providing services in English, can often deepen audiences' understanding of the Chinese modes of thought and attitudes toward life reflected in Dunhuang culture, thereby improving communication effectiveness. In translating literary and artistic texts, some scholars have pointed out that insufficient research into the cultural background and aesthetic habits of target-language audiences has caused some translated works on Dunhuang culture to lack cultural adaptability. As a result, they fail to evoke emotional resonance and cultural identification among foreign audiences effectively. This is a common manifestation of insufficient attention to the agency of the other subject in communication. In response to the current imbalance in language services, where more Western languages are available while fewer languages from other regions are provided, it is necessary to give full consideration to the needs of tourists from Southeast Asian countries. It is also necessary to make greater use of the languages of Southeast Asian countries and expand interaction between Dunhuang

culture and Southeast Asian internet users through the internet. This should become an urgent task.

Intersubjective interaction is dynamic and developmental. At times, interaction is strong; at other times, it is weak. At times, positive feedback emerges; at other times, negative feedback occurs. State subjects and national subjects are the decisive factors in intersubjective interaction. Other plural subjects are secondary factors, while individual subjects are tertiary factors. Under specific conditions, however, individual subjects may become decisive or secondary factors in intersubjective interaction. The main medium of intersubjective interaction is language and script. Language and script shape the construction of meaning and value and influence the formation of shared memory and shared understanding. Differences in language and script mean differences in the conceptual forms and theoretical discourses at the core level of culture. They also mean differences in the connotations and forms of soft culture. Even within homogeneous cultures, different groups still have different levels of knowledge and understanding. Other general symbols, such as graphics and images, may convey certainty of meaning and understanding in intersubjective interaction, and they may also show ambiguity and uncertainty, leading to different or even opposite understandings. Information technology is the foundation, bridge, and link of intersubjective interaction. It is a fundamental guarantee, and in communication it is even regarded as having a status and role equal to that of cultural content. From a dialectical perspective, however, cultural content and technology are interdependent in intersubjective communication, and cultural content remains the decisive factor. The main goal and ultimate value of intersubjective interaction lie in the breadth of overlap among different cultures, in the depth of interaction among different cultures, and in the persistent pursuit by both sides or by multiple parties of the capacity—and especially the subjective willingness—to deepen understanding, expand consensus, and strengthen cooperation. This is the most important aspect of intersubjective communication.

Intersubjective communication has multidimensional value for the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture. Its core implication for communication subjects at all levels is the urgent need to develop a systematic understanding of subjectivity. This includes, for example, recognizing and having confidence in China's history and culture of diversity in unity, as well as recognizing and having confidence in the spirit of independence and self-reliance and the great vision of the Chinese path to modernization. Another example is that, under conditions of informatization, individual subjects have already become units capable of performing the functions of major or secondary subjects in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, it is necessary to fully understand and make use of their roles under the guidance of the state subject, the national subject, or other group subjects. More specifically, in cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture, multiple types of communication subjects should be cultivated, and their roles brought into play. Communicators, including individuals, should be enabled to achieve greater communication effectiveness within corresponding organizational and institutional arrangements. Cognition of objects in communication must be strengthened and placed at the same strategic level as, or even at a higher priority than,

cognition of subjects. More research on targeting area and country audiences should be conducted. Given the current insufficient understanding of the appreciation characteristics, aesthetic habits, and cultural backgrounds of target audiences for Dunhuang culture, more localized research should be carried out around the cultural subject of the "human being." This will allow more "cultural subjects" to appear before people in concrete, detailed, warm, and perceptible forms. It will enhance the relevance and precision of intersubjective interaction, allowing Dunhuang culture to benefit people through exchange and to grow stronger through mutual learning.

3 "*Zhong*-Media Communication" of Dunhuang Culture: Subjects, Channels, and Theoretical Advantages

Zhong-media 众媒体 communication,[1] a concept proposed in this article, first emphasizes that the concept of communication media is open-ended. From a subject perspective, *zhong*-media communication is expansive. It includes specialized organizations that integrate news gathering, content creation, editing, publication, and distribution, such as news agencies, newspaper and periodical publishers, publishing houses, radio and television stations, internet companies, and various micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises. It also includes a growing number of increasingly influential individual participants. More broadly, it includes all subjects involved in any stage of content production and communication, such as government departments, social organizations, enterprises, and schools, especially libraries, museums, cultural centers, film companies, and advertising companies. In places with dense flows of people, such as airports, railway stations, expressways, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, and residential communities, any organization that makes corresponding arrangements for and manages information carriers should be regarded as a communication subject. In terms of product forms, *zhong*-media communication is extensible. It focuses on the various forms generated through the integration of high and new technologies represented by the internet, artificial intelligence, and big data with social production and life, as well as with China's historical and cultural traditions. It also focuses on the various forms of creativity, innovation, and creation that emerge in the Chinese path to modernization. These forms include new-media presentations of news, images, short videos, animation, films, live streaming, novels, notes, interactive games, advertisements, exhibitions, and performances, as well as other forms that continue to evolve and innovate through interaction with internet users. As long as the content and aesthetics conform to the fundamental direction guided by the core socialist values and the common values of humanity, and are loved by the Chinese people and people around the world, they are worthy of advocacy and encouragement.

[1] The character *zhong* 众 visually depicts three people standing together, which etymologically signifies a gathering of people and serves as an ancient symbolic carrier of Chinese harmonious culture.

Zhong-media communication is composite and interactive. Based on traditional cultural elements such as cultural remains, natural geography, and language, and supported by advanced technologies represented by the internet, artificial intelligence, and big data, it has the self-generating capacity to assemble modern business forms. These elements intersect to form composite business forms with rich connotations. For example, tourism is integrated with the cultural industry in China, with its cultural-industry characteristics becoming increasingly evident. Within tourism, there are not only the traditional service components of dining, accommodation, and transportation, but also people's viewing and experience of cultural heritage and natural landscapes, the interpretation and promotion of related connotations, the "secondary creative expression" of cultural content, and interaction with tourists. Various participants, including tourists themselves, also engage in communication activities such as live streams, short videos, and text-and-image posts produced by vloggers and photographers. In fact, diverse forms of media interaction, together with people's experiential activities, constitute large-scale popular cultural interaction and form a high-frequency, high-density aggregate of cultural communication. At the same time, the more cultural and technological content elements are incorporated into tourism, the more their business forms will spill over into independently formed categories, such as tourism performances, digital displays, and immersive and interactive experiences. Their communicative capacity and influence will also continue to grow.

Zhong-media communication balances commercial value with public-interest effectiveness. It advocates the realization of cross-culturally adaptive communication through cultural trade mechanisms, thereby promoting the localized acceptance of heterogeneous cultures. The practice of reform and opening up has shown that China has both contributed to and shared in the gains of globalization. Today, China continues to advance globalization firmly and to develop cooperation and exchanges with countries around the world in politics, economy, trade, science and technology, and culture. In the present era, all countries and nations of the world are increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Yet unilateralism, "the law of the jungle," and the theory of civilizational superiority are tearing apart the bonds that sustain humanity. At the same time, economic globalization, cultural exchanges, and mutual learning among civilizations face serious challenges. Under such circumstances, to promote cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture, including Dunhuang culture, all kinds of effective nonprofit media, means, and methods need to be used. It is also necessary to make full use of cultural trade, amplify the cultural elements in general trade, and make sustained efforts to translate and promote Chinese-language cultural products and construct discourse. Academic exchange, the release of think-tank research, and international Chinese-language education should all be treated as elements and carriers of communication and should be arranged and used in a comprehensive and multidimensional way. Only in this way can the cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture, including Dunhuang culture, break through various man-made barriers. It can then shift from a general mode of "spillover" to a "localized" mode and from a superficial "symbolic" mode to a deeper "conceptual" mode,

thereby achieving stronger effects of everyday cultural immersion.

Zhong-media communication is Chinese-style and systematic. In geographical space, communication subjects are distributed, multi-level, and multicentric. Within a single organization or individual, they are integrated, combining multiple media forms. *Zhong*-media communication transcends the meaning contained in such concepts in Western communication studies as polymedia or multimedia, which refer to the combination of multiple media forms, such as text, audio, video, and images. Instead, *zhong*-media communication refers to the comprehensive international communication activities carried out in a country, such as China, with a vast territory and a large, multiethnic population, in accordance with territorial spatial planning, by various subjects such as national political and cultural centers, regional cultural centers, and distinctive cultural centers, through the use of multiple media. In terms of its advantages, *zhong*-media communication can mobilize the agency and enthusiasm of multiple subjects. It implies a vibrant media ecosystem. Moreover, *zhong*-media communication provides functions and positions for organizations and individuals at all levels and types of communication practice. It identifies main directions and concrete points of action for solving problems in broad communication missions such as global communication and integrated communication.

The concept of *zhong*-media communication has been continuously developed in research on the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture, and this is closely related to the specific historical conditions and contemporary environment of Dunhuang culture. As a historical and cultural heritage that bears the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese nation, Dunhuang culture holds great potential value that transcends time and space. Making the value, quality, distinctive characteristics, overall appearance, and even visual aesthetics of Dunhuang culture known to the Chinese people and to people around the world faces numerous difficulties. Relying solely on the few institutions traditionally understood as media is insufficient. Robert Chard has stated that the greatest problem in Western perceptions of China is not misunderstanding, but blankness, and that Western students know far less about Chinese civilization than Chinese students know about the West, that many people know nothing about China at all and do not even regard China as a civilizational system, but merely see it as a distant country (Liu 2025). What Robert Chard describes, and what is corroborated by other materials, is not an isolated or individual case, but a phenomenon with a certain degree of universality. This shows that cross-cultural communication has already accumulated a certain foundation and influenced many foreigners. However, enormous gaps still need to be filled. At the same time, it also warns and urges us that only by becoming better prepared in communication theory, by more fully mobilizing communication thinking, by arousing the enthusiasm and creativity of subjects in all fields, and by making full use of all carriers, business forms, and channels capable of communicating information, can Dunhuang culture travel farther while carrying with it the Chinese people's spirit of inclusiveness, belief in peace, and enterprising outlook. This is also the starting point and ultimate purpose of our exploration of *zhong*-media communication.

4 Circle-Based Communication of Dunhuang Culture: Manifestations, Logic, and Historical Laws

The theory of circles has existed since ancient times. The "Tribute of Yu" 禹贡 of the *Book of History* 尚书 proposed the theory of the Five Zones 五服—a Western Zhou system in which, around the Son of Heaven, every five hundred *li* 里 (an ancient Chinese unit of length) constituted a service zone. According to distance, these zones were called *dianfu* 甸服 (Royal Zone), *houfu* 侯服 (Zone of Nobles), *suifu* 绥服 (Zone of Pacification), *yaofu* 要服 (Zone of Restraint), and *huangfu* 荒服 (Wild Zone). Different tribute requirements were imposed on each zone (Qian 2017, 110). This was a geographical circle structure. Similarly, the "five degrees of kinship" in traditional Chinese families include the great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, grandfather, father, and oneself. This is a lineage circle structure. The essence of the structure is social relations. Where there are social relations, there must be information transmission; where there is a circle structure, there must be circle-based communication. This is both a conclusion drawn from logical reasoning and an actual reality.

Circle-based communication is a phenomenon that constantly fluctuates from center to periphery and from periphery to center. From the perspective of physical phenomena in nature, when people throw a small stone into a calm pond, ripples immediately appear. Under the action of force, ripples spread outward ring by ring, expanding farther and farther. As the force encounters resistance, ripples gradually weaken until they disappear. This is similar to circle-based communication from the inside outward. People can also observe another physical phenomenon: "Whether it is a typhoon or a sandstorm, both are natural phenomena formed when fluctuations continuously gather from the periphery toward the center and reach a certain degree. The formation of a typhoon and its mobile fluctuations are both processes in which movement continuously spreads from the periphery toward the center" (Gao et al. 2021, 158). From the perspective of urbanization and population migration, urban infrastructure shows a tendency to expand from the center outward. Most cities radiate outward through a combination of straight lines from the center and ring roads, thereby enlarging their scale and functions and forming the "spillover effect" of circle-based communication. The main trend of urbanization, however, is the concentration of population from the periphery toward the center, forming the "agglomeration effect" of circle-based communication. The larger the population concentrated within a city, the larger the scale of urban spillover and the more numerous its functions. The two show an interactive, positively correlated relationship. Circle-based communication is not merely nearby communication. Circles are groups formed based on blood ties, geographical ties, shared interests, cultural tastes, and other factors. Therefore, even when people are geographically distant, circle-based communication can still occur.

From the perspective of historical and cultural transformation, Chinese civilization, with a history of more than 5,000 years, has undergone exchanges, wars, population migrations, and ethnic integration among the various ethnic groups in antiquity and the medieval period. Culturally, it achieved a form of inward-oriented cohesion, which some scholars have also

called “whirlpool-like” cohesion. At the same time, as Lucian Pye stated, “China is not so much a state as a civilization” (qtd. in Yan 1997, 238). As a civilizational state, China had early, long-lasting political, economic, and cultural interactions with Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia with profound mutual influence. In forming the East Asian cultural sphere in ancient East Asia, China long played a central role. China maintained long-term harmonious relations with East Asian countries, and its main contributions to the East Asian cultural sphere included Chinese characters, Confucian culture, institutions and systems, folk customs, Sinicized Buddhism, and science and technology. What it contributed was the civilizational essence of collective orientation, inclusiveness, moderation, and harmony.

Compared with ancient circle-based communication, modern circle-based communication, with a higher degree of population concentration, more frequent interpersonal contact, and more efficient communication methods, shows more diverse types, richer connotations, and faster, denser information interaction. From the perspective of interpersonal circle-based communication in modern society, driven by people’s needs for growth and development, circle-based types continue to increase, and their scope continues to expand, moving from points to surfaces and from the few to the many. In particular, people’s WeChat groups and Moments increasingly show the characteristics of multi-level, high-frequency, and finely textured interactive communication.

Circles also imply demarcations or boundaries, with distinctions between the inside and outside of a circle. Transnational circle-based communication includes not only the circle of international bilateral and multilateral organizations but also the circle of personnel in different countries who are specifically responsible for foreign affairs and cultural exchange. It includes not only circles formed by acquaintance-based societies along national borders, people of the same ethnic origin, and speakers of the same language, but also circles formed by people in different countries and regions who work in the same industry, and so on. This suggests that, in carrying out cross-cultural communication about Dunhuang culture, the laws of circle-based communication in Dunhuang’s historical and cultural process should be carefully summarized: from Luoyang and Chang’an westward, and from the various states of the Western Regions eastward. Circle-based communication requires proficiency in establishing concepts, clarifying lines of thought, and identifying practical points of action. In planning the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture, attention should be given not only to international multilateral organizations, such as UNESCO and the Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia, and to bilateral mechanisms, but also to sister-city relations with places where UNESCO World Heritage sites are located. Equal attention should be paid to cultural heritage and academic circles in Europe, America, Asia, and other regions that hold Dunhuang cultural relics; tourists from countries within the East Asian cultural sphere; countries and regions with close economic and trade ties with China, especially with Gansu Province; and China’s neighboring countries. By considering these circle relationships, the laws and characteristics of communication can be better understood, and a coordinated plan for cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture can be developed.

Concepts such as intersubjective communication, *zhong*-media communication, and circle-based communication each have their own connotations and characteristics, while also revealing common laws of communication within the shared background of Chinese culture. They are both independent and interconnected. These communication approaches are not only cognitive principles for understanding Dunhuang culture but also practical methods for advancing its cross-cultural communication. They are organically unified in the concrete practice of communicating Chinese culture, including Dunhuang culture.

5 Practical Approaches to the Cross-Cultural Communication of Dunhuang Culture

In communicating Dunhuang culture, we should expand its international brand influence by coordinating communication subjects. Dunhuang is "a marvelous linkage among the East, the South, and the West, a convergence point in Asia" (Jiang 1956, 22). Dunhuang culture is a great cultural creation through which the Chinese people integrated elements from many sides, and it is a cultural brand accumulated over a thousand years. Whether strengthening domestic cultural development or polishing Dunhuang culture's international brand, it is necessary to fully recognize that the leadership of the CPC is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Hence, coordinating the various subjects involved in Dunhuang culture's cross-cultural communication requires fully leveraging the CPC's institutional and organizational strengths to exercise overall leadership and coordinate the efforts of all. Intersubjective communicators should first strengthen subject construction and enhance coordination in policy supply. Through measures such as medium- and long-term planning, project funding support, relaxed market access, and strengthened market supervision, state-owned and private cultural subjects engaged in the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture should receive equal treatment and support. Private cultural subjects applying new technologies and developing new formats, as well as photographers, vloggers, and bloggers, should also be included so they can play their roles. As Dunhuang is located in China's northwestern regions, retaining and effectively leveraging cross-cultural communication talent is a major challenge, especially compared with the eastern regions. Therefore, Dunhuang should strengthen coordination in talent supply and improve the talent-cultivation mechanism for cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture. For example, based on Lanzhou University and Northwest Normal University, and in cooperation with institutions such as the Dunhuang Academy, a discipline of cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture should be established to train a certain number of domestic and international undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students. The talent-incentive mechanism should be improved, and international communication talent for Dunhuang culture should be included within the policy scope for attracting high-level talent to China's western regions. Favorable arrangements such as housing, children's education, employment arrangements for spouses, and work funding should be provided, thereby offering strong support for talents

to pursue their work and entrepreneurship and to take responsibility and make contributions. Dunhuang culture is broad and profound. As research deepens, its connotations grow richer. It is well known that the Dunhuang Han Slips reveal the brilliant historical truths, while the cave temples, painted sculptures, and murals themselves are precious works of art. Duan Wenjie 段文杰 pointed out, "There are a large number of donor portraits in the Dunhuang murals. They represent real people, with names and surnames, in local life at that time. The murals not only depict their appearances but also include detailed inscriptions of their names, official titles, and ranks, directly reflecting real figures and their activities, and therefore possess realistic authenticity" (Duan 1994, 108). This shows that behind the art lies historical value. Many artistic treasures contain valuable details about the central and local governments of ancient China, relations between China and foreign countries, as well as military affairs, education, religion, agriculture, social life, and other fields. This points to the need for stronger coordination in the content supply of Dunhuang culture: Research and interpretation should be prioritized, disciplinary barriers broken down, the art, knowledge, and ideas of specialized fields integrated, and overall coherence and internal connectedness enhanced. Through the dual transformation of image–idea–image and ancient–contemporary–integration, these resources should be fused into new expressive paradigms with a distinct foundation in Chinese culture and the capacity to connect China and the world. They should be condensed into iconic stories, forms, colors, networks, lines of reasoning, and philosophical reflections, thereby providing all communication subjects with commensurable discursive support for Dunhuang culture.

We should enhance the cross-cultural communicative capacity of Dunhuang culture by taking the internet as the main direction of effort. The world is now amid a new wave of industrialization driven by advances in information technology, aerospace technology, genetic engineering, and other fields. As the internet, artificial intelligence, big data, and related technologies continue to evolve, the convergence of emerging needs and new technologies has "turned tools once confined to specific industries, as well as previously overlooked functions, into mainstream necessities" (FTC 2025). Applications such as smartphones, video calls, social media, short videos and live streaming, QR codes, swipe-based interfaces, web-scraping tools, recommendation algorithms, and motion capture have created new business forms and modes of cultural production, profoundly reshaping how culture and information circulate across national borders. To fulfill the solemn commitment that "we will work with all other countries to leverage the strength of the Internet as a communication platform, so that people of other countries can better understand China's fine cultural heritage, and the Chinese people can better understand theirs" (Xi 2019, 317), we should, with a more open mind and the courage to confront difficulties, promote benefits while eliminating drawbacks, and, through *zhong*-media communication, follow the trend of digital cultural development. Through the dual corridors of the internet and cultural tourism, Dunhuang culture should connect with the world and, with Dunhuang culture as a medium, promote emotional exchange and heart-to-heart communication among peoples of different countries.

The *zhong*-media strategy should be fully applied, and the internet corridor should be used to carry out the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture. Under the leadership of the CPC committees and governments, media of all levels and types should be brought together, and the enthusiasm of public and private cultural participants as well as participants in other sectors should be mobilized. Dunhuang culture should be transformed into products, digitized, visualized, and made interactive. Various application tools with communicative functions should be used to conduct both market-oriented and public-interest sharing. These tools include registering social media accounts, distributing short videos, and live streaming. Through a high-quality, high-density, and high-frequency supply of Dunhuang cultural products, willing consumers of digital products and ordinary internet users around the world can be reached. Similarly, the Dunhuang cultural tourism corridor should be used to carry out cross-cultural communication. Communication subjects should be encouraged to focus on serving tourists and to use multimodal, multi-category, and diversified carriers and products. With a rational outward layout from the core circle of Dunhuang culture, such as the Mogao Caves, the Yumen Pass Site, and the Xuanquan Posthouse Site, an integrated complex for immersive Dunhuang cultural services and communication should be created. At the same time, by translating information and presenting themed films and television works, music, and images on flights and trains between Dunhuang and other destinations, as well as in terminals, railway stations, highway service areas, and other transport hubs, Dunhuang can build a cultural corridor. In this way, the experience and satisfaction of foreign tourists can be continuously improved, and the reach, penetration, and communicative capacity of Dunhuang culture's cross-cultural communication can be effectively enhanced.

We should enhance the appeal of Dunhuang culture's cross-cultural communication by advancing cultural product optimization and market mechanism improvement in tandem. The first track is to optimize the supply of Dunhuang cultural products. Original works on Dunhuang-related themes can be encouraged through measures such as the provision of source materials, creative funding, and rewards at a later stage. Experts may be invited to write popular readings and participate in television programs aimed at public-oriented promotion, while writers, composers, painters, and performing artists can be supported in creating novels, film and television works, dramas, music, paintings, and other works. Foreign experts in Dunhuang studies, writers, artists, and journalists may also be attracted to Dunhuang for fieldwork and inspiration, and encouraged to participate in joint creative projects. Since most existing cultural works and academic publications on Dunhuang themes are created in Chinese, the translation, publication, and promotion of these works should be strengthened and extended to countries in different circles, using measures such as funding subsidies and the front-end involvement of foreign publishers and translation scholars, with the products entering the international cultural market as commodities at the back end. The second track is to rely on market mechanisms as the basic support and improve the mechanism for creative planning. Based on preserving the authenticity of Dunhuang cultural heritage and ensuring the accuracy of its core connotations, themes, characters, stories, and language

settings should be designed in ways that respond to the values and aesthetic preferences of targeting area and country circles, such as Generation Z in Western countries, while also adapting to the regulations and conventions of the international cultural market. The investment and financing mechanism should be improved. Efforts should be made to promote the establishment of specialized mechanisms through which financial services support cultural enterprises in Dunhuang cultural innovation, broaden direct financing channels for cultural enterprises in the capital market, deepen the assessment of fiscal investment in Dunhuang cultural projects undertaken by cultural enterprises, and strengthen loan incentives for state-owned commercial banks in support of such projects. The mechanism for bringing in creative teams should also be improved. Project-based, contract-based, and other mutually beneficial forms of cooperation should be adopted, with a focus on bringing in innovative teams that are skilled in integrating technology with cultural presentation and familiar with overseas cultural markets, so as to carry out the creation and production of Dunhuang cultural products. In addition, the marketing mechanism should also be improved. Guided by circle-based communication, markets and target audiences should be segmented. Through scientific planning, sound procedures, and precise attention to detail, Dunhuang cultural products can realize their value in the market. By virtue of the appeal of cultural products, overseas audiences and readers in an increasing number of circles can be influenced and inspired, and can thereby come to choose, understand, and identify with Dunhuang culture.

We should enhance the perceptibility and permeative influence of Dunhuang culture in reaching beyond existing circles and penetrating new circles through targeting area and country audience research. The audience is the center of communication, a key side of intersubjective communication, and both the point of departure and the ultimate destination of the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture. The revolutionary progress of communication technologies, marked by China's connection to the global internet in the 1990s, has brought the international circulation of culture into a new stage amid "profound changes unseen in a century." Cultural communication has shifted from being primarily directed at domestic audiences to simultaneously addressing "audiences beyond national borders" (qtd. in Liu et al. 2011, 29). The traditional concept of the audience has therefore been disrupted, and the connotation of international audiences for Dunhuang culture should be reconstructed based on the broadest possible consensus. In general, the notion of audience has expanded considerably. It now encompasses not only readers, viewers, and listeners of traditional media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and cinema, but also end-users and consumers of smartphones, mobile devices, IPTV, and various display screens (including online platforms, websites, applications, and digital-product hardware and software). It also extends to visitors and tourists who engage with exhibitions, displays, and performances mediated by new technologies. The comprehensive incorporation of immediacy and interactivity into communication has fundamentally overturned the traditional "transmission–reception" model and blurred the boundary between "communicator" and "receiver." Both theoretically and practically, every participant in a communication system

simultaneously occupies the dual roles of communicator and receiver. This endows both sides of the transmission–reception process with subjectivity. In cross-cultural communication in particular, the significance of mutual subjectivity is increasingly evident, providing a solid foundation for the theoretical interpretation of intersubjective communication. Reconstructing the approaches and methods for studying international audiences of Dunhuang culture can help overcome the earlier predicament in which such research depended largely on cross-border fieldwork and was constrained by considerable practical obstacles. Today, surveys of overseas audiences conducted through the back-end systems of online platforms, user data, and third-party search engines already have ample precedent and are practical to implement. This opportunity should be seized by drawing on more than a decade of interdisciplinary experience in area studies. With input from communication studies, art studies, history, linguistics, political science and law, economics, and other disciplines, research can be carried out in a planned manner, with a focus on neighboring countries as well as other countries. It may be organized around both country-specific and cross-country themes, while combining online platform-based surveys with overseas fieldwork and integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. In this way, research on the cross-cultural communication of Dunhuang culture can be advanced to a new level.

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