# A Study on the English Translation Strategies of **Dunhuang Cultural Terminology and the Communication Effects of the Translated Texts**



### Yujing Wang, Shaocheng Shen, Qiang Ma, Yong Liang\*

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Xihua University, Chengdu 610039, China

Abstract: The content of traditional Chinese culture is vast and profound, with a long history. This article discusses the translation of Dunhuang cultural terms and their translation effects on the public signs in Dunhuang City. It collects 256 Chinese and English translations of terms related to Dunhuang murals and sculptures, music and dance, architecture, pattern decoration, and literature, and religious culture, and analyses some Chinese-English bilingual public signs shot by the author in Dunhuang in 2024, which involve the translation of multiple Dunhuang cultural terms. This article focuses on analyzing the translation methods and strategies of these cultural terms, and summarizes and explains them from the perspective of descriptive translation. Research has found that Dunhuang murals and sculptures, music and dance, and architecture are important carriers for the external dissemination of Dunhuang culture. There are a large number of related terms worth in-depth research, and the accuracy and dissemination effect of translation needs to be emphasized. This indicates that in the process of cultural exchange, a combination of text and images can be adopted, emphasizing the readability of the translation, promoting the dissemination of local culture, and enhancing the dissemination effect of Chinese indigenous culture. This provides a reference for the worldwide exchange and translation of Dunhuang culture and traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: Dunhuang Culture; Translation Strategies; International Communication

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### 1 Introduction

Dunhuang City in Gansu province is located in the northwest inland of China and is a charming place known for its rich historical and cultural heritage as well as its unique natural environment. It is also situated at the westernmost end of the Hexi Corridor and the intersection of Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang provinces. Dunhuang is a node city on the Silk Road, most renowned for its Grottoes and Murals. The most famous Mogao Grottoes, one of the four major grottoes in China, contain a large number of murals and Buddha statues, reflecting the prosperity of ancient Buddhist culture. Specifically, there are roughly 492 existing grottoes in Mogao Grottoes, with a total area of approximately 45,000 square meters of murals and 2,415 clay-colored sculptures. It is recorded as the largest and most abundant Buddhist art sanctuary in the world. The early translation of Dunhuang Chinese

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\*Corresponding author: Yong Liang, lukeliangnew@gmail.com

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In addition, Dunhuang is equally a witness to the cultural exchange between the East and the West in ancient times, leaving behind many precious cultural relics. In The Book of Han (Pinyin: Han Shu), it is recorded that Dun means vast, and Huang, prosperous [2]. Moreover, Dunhuang has abundant tourism resources. Dunhuang, with its profound historical and cultural heritage and unique natural scenery, has attracted a large number of tourists for sightseeing and tourism. Whether exploring the historical relics of Mogao Grottoes or appreciating the natural beauty of Mingsha Mountain and Crescent Spring, one can feel the charm and uniqueness of Dunhuang. Dunhuang is like a pearl on the Silk Road [3]. A large number of foreign tourists visit Dunhuang every year, so the accuracy and good readability of bilingual signs in Chinese and English are particularly important. Thus, the view of translation ethics means a lot for better maintaining the diversity and balance of local culture [4]. For effective cross-cultural communication, the accurate translation of those cultural terms has become more and more important, which could better promote the increasing international communication between Chinese traditional indigenous culture and those abroad.

The Chinese-English bilingual terms analyzed in this study mainly come from the book *Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture* [5]. A classification study was conducted on 256 terms from 6 aspects, describing the main translation methods used and explaining translation phenomena. This paper also researched dozens of pictures of Chinese-English bilingual public signs taken by the author in Dunhuang City in 2024, providing a reference for better translation quality and cross-cultural communication.

### 2 Literature Review

Translation of Dunhuang culture receives considerable attention from both Chinese and overseas scholars. Jiang discussed the uniqueness and translation difficulty of Dunhuang culture, believing that Dunhuang culture has the characteristics of multiple civilizations [6]. The indigenous culture of Dunhuang possesses encyclopedic knowledge, and its artistic value is widely acknowledged. In addition, Jiang holds that the translation of Dunhuang culture needs to be mainly based on the strategy of foreignization, which can be combined with translation strategies of hybridization, harmonization, and domestication to make the translation acceptable. Besides, the

Dunhuang manuscripts have also received attention from international sinologists. Relevant studies focus on the author, historical value, and function of Dunhuang's manuscripts, and scholars annotated and translated some texts, which gradually led to the formation of international Dunhuang Studies [7, 8].

As for the studies and translation of Dunhuang Bianwen (i.e. transformation text, a collection of literary stories mainly for storytelling and ballad-singing from the Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties), more research could be found. Sun and Liu (2022) explored the translation and overseas dissemination of Dunhuang Studies and its Bianwen, made a diachronic review of the translation and introduction of Dunhuang Bianwen by overseas sinologists such as Herbert Allen Giles, Lionel Giles, Arthur Waley, Eugene Eoyang, Victor H. Mair, and Steven Owen [9]. They pointed out that Dunhuang Bianwen played a connecting role between ancient Chinese literature and modern literature, promoting the exchange of Chinese and foreign literature. Moreover, Guo (2023) points out that the study and translation of Dunhuang Bianwen by British and American sinologists began in the 1920s [10]. Research has pointed out that sinologists mainly concentrate on the definition and origin of Bianwen, its unique literary attributes, the impact of Bianwen on later Chinese popular literature, and the textual research and collation of Bianwen. From the perspective of the strategies used by the main translators, translated works can be divided into literary types, academic types, and sinological types. Guo (2023: 76) holds that the translation by sinologist Victor H. Mair focuses on promoting Dunhuang culture, and Mair's research methods are worthy of reference by the academic community in China.

Some bilingual books introducing Dunhuang culture in Chinese and English have effectively promoted the cross-cultural exchange of Dunhuang culture. The book *Dunhuang Grottoes* briefly introduces the history, culture, and art of Dunhuang in both Chinese and English, and highlights Dunhuang murals and sculptures (Mogao Grottoes, Western 1000-Buddha Cave, and Yulin Grottoes) through illustrations and text [11]. Through bilingual special introductions on grottoes, the exchange of Dunhuang grotto culture with foreign countries and visitors has been greatly enriched, which is one of the important methods to strengthen the visualization and dissemination of Dunhuang culture.

In the new era of digital media popularization, new ways have been created to spread Dunhuang culture to the

outside world through the Internet and virtual reality technology. For example, the digital Dunhuang website (see www.e-dunhuang.com) can permanently preserve Dunhuang culture through digital technology. Since 2017, global visitors can browse English introductions of Dunhuang and experience Dunhuang culture on the Internet, such as visiting Dunhuang Grottoes and murals, understanding the cave era and characteristics, and intuitively experiencing content such as digital scripture caves. Online viewers can also participate deeply through cloud games, browsing over 60,000 volumes of Dunhuang cultural relics by virtue ways. However, scholars have pointed out that the English webpage of Digital Dunhuang has multiple spelling, grammar, and other errors. The English page is rich in content and information, but the focus of the dissemination content is not prominent, and the explanation of the unique content is not thorough, which may cause visual fatigue for readers. Therefore, the study suggests adding an online user feedback section to accurately analyze the needs of the target language audience, adjusting communication strategies promptly, and enhancing international communication effectiveness [12].

According to the above literature review, it can be seen that key concepts of traditional and modern Chinese culture received much attention [13], especially those concepts related to Dunhuang culture [14], these terms and their translations can be regarded as the bridges that connect different civilizations for better cross-cultural communication. However, the current studies have not yet fully explored the practical significance of Dunhuang terminology translation. In addition, due to Dunhuang being an important tourist destination, there is relatively little research on the translation of Dunhuang cultural terms as public signs. Therefore, this study intends to advance in these areas.

# 3 The Translation Efficiency of Dunhuang Terminology from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

The core content of Eco-translatology mainly revolves around the ecological paradigm and research field of translation as adaptation and selection. This theory emphasizes the central position of the translator in the translation process, believing that translation is the process in which the translator adapts to the translation ecosystem

and makes choices. Within the framework of Eco-translatology, the translation process is seen as an alternating cycle of adaptation and selection by translators. Translators make choices based on adapting to the source text to generate the target text [15].

Based on this theoretical foundation, this study examines to what extent translators have played a subjectivity and initiative in the translation process of Dunhuang terminology, whether they consciously adapt to the translation ecological environment during the translation process, and make choices to produce translations that meet the needs of target language readers.

## 3.1 Translation Efficiency of Terminology of Dunhuang Mural Sculptures and Architectural Art

Dunhuang murals, sculptures, and architecture are closely linked, and various brightly colored and uniquely shaped images, paintings, sculptures, and statues are commonly seen in various types of caves or grottoes. This study selected 110 bilingual terms related to Dunhuang mural sculptures and 38 architectural terms for research from the book *Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture*, mainly analyzing their translation readability and reliability.

Generally, Dunhuang murals, specifically referring to the artistic works of painting on the inner walls of Dunhuang Grottoes in China, belong to the World Cultural Heritage. The main part of murals is Buddha portraits, as well as sutra illustration paintings (*Jingbian*), human portraits, decorative paintings, story paintings, and land-scape paintings. When translating the Chinese term *Suxiang* 塑像 (statue or sculpture made of materials such as soil), the translator employed at least three translation methods to achieve better readability and conciseness in the translated terminology.

Firstly, when the terminology in source text is relatively short, translators usually use the expression "statue of + object" or "object + statue" to complete the literal translation, for example, Statue of Kasyapa (*Jiaye Suxiang* 迦叶 塑像), Statue of Meditating Monk (*Chanseng Suxiang* 禅 僧塑像), Statues of the Eighteen Arhats (*Shiba Luohan Suxiang* 十八罗汉塑像), Standing Buddha Statue (*Lifo Suxiang* 立佛塑像), and Ascetic Buddha Statue (*Kuxiu Suxiang* 苦修塑像).

Secondly, when the terms containing the word "Suxiang"

in the source text are relatively long, translators usually use the omission method and directly use "Buddha" for translation, omitting the "statue". For example, *Jiaojiao Pusa Suxiang* 交脚菩萨塑像 is translated into "Buddha in Cross-Ankled Position", *Sanshifo Pusa Suxiang* 三世 佛塑像 is rendered into "Buddhas of the Three Ages", and *Diezuofo Suxiang* 跌坐佛塑像 into "Buddha Sitting in Full-Lotus Position". It can be observed that the translator combined the method of free translation and tried to explain the meaning of the Chinese source text as much as possible. If transliteration is used too much, English readers often do not understand these source language terms. This also reflects the translator's emphasis on readability and conciseness of the target text.

Thirdly, when translating the term "Suxiang", the translator also used other expressions instead of using "statue" all the way, such as "sculpture" in "Seated Sculptures of the Sakyamuni Buddha and Prabhutaratna Buddha" (Shijia Duobao Bingzuo Suxiang 释迦多宝并坐塑像). In addition, it can also be found from the English translation of the term Huaxiang 画像 (portrait) that the translator's multiple translations of the term maintain consistency and flexibility. For example, Huaxiang is often translated as "painted image" in English, but sometimes "painting" is also used directly for translation, such as "Painted Image of Amitabha Buddha" (Emituofo Huaxiang 阿弥陀佛画像), and "Painting of Zhang Yichao" (Zhang Yichao Gongyang Huaxiang 张议潮供养画像).

In general, the characteristics of Dunhuang mural sculptures and architecture include unique artistic style, rich content and themes, and high historical and cultural value. As for the architectural terms, the characters Ku 窟 and Dong 洞 hold great importance in Dunhuang architecture. They can all refer to small holes or caves in Chinese. It is generally accepted that in Dunhuang architecture, the area of *Dong* is smaller than that of *Ku*, and *Ku* can contain multiple Dongs. Among the 16 terms related to Ku collected in this article, it is mainly translated as "cave". In rare cases, Grottoes can also be used for the translation of Ku. For example, Chanku 禅窟 can be rendered into "Meditation Cave", and Dunhuang Shiku 敦煌石窟 can be "Dunhuang Caves/Grottoes". Moreover, Dong Qianfo Dong 东千佛洞 can be translated into "Eastern Thousand Buddha Caves/Grottoes".

The book Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture collects a

large number of Dunhuang cultural keywords, and Dunhuang mural sculptures and architectural terminology account for about 58% of the proportion, which can be said to be a very important component of Dunhuang culture and worthy of in-depth exploration. Dunhuang culture is inseparable from Chinese history and is known as the art museum of the Eastern world. From the perspective of Eco-translatology, translators can focus on language-level transformation, deeply analyze the roles of cultural, historical, social, and other factors in translation, and study how to improve translation efficiency [16]. Through precise translation, the essence of Dunhuang culture can be conveyed to international readers, thereby enhancing the influence and popularity of Dunhuang culture internationally.

### 3.2 Translation Efficiency of Dunhuang Terminology with Various Translation Methods

In Dunhuang terminology, there are many entries with Chinese characteristics that are closely linked to ancient Chinese history and culture. The amplification translation method is a translation technique that involves adding words or short sentences during the translation process to ensure that the meaning of the original text is more accurately expressed in the translation [17]. When translating, it is necessary to interpret them by adding information, while also preserving the connotation of Chinese characteristic culture, so that readers can not only understand its meaning, but also observe its form and imitate its sound.

In the translation of some Dunhuang literary documents, transliteration and interpretation methods can be used. For example, the original text of popular rap literary stories hidden in Dunhuang caves is called Bianwen (Transformation Text). Before or after the text of the Bianwen, there is usually a text of Yazuo Wen or Jiezuo Wen. Yazuo Wen is similar to an introduction, and Jiezuo Wen is the one that ends the scene. This system of correspondence between the two ensures the integrity of the structure of the Bianwen. Thus, terms such as Bianwen 变文, Yazuo Wen 押座文, Jiezuo Wen 解座文, Zhuanbian 转变, and Dunhuang Gushi Fu 敦煌故事赋 can be translated separately as Bianwen (Transformation Text), Yazuo Wen (Opening Remarks), Jiezuo Wen (Concluding Remarks), Zhuanbian (Picture Recitation), and Dunhuang Gushi Fu (Narrative Prose). It can be seen that translators retained

the *pinyin* of these words, and added parentheses after the pinyin to explain their meanings.

In addition, in terms of Dunhuang pattern decoration, the Chinese key terms are mainly Tu'an 图案 and Wen 纹, which can be translated as "pattern". Examples are listed as follows, Baihua Mancao Wen 百花蔓草纹 is translated as "Flower Tendril Pattern", Baoxiang Huawen 宝相花纹 as "Baoxiang Flower Pattern", Fengniao Wen 凤鸟纹 as "Phoenix Design/Pattern", Foguang tu'an 佛光 图案 as "Aureole Pattern" Jiaochu Lianhua Zaojing tu'an 交杵莲花藻井图案 as "Lotus-Vaira Ceiling Pattern" 藻井 as "Zaojing (Caisson) Ceiling Pattern", and Dunhuang tu'an 敦煌图案 as "Dunhuang Decorative Motif". It can be observed that a large number of terms are translated literally, retaining the original form and meaning. A small number of terms use a combination of transliteration and literal translation, retaining the original pronunciation, such as Baoxiang and Zaojing. In terms of terminology consistency, translators have achieved consistency in most cases, but several terms can also be flexibly handled, such as translating *Tu'an* 图案 into pattern or motif.

In terms of translation of Dunhuang music and dance. this article collected 28 terms related to dance. The vast majority of Chinese terms are literally translated as "subject+dance", and the general term for dance uses the term "Choreography". For example, Dunhuang Wudao 敦煌舞 蹈 is rendered as "Dunhuang Choreography", Jianwu 健 舞 as "Energetic Dance", Jisi Wu 祭祀舞 as "Sacrificial Dance", Jingbianhua Wu 经变画舞 as "Musical Dance in Sutra Illustration Paintings", Lifo Wu 礼佛舞 as "Buddha Worshipping Dance". In addition, some translations of ancient Chinese musical instruments and dances use transliteration, using pinyin to preserve the cultural connotations of the source text, rather than using Western instrument names as substitutes. For example, Pipa Wu 琵琶舞 is translated as "Pipa Dance", Qigu 齐鼓 as "Qi Drum", Jilou Gu 鸡娄鼓 as "Jilou Drum", Fengshou Konghou 凤首箜篌 as "Phoenix-Headed Konghou", 花 边阮 as "Flower-Shaped Ruan", Bili 筚篥 as "Bili Pipe", Jia 笳 as "Jia Flute", and Xun 埙 as "Xun (Clay Instrument)". From the above translation, it can be seen that the translator's translation method is relatively flexible, combining literal translation, transliteration, and addition translation. For unique Chinese musical instruments such as Xun, the material of the instrument is added as clay, which also conveys the uniqueness and diversity of the

source language culture to readers in the English-speaking world. Therefore, translators can introduce new vocabulary and expressions, and preserve the exotic flavor of the original text, so as to help enhance people's understanding and respect for different cultures.

Due to significant differences in the use of nouns, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and articles between English and Chinese, the application of various methods needs to fully consider these factors to ensure that the translation meets the requirements of the target language in terms of grammar, semantics, and expression habits. The translation process reflects the translator's initiative and creativity, while also being constrained and influenced by the translation ecosystem [18].

In summary, the translation of Dunhuang cultural terms is of great practical value in promoting the international dissemination of Dunhuang culture, as well as promoting cross-cultural exchange and cooperation. After thousands of years, Dunhuang culture has become a unique Chinese cultural meme that has spread overseas [19], transforming from indigenous knowledge into a worldwide cultural treasure. Through deepening academic research on Dunhuang culture, we can also enhance cultural confidence and identity, and promote the development of Dunhuang Studies.

# 4 The Translation Application of Dunhuang Culture in Tourism and Its International Dissemination

The translation of public signs plays an important role in cross-cultural communication, and its accuracy and appropriateness directly affect the effective transmission of information and the correct expression of culture. There are some problems in the translation of Dunhuang culture in tourist attractions, which may stem from cultural differences, the complexity of language conversion, and the professional competence of translators. From the perspective of translation ethics, when conducting foreign exchanges of Dunhuang culture, translators need to respond to the questions of "what should be translated" and "how should it be translated" [20].

This article collects dozens of bilingual public slogans and pictures, taken by the authors, in Chinese and English from multiple tourist attractions in Dunhuang city in 2024. By analyzing their English translations, it explores the

strategies and effects of translating Dunhuang culture into foreign languages.

Firstly, Dunhuang Geological Park in Dunhuang City, with its rich cultural relics, and beautiful environment, has become an important window for understanding Dunhuang and its history. It has been included in the UNESCO World Geopark Network directory. The Yardang, Gobi, and desert in Dunhuang Geopark are typical representatives of extreme arid terrain types. In the process of translation, if one does not have a deep understanding of these natural and cultural elements, it may lead to inaccurate translation and even complete loss of the cultural connotations of the original text. For example, some vocabulary with specific cultural backgrounds, including scenic spot names and distinctive landforms, may not be able to find a complete corresponding expression in another language. Improper translation may lead to missing or misunderstood cultural information. Through the analysis of the Chinese-English translation of the public signs in the following example (also see Figure 1), the translation methods and external dissemination of Dunhuang geological culture are explored.



Figure 1 The Columnar Yardang in Dunhuang Geopark (photo by courtesy of He Qiling in 2024)

#### Example analysis 1:

Chinese source text: 孔雀玉立(柱状雅丹)

属于柱状雅丹体演化后期的产物。由于风、雨对雅 丹体表面的侵蚀,使软弱的部分逐渐消失,保留了相 对坚硬的部分,它们构成了形态逼真、栩栩如生的"孔 雀",正傲视苍雄,向人们展示着它的美丽。

#### Translation 1:

Columnar Yardang (Peacock Standing Gracefully)

It is a product of the late period of columnar yardang. Erosion to yardangs' surface occured from weather or runoff, destroying its softer part, leaving the relatively adamant part. Finally makes it a vivid animal of "Peacock", who is showing her pride and beauty to the people.

Revised Translation 2 by the author:

Peacock Standing Gracefully (Columnar Yardang)

It belongs to the product of the late evolution of the columnar Yardang body. Due to the erosion of wind and runoff on the surface of the Yardang body, the soft part gradually disappeared, retaining the relatively adamant part, which constitutes a realistic and lifelike "peacock". The standing peacock is proudly looking at the sky, showing people its beauty.

There are grammatical errors in the former translated text (see Translation 1), where the last English sentence has no subject. In addition, there is an inadequate understanding of the Chinese source text, for example, the meaning of the word evolution has not been translated and the translation of the peacock's standing posture is not accurate enough.

It should be noted that in the translation of such tourism texts, the reader's ability to witness the physical objects and have a true perception of the on-site environment should be taken into account. During translation, the translator's subjective initiative can be utilized, and it is better to retain the unique aspects of Chinese culture through methods such as transliteration, and to spread cultural terminology keywords to the outside world.

Secondly, when translating architectural texts from Dunhuang, the content often involves architectural styles, materials, and decorations, which are closely related to the various types of Dunhuang terminology analyzed above. The important archway architecture of Dunhuang culture can be seen in Figure 2 below. For details, see the source text and translation below, as well as their analysis.



Figure 2 The Chinese-English Introduction of Dunhuang *Pailou* (memorial archway) (photo by courtesy of He Qiling in 2024 in Dunhuang)

In the above English translation, the translator retained the *pinyin* of the *Pailou*, which will not cause reading difficulties for foreign tourists who can see the appearance of the on-site *Pailou* (memorial archway), but instead may effectively enhance the experience and perception of foreign visitors to ancient Chinese architecture. However, careful reading of the above English translation reveals punctuation errors, with an unnecessary hyphen added to the word watchtower. Additionally, there is a grammatical error in the final English sentence, with incomplete cultural information and an extra period in the sentence. Below is a summary of the original Chinese source text and the original translation, followed by the revised English translation.

Example analysis 2:

Chinese source text: 由牌楼和左右两阙组成,巍峨壮观、古朴典雅。汉阙牌楼正面墙上两侧嵌布高温釉下彩大型陶瓷壁画《丝路友谊图》。

Translation 1:

It is a group of combined buildings made up of Pailou and two watchtowers on its right and left side. The architecture is spectacular, elegant yet simple with its from wall inlaid. with a huge ceramic fresco "the Silk Road Friendship".

Revised Translation 2 by the author:

The architecture consists of a Pailou and two watchtowers on both sides, which are majestic, quaint, and elegant. On the front wall of the Pailou, large underglaze-color ceramic murals of "Silk Road Friendship" are embedded on both sides of the wall.

Besides, Dunhuang cultural relics and art culture can also be exhibited in museums in other regions and countries, for example in Hong Kong's Heritage Museum [21], which can also become an important window for show-casing Dunhuang's ancient civilization.

In summary, the primary task of translating public signs is to ensure accurate communication of information. Translators should have a deep understanding of the meaning of the original text to reduce misunderstanding. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the cultural background and language habits of the target language to ensure the accuracy of the translation in the target language environment. Moreover, translators should follow certain standards and norms [22], such as using unified terminology to avoid ambiguity. Cultural differences are an undeniable factor in the translation of Dunhuang public signs, translators are not invisible in translating indigenous culture [23]. For Dunhuang terms with Chinese

characteristics, such as ancient Chinese musical instruments and mural patterns, translators can exert initiative and creativity in the ecological context, try to use new expressions or vocabulary, and respect and preserve the cultural characteristics in the original text.

### **5** Conclusion

This article focuses on the translation of terms related to Dunhuang culture, and analyzes the actual application of these keywords in Dunhuang scenic spots. It is found that there are many problems in the translation of terms related to Dunhuang culture. Firstly, the English translation is not accurate, and there are many grammatical and punctuation errors. Secondly, the translation does not well reflect the content and cultural connotation of the source text. Finally, the translation is not authentic and smooth.

This article holds that scholars need to pay more attention to the following key points when translating and communicating Dunhuang culture to the outside world: (1) attaching importance to the accuracy of the translation of Dunhuang terms and historical background. (2) deepening the understanding of Chinese-English cultural differences and unique cultural elements of Dunhuang. (3) improving the readability of the text with reasonable arrangement of structure and concise wording. (4) carrying out multi-channel cultural exchanges through holding exhibitions, opening digital Dunhuang platforms, and other forms. (5) properly protecting Dunhuang culture and inheriting China's intangible cultural heritage.

In short, as an important part of Chinese history and culture, Dunhuang culture includes rich religious art, historical elements, and ancient lifestyles. By considering the above points, we can better promote the Dunhuang culture to the world and enhance communication and understanding between different cultures.

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