

## 《A third-generation restorer preserves Dunhuang frescoes》

A third-generation restorer of the Dunhuang frescoes relishes the ancient art and the traditional methods to preserve it, Wang Kaihao reports in Quyang county, Hebei province.



Veteran fresco restorer Li Yunhe, 85, still works on the spot, and he has passed down his skills to his grandson Li Xiaoyang, 28, who, after college in Australia, is back in China to contribute to the cause. Photos by Li Bo and Wang Xionglong/For China Daily

Li Xiaoyang is 28 years old, but he says he's been submerged in fresco restoration for more than 20 years, thanks to his family.

It is not a joke.

"I followed my grandfather and stayed with restorers at work sites for months," Li recalls. "That was how I spent my summer vacations when I was a child."

Li was born in Dunhuang, Gansu province. The oasis city in the Gobi desert is known as a major stop on the ancient Silk Road and commanded a strategic position on that Eurasian trade route. Dunhuang's legacy includes the breathtaking Buddhist relics of the Mogao Caves, which date to the 4th century. The art of its frescoes reached its zenith during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and the relics were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1987, one of the earliest listed sites in China.

Li's grandfather, Li Yunhe, moved to Dunhuang from his hometown in eastern Shandong province at the age of 24, working in Dunhuang Academy as a fresco restorer. He devoted his next six decades not only to the remarkable cultural treasures in the Mogao Caves but to many other exquisite ancient art pieces around the country.

"What creates the spirit of craftsmanship? I think the answer is time," Li Xiaoyang says in admiration of his grandfather. "After repairing No 161 grotto in the Mogao Caves in 1962, my grandfather has gone back to check whether the restoration was solid every year since."

"He is 85 years old, but it's a piece of cake for him to climb up 20-meter-high scaffolds. He says he likes staying with us young people, and that makes him feel young."



Veteran fresco restorer Li Yunhe's grandson Li Xiaoyang works on fresco restoration.

On April 18, International Day for Monuments and Sites (established by International Council on Monuments and Sites and approved by UNESCO in 1983), Li Xiaoyang came to Quyang county in Hebei province to attend an award ceremony honoring the fresco restoration project in a temple that dates to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

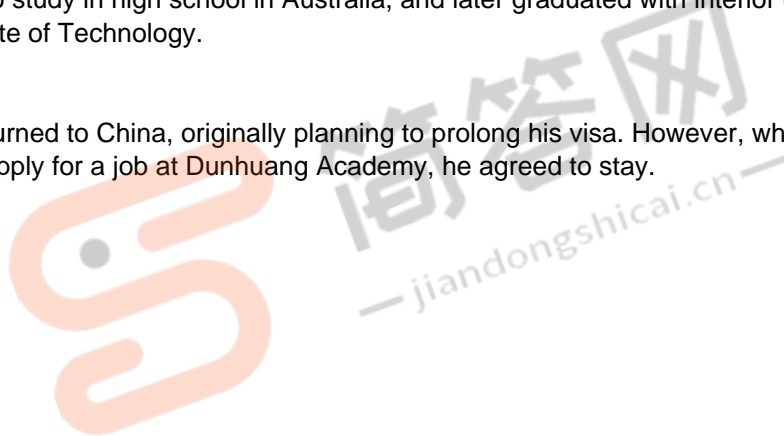
Led by his grandfather, Li Xiaoyang was a team member to do the project. It is on the country's most recent "10 best cultural relic restorations" list, which was released on that day.

Li Yunhe is commonly considered by many to be the top fresco restorer from Dunhuang who is still active. He was absent in the ceremony because he's committed to another project.

The project in Quyang, starting from August 2012, is the first major restoration Li Xiaoyang participated in. He followed his grandfather and his uncle, who is the middle-generation fresco restorer in the family.

Li Xiaoyang left home to study in high school in Australia, and later graduated with interior design major from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

After graduation, he returned to China, originally planning to prolong his visa. However, when his parents asked whether he wanted to apply for a job at Dunhuang Academy, he agreed to stay.





Veteran fresco restorer Li Yunhe's grandson Li Xiaoyang works on fresco restoration.

"I knew I would work in China when I was abroad," he says. "Though returning to Dunhuang was not my first option, there was nothing bad about inheriting my family's career."

He joined the restoration team in 2011 and started with basic work like making mud (to restore the wall) or cutting wheat straw (to mix it with the mud later). Both are fundamental materials in restoration.

"An experienced restorer will immediately know how sticky or how moist the mud needs to be. I'm still practicing," he says. "My masters will judge whether my formula is OK. If it is not, I will keep adjusting until it fits. The job hones my patience."

Their family gatherings or dinners can easily turn into academic seminars on restoration. The grandfather will get angry if the younger Li seems to forget something he's been taught.

Li Xiaoyang notes that identical materials of the original walls are required in restoration. If some parts of the frescoes fall down and break into small pieces, restorers will put them back together, but redrawing is not allowed on the parts being eroded over time.

"Restoration is complicated and extremely demanding for each process," Li Xiaoyang says. "However, we don't adopt models like that of an assembly line, where each worker is in charge of one process."

He says a qualified restorer should be capable of doing every step and make sure the project can continue when someone is absent. "I'm a carpenter. I'm a bricklayer. I'm an electric technician as well," he says and smiles.



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In the case of fresco restoration in Quyang, Li Xiaoyang also had to deal with feces left by bats and pigeons. A heavy layer of dust that had fallen on the fresco surfaces was another problem here: Quyang is a hub for the stone-carving industry, and the local air is often dusty.

"Someone working at the temple for many years told me that she had never known what the frescoes were really like until we unveiled them," the younger Li says.

Though he says he is someone full of new ideas, his job does not allow him to exert his creativity. For example, 3-D printing was once considered a way to repair broken parts of the Buddhist sculptures.

"However, we still stick to old methods," he says. "3-D printing is convenient, but we still prefer the traditional way to restore frescoes, as it's good for people's research on the cultural relics in the future."

Li Xiaoyang is an outdoor sports fanatic and jokes that his hobby "is too dynamic to match his quiet job". He also tries to design cultural, creative products in his spare time to give his imagination an outlet.

"I grew up in a touristy city, and I am fed up with the souvenirs that look the same everywhere around the country," he says. "I want to create something different."

Nevertheless, it seems a luxury for Li Xiaoyang to get to focus on his own business.

After the award ceremony, he immediately rushed to another fresco waiting to be repaired in Shijiazhuang, capital of Hebei province.

He will stay in Shijiazhuang through the summer?where once again he will spend a season with his grandfather.

"My girlfriend is still in graduate school," he says with a sigh. "When I often leave her alone for a few months, I know she is not happy. But my job is like that. I hope she supports me as I am doing the job that I love."

