



Xue Haitao's painting showing 290 figures, *Xibitu of Chaoyuantu*, based on murals in Yongle Gong Temple, in North China's Shanxi province, depicts a scene where the congregation meets Yuanshi Tianzun, which is an etiquette story of Taoism. Xue used a silk scroll and color pigment for the painting. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

A brush with history

Painter develops his own distinctive style after restoring and prolonging the life of ancient murals

By CHINA DAILY

Xue Haitao, an artist known for traditional Chinese painting, has been deeply inspired by the Dunhuang frescoes in Northwest China's Gansu province.

"I worked as a restorer of the Dunhuang frescoes from 1993 to 2005, and my job was to repair the damaged parts of the murals," Xue recalled.

"Ancient mural restoration deals with flaking pigment curling, efflorescence, fading of colors and other damage caused by long-term natural infringement and improper conservation. It was urgent to carry out the protection work so as to restore the original look," Xue said.

Despite poor working conditions due to the wind and sand of the Gobi Desert, Xue and his colleagues worked consistently from beginning to end to finish the job.

"However, I used to feel a sense of achievement after finishing the restoration of a badly damaged mural. I love ancient mural restoration. Our work prolonged the life of the murals, with their historical and cultural value better conveyed and traditional Chinese culture better inherited."

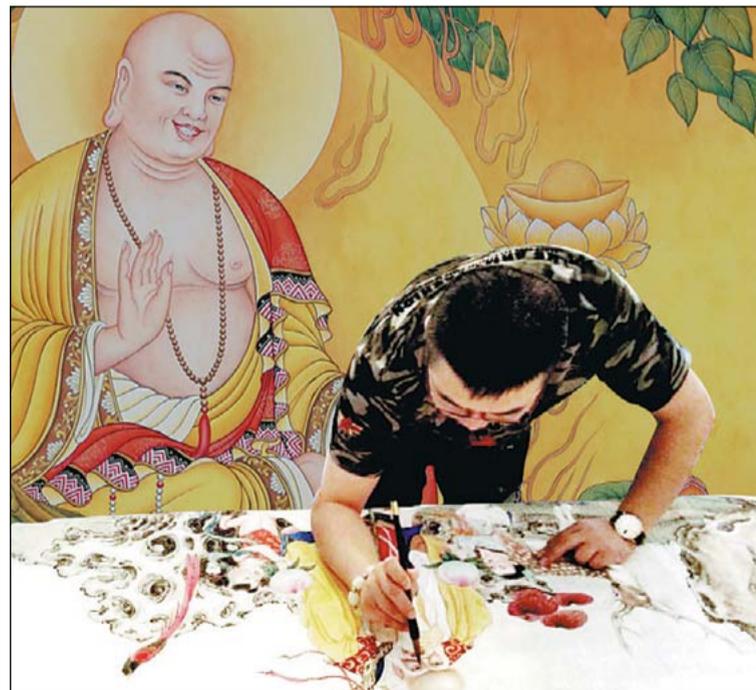
The 12 years as a restorer of the Dunhuang frescoes was just the beginning of Xue's story. After his time in Dunhuang, Xue was transferred to the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

In 2012 he began devoting himself to a piece of art based on the murals on the walls of Sanqing Hall in the remote Yongle Gong Temple, also known as the Palace of Eternal Joy, in North China's Shanxi province.

The murals, with a total of about 290 figures on them, depict a scene where the congregation meets Yuanshi Tianzun, an etiquette story of Taoism. The murals became blurred with heavy deterioration.



Xue's artwork *Elephants in Tranquility*.



Xue Haitao, an artist known for traditional Chinese painting, and his artworks (right) *An Eagle Flies A Thousand Miles* and *Asian Heart*.

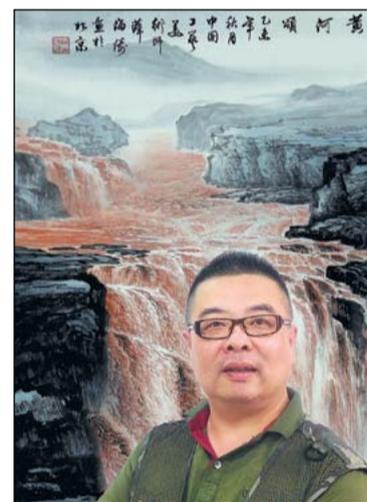
Xue's paintings based on them started with the west wall murals.

He spent the first half year doing research before devising a strict plan for the painting based on the damaged murals.

Then, he used a silk scroll and color pigment to do the drawing, also called *Xibitu of Chaoyuantu*. It took him four years to complete.

"The key to the restoration of these murals lies in details. Each stroke has to be responsible for the next in the painting. In particular, each of the 290 figures in the murals has a totally different facial expression and clothes. A tiny mistake would ruin the murals. Thus, the restoration requires precise work," Xue said.

Comparable with the Dunhuang



based on the east wall murals in August.

Xue, who was born into a family of artists, started learning Chinese calligraphy at 5, painting at 8, carving at 12 and seal carving at 16.

In 1988, he joined the then Central Academy of Arts and Design, which is now part of the Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University.

He learned Western oil painting and began to combine the techniques of traditional Chinese painting with Western methods.

In 2007, he went to the Repin Academy of Fine Arts in St Petersburg, Russia, for further studies.

Since then, Xue has been developing his own painting styles and skills. Each painting has a distinctive style.

In one of his ultra-realistic paintings called *Tears of First Love*, the girl's strands of hair, eyebrows and eyelashes, wrinkles on her forehead, as well as the tears in her eyes and on her face, can be seen distinctly.

The piece, which took Xue two and a half months to complete, is now with a national gallery in Italy.

Xue often goes to the African grasslands. Taking sightseeing trips, he observes and sketches the facial expression and body movements of the animals and turns them into ultra-realistic oil paintings. They make people feel as if they are personally at the scene.

"I will not stop my ultra-realistic painting until my eyesight and physical strength cannot support the work. The observation and concentration required is extremely consuming."

For the past 12 years, Xue has started work in his studio at midnight, going to sleep at 4 am.

During the day, he now works as a lecturer at the School of Continuing Education at Renmin University of China.

"I enjoy the uneasy quietness of night, and I want to make full use of it in my paintings," he said.

frescoes, the murals of Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) in Yongle Gong Temple are nationally important traditional religious murals and enjoy a key position in the history of Chinese mural art.

They are considered the Chinese counterpart of the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

Xue also completed a painting