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The Contemporary Value and Revitalization Pathways of the Humanistic Spirit of Dezhou's Historical Figures

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Abstract:
Drawing on the cultural traditions shaped by the Yellow River and the Grand Canal, Dezhou has developed a rich legacy of historical figures whose humanistic spirit is a core resource for regional cultural development. Existing research, however, has tended to treat this legacy in fragmented ways and has offered insufficiently targeted approaches to translating it for contemporary society. This article identifies four central dimensions of the humanistic spirit embodied by Dezhou's historical figures over more than two millennia, examines their contemporary relevance, and proposes an integrated approach to revitalizing and transmitting this legacy. The study aims to inform the creative transformation and innovative development of Dezhou's outstanding traditional culture.

Keywords:
historical figures of Dezhou; humanistic spirit; regional culture

1. Introduction

Nourished by the cultural traditions of the Yellow River and the Grand Canal, Dezhou has accumulated a rich legacy of historical figures over many centuries. This legacy has helped shape the region's distinctive cultural character and serves as an important foundation for urban cultural development, civic and ethical education, and the upgrading of cultural and tourism industries. Revitalizing and reinterpreting the humanistic spirit of Dezhou's historical figures for contemporary life is important to the creative transformation and innovative development of regional culture, the strengthening of Dezhou's cultural identity as the "City of Great Virtue," and the improvement of community-level governance.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, substantial progress has been made in collecting and organizing Dezhou's local historical materials, providing a firm documentary basis for research on its historical figures. Dezhou Historical Celebrities, compiled by Liang Guoying and colleagues, documents sixty notable figures from different periods and was the first comprehensive account spanning the region's history from antiquity to modern times [1]. Dezhou: A Comprehensive Survey of Its Culture, edited by Tian Yumao and Shi Haoquan, traces the development of local cultural traditions and the achievements of historical figures, offering a broad historical foundation for further research [2]. The four-series, forty-four-volume Dezhou Regional

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Culture Research Series, compiled by Dezhou University, includes studies of figures such as Xing Tong, Lu Jianceng, and Tian Wen, as well as research on official families and local documents [3]. Dezhou Biographical Sketches of Ming- and Qing-Dynasty Figures, collated and annotated by Zhang Jinping and Wang Yuanmin, brings together more than one hundred epitaphs, inscriptions, biographies, and other primary sources on local worthies and is a particularly substantial collection of materials on figures of the Ming and Qing dynasties [4]. Overall, existing scholarship has focused mainly on collecting historical records, compiling biographies, and providing broad cultural overviews. A systematic account of the shared values represented by Dezhou's historical figures, their contemporary significance, and practical pathways for revitalization remains underdeveloped.

To address this gap, this article combines a review of documentary sources with historical synthesis. It identifies the central elements of the humanistic spirit associated with Dezhou's historical figures, examines their value for contemporary society from several perspectives, and explores locally grounded, systematic approaches to their revitalization and transmission. The aim is to support the continued relevance and innovative development of Dezhou's historical culture.

2. Core Dimensions of the Humanistic Spirit of Dezhou's Historical Figures

2.1. Esteem for Learning and Literary Culture: Scholarly Traditions and Educational Continuity

Esteem for learning and literary culture has been a defining feature of Dezhou's cultural history for more than a thousand years. Since the Western Han dynasty, the pursuit of education, diligent study, literary achievement, and artistic cultivation has been passed down through generations, becoming a distinctive and enduring regional characteristic. Dong Zhongshu, a prominent Confucian scholar of the Western Han, was renowned for his devotion to scholarship. The story that he "did not look at his garden for three years" has come to symbolize sustained concentration and disciplined study. His thought and the historical memory associated with it also offer an important reference point for understanding Confucian traditions in Dezhou and neighboring areas.

Sun Fuga, a native of Wucheng in Dezhou during the Tang dynasty, placed first in the imperial examination during the Wude era and is regarded as the earliest reliably documented top graduate of China's civil service examination system. He established his reputation through learning and writing while upholding the integrity of the scholar-official and speaking frankly in remonstrance. His life exemplifies the local tradition of cultivating virtue through learning and serving society with candor. Xing Tong, a celebrated Ming-dynasty scholar from Linyi, pursued calligraphy after entering official service. Following the styles of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi while demonstrating exceptional technical command, he became known alongside Dong Qichang as one of the leading calligraphers of his time. His sister, Xing Cijing, was accomplished in poetry and painting. Their shared achievements in poetry, calligraphy, and painting offer a vivid example of the literary culture cultivated in Dezhou during the Ming dynasty.

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Literary culture flourished in Qing-dynasty Dezhou, where several scholarly families produced generations of accomplished writers and officials. The Tian family is particularly representative: Tian Xuzong, Tian Wen, and Tian Tongzhi, across three generations, achieved success in the examinations and left a substantial body of poetry and prose. Tian Wen rose to become governor of Guizhou and was known for conscientious governance and concern for the public. His works, including Gu Huan Tang Ji and Qian Shu, have both literary and historical value. This tradition continued into modern times through Ren Jiyu, a scholar from Pingyuan who devoted his career to philosophy and religious studies. After serving for many years as director of the National Library of China, he undertook the major late-career project of overseeing the compilation of the Chinese Buddhist Canon. His dedication to scholarship and the preservation of classical texts extended Dezhou's tradition of learning in the service of society.

Across more than two thousand years, diligent scholars, families that transmitted learning across generations, and advocates of education have remained a continuous presence in Dezhou. The intergenerational transmission of learning is especially notable: families such as the Tians, Lus, Chengs, and Xings repeatedly produced successful examination candidates and scholars. Esteem for learning had therefore become more than an individual aspiration; it had taken root as part of Dezhou's regional cultural identity.

2.2. Loyalty and Moral Courage: Commitment to the State and Personal Integrity

Loyalty and moral courage are prominent qualities displayed by Dezhou's historical figures in times of national crisis and in public service. Located where the cultural traditions of Qilu and the moral fortitude associated with Yanzhao intersect, Dezhou has long been a strategic crossroads. Recurrent Yellow River floods and other demanding conditions also helped shape a regional ethos marked by resilience, resolve, and an unwillingness to abandon principle. Over time, these qualities formed a distinctive tradition of moral integrity.

One early figure associated with this tradition was Dongfang Shuo, a notable figure from Lingcheng in the Western Han dynasty. Although known for his wit, he remained deeply concerned about the state and adhered to his principles. He used tactful satire and remonstrance to criticize government shortcomings and was praised by Sima Qian for possessing the bearing of a senior minister. Zhao Bao, a native of Wucheng in the Eastern Han, faced a grave dilemma while serving as governor of Liaoxi: invading Xianbei forces took his family hostage and demanded his surrender. Putting his duty to defend the territory and protect its people first, he declared, "Once we were mother and son; now I am a minister of the state." He led his troops into battle, defeated the invaders, and lost his family in the process. According to historical accounts, grief ultimately led to his death. His actions became an enduring example of the conflict between filial duty and public responsibility. Mi Heng, a talented and uncompromising figure from Linyi who lived around the same period, refused to flatter the powerful. His public denunciation of Cao Cao and steadfast adherence to his convictions secured his place in historical memory as a man who would rather suffer than compromise his integrity.

During the An Lushan Rebellion of the Tang dynasty, while many prefectures in Hebei submitted to the rebels, Yan Zhenqing, then serving as prefect of Pingyuan, strengthened the city's defenses and rose in resistance at an early stage. His action became known as the "first uprising at Pingyuan." The Stele of Dongfang Shuo's Portrait Ode, preserved in Lingcheng District, bears Yan's vigorous calligraphy and stands as a material testament to the relationship between moral character and artistic expression. During the Ming dynasty,

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Cheng Shao, Vice Minister of Works, remained upright in office and refused to align himself with the powerful eunuch Wei Zhongxian's faction. He was falsely accused and dismissed, only to be reinstated during the Chongzhen reign. His integrity was later recorded in the History of the Ming Dynasty, and he remains an example of an outspoken official in the late Ming.

This tradition continued into modern times. Song Zheyuan, from Leling, led the 29th Army of the National Revolutionary Army in resisting Japanese forces at Xifengkou. The unit's night raid by its broadsword corps inflicted serious losses on the Japanese army and inspired the song "March of the Broadswords," which became a symbol of resistance to aggression. In peacetime, Meng Xiangbin, from Qihe, sacrificed his life while rescuing another person, demonstrating that courage and moral responsibility can be expressed through ordinary acts. Other figures, including Cui Hao of the Northern Wei, who insisted on recording history truthfully; Ge Shouli, a Ming official known for principled remonstrance; and Wang Jinming, a revolutionary martyr who died in the 1911 Luanzhou Uprising, also embodied this tradition.

From the Western Han to the present, loyalty, moral courage, and steadfastness have been evident in officials who remonstrated with rulers, administrators who defended their communities, military leaders who resisted invasion, and ordinary people who acted selflessly. These qualities were not isolated personal traits or temporary products of a particular era. They became a collective regional disposition, contributing a core of resilience and uprightness to Dezhou's humanistic spirit.

2.3. Practical Governance and Public Welfare: Service to the People

A commitment to practical governance and public welfare is evident in the way Dezhou's historical figures addressed public needs and took responsibility for their work. Located in the lower reaches of the Yellow River and traversed by the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal, Dezhou depended on water management, reliable canal transport, and the protection of local livelihoods. Historical figures responded to these practical demands through flood control, administration, and disaster relief, establishing a tradition of pragmatic public service.

Lu Jianceng, a Qing-dynasty figure from Dezhou, emphasized practical results in government. He oversaw the excavation of Longfeng Canal to address flooding and, while serving as salt commissioner in the Lianghuai region, petitioned for tax relief and provided assistance to salt workers affected by disaster. During his work on grain transport, Tian Wen organized the transfer of 60,000 shi of military grain in just ten days, demonstrating efficiency and a strong sense of duty. While serving as grain-intendance commissioner in Shandong, Sun Xingyan proposed deploying stationed troops to dredge the southern branch of the river at Sinu Temple, helping maintain navigation and reduce the burden on farmers. These examples illustrate a commitment to solving concrete problems and protecting livelihoods.

Public-minded governance also involved defending fairness and serving the broader community. Lu Yinpu, a Dezhou native who held important central-government posts during the Qing dynasty, participated in overturning wrongful convictions and protecting people's rights through impartial administration. In modern times, Shi Chuanxiang, from Qihe, devoted himself to municipal sanitation work. Guided by the belief that "it is better for one person to get dirty so that thousands of households can stay clean," he turned ordinary labor into a form of public service.

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From flood control and disaster relief to impartial administration and everyday public service, Dezhou's historical figures pursued practical solutions and remained attentive to people's needs across different periods and fields. This commitment was evident both among officials fulfilling their duties and among ordinary workers who served the public through their jobs. It remains an important part of Dezhou's cultural identity and a source of inspiration for improving public welfare and promoting a strong work ethic today.

2.4. Upholding Tradition While Embracing Innovation: Cultural Continuity and Creative Practice

In literature and the arts, Dezhou's historical figures sought to build on inherited traditions without being constrained by established forms. Dongfang Shuo's Answer to a Guest's Objections uses a dialogue between a host and a guest to express the aspirations and dilemmas of the scholar-official. Its form broadened the expressive possibilities of Han-dynasty fu poetry and influenced later literary writing. Xing Tong of the Ming dynasty studied the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi while developing a distinctive style of his own. His engraved collection Laiqin Guan Tie established his reputation, and he was paired with Dong Qichang in the saying "Xing of the North, Dong of the South." Tian Wen, a prolific Qing-dynasty poet and writer, produced works including Shan Jiang Shi Xuan. While drawing on classical poetic traditions, he developed an individual voice and enriched the literary culture of Shandong.

In historiography and the preservation of classical texts, this spirit was expressed through the systematic collection, editing, and circulation of documents. Cui Hong of the Northern Wei compiled the Spring and Autumn Annals of the Sixteen Kingdoms, gathering and organizing a wide range of historical materials. The work has enduring value for documenting the history of the Sixteen Kingdoms and preserving accounts of political regimes during a period of division. While serving in Yangzhou during the Qing dynasty, Lu Jianceng gathered scholars from across the country for literary gatherings at Hongqiao and supported younger intellectuals. The collection Yayu Tang Congshu, published under his direction, was carefully collated and became an important resource for scholars, contributing to the development of evidential scholarship during the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods.

In contemporary times, people associated with Dezhou have continued to transmit and reinterpret traditional culture. Ren Jiyu, the scholar from Pingyuan, applied modern academic methods to the study of Chinese philosophy and religion and led the compilation of the Chinese Buddhist Canon, helping collect, collate, and preserve Buddhist texts on a large scale. Deng Youmei, whose ancestral home was Pingyuan, explored the social life and folk customs of old Beijing in works such as Na Wu and The Snuff Bottle. Through distinctive local detail, vivid characterization, and an individual narrative style, he expanded the expressive range of Beijing-flavored fiction and demonstrated how traditional culture could be reworked in contemporary literature.

Taken together, these intellectual, artistic, and scholarly practices show that the spirit of upholding tradition while embracing innovation involves both preserving inherited thought, art, and texts and extending established knowledge, forms of expression, and channels of cultural communication. From literature and calligraphy to historical compilation, textual preservation, and modern scholarship, traditional culture is not a fixed inheritance; it acquires new interpretations and forms of expression under changing historical conditions. This combination of cultural rootedness and openness to innovation offers a locally grounded historical reference

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for the creative transformation and innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture.

3. Contemporary Value of Dezhou's Humanistic Spirit

3.1. Esteem for Learning and Literary Culture: Deepening the City's Cultural Foundations

Esteem for learning is a tradition that has endured in Dezhou for more than a thousand years and remains an important cultural resource for education and talent development. From Sun Fuga's success in the imperial examinations to the Tian family's intergenerational literary achievements, Dezhou's history of scholarship and education provides a deep foundation for contemporary educational development and efforts to foster a culture of reading. In the face of regional competition for talent and the need to strengthen the city's cultural identity, highlighting the diligence, intellectual commitment, and respect for education embodied by historical figures can encourage respect for knowledge and scholarship, deepen civic identification with local culture, and provide lasting support for talent development and a learning-oriented society.

3.2. Loyalty and Moral Courage: Cultivating a City Ethos of Integrity and Public Good

Loyalty and moral courage are defining ethical features of Dezhou's humanistic tradition. They center on adherence to principle, fairness, and a willingness to accept responsibility. From Yan Zhenqing's resistance at Pingyuan to Meng Xiangbin's sacrifice while saving another person, historical figures and contemporary role models demonstrate a sense of responsibility that transcends their respective eras. This legacy can inform ethics education for public officials and integrity-building initiatives, while also providing examples for civic conduct and the development of a civilized city. Translating these qualities into shared social values and everyday conduct can strengthen Dezhou's image as a city committed to integrity, justice, and the public good, giving contemporary meaning to its identity as the "City of Great Virtue."

3.3. Practical Governance and Public Welfare: Reinforcing Responsibility and Service

The tradition of practical governance and public welfare reflects an enduring commitment to addressing real problems, understanding people's circumstances, and acting responsibly. From historical efforts to control floods and protect livelihoods, to officials' concern for the burdens borne by ordinary people, and to Shi Chuanxiang's public service in his everyday work, this tradition emphasizes responding to social needs through concrete action. Its contemporary transmission can encourage public officials to strengthen their commitment to serving the public and improve their working practices, translating public-minded principles into community governance, public services, and social welfare. The same persistence and practical responsibility can provide value-based guidance for ecological protection in the Yellow River Basin, the preservation and transmission of Grand Canal culture, and regional cooperation, turning cultural tradition into a practical resource for urban development.

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3.4. Upholding Tradition While Embracing Innovation: Renewing the Creative Vitality of Traditional Culture

The spirit of upholding tradition while embracing innovation is reflected in the ways Dezhou's historical figures explored new ideas while remaining grounded in inherited knowledge. Xing Tong's calligraphy, Lu Jianceng's work on classical texts, and Ren Jiyu's use of modern scholarship to study traditional literature all illustrate how cultural traditions can develop through transmission and continue through innovation. For Dezhou to advance the creative transformation and innovative development of its outstanding traditional culture, it should draw on this spirit to identify the distinctive value of local resources and connect them with contemporary education, artistic creation, digital communication, and cultural tourism. In this way, cultural resources can be developed into cultural products, recognizable brands, and broader sources of regional advantage, contributing to cultural innovation and high-quality development.

4. Pathways for Revitalizing and Transmitting Dezhou's Humanistic Spirit

4.1. Deepen Scholarship to Establish a Reliable Foundation for Transmission

Revitalizing Dezhou's humanistic heritage requires a clear understanding of its historical origins and core meanings, providing a reliable basis for public communication and practical initiatives. Three steps are particularly important. First, local gazetteers, writings by historical figures, steles, epitaphs, and family archives should be systematically collected. Existing resources, including Dezhou: A Comprehensive Survey of Its Culture and Dezhou Biographical Sketches of Ming- and Qing-Dynasty Figures, could support the creation of a digital repository of Dezhou's historical figures. Second, focused studies should be conducted on representative figures such as Tian Wen, Lu Jianceng, and Cheng Shao, as well as the broader communities of local worthies. Comparing their ideas and practices would help clarify the content and interrelationships of the four core dimensions: esteem for learning, loyalty and moral courage, practical governance and public welfare, and upholding tradition while embracing innovation. Third, historical claims should be carefully verified, including individuals' places of origin, historical affiliations, and recorded deeds. Research findings should then be adapted into accessible books, local curricula, and public cultural resources. Combining documentary work, focused scholarship, and public-facing outputs would establish a sound content base for transmission.

4.2. Integrate Cultural Resources and Expand the Places Where Heritage Can Be Experienced

Building on systematic research, Dezhou should integrate dispersed historical and cultural resources and turn scholarship into cultural experiences that the public can encounter directly. First, the four core dimensions of the humanistic spirit can serve as organizing themes linking memorial halls, historic sites, museums, and cultural resources along the Grand Canal. This would establish clearer connections among individuals' lives, surviving historical sites, and broader themes. Second, in conjunction with development of the Grand Canal National Cultural Park, the legacy of Dezhou's historical figures could be incorporated into public cultural spaces, themed tourism routes, and distinctive cultural settings, strengthening connections among

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existing resources. Third, exhibitions should move beyond static displays of biographies and documents by incorporating personal stories, historically grounded settings, and interactive experiences. These approaches would help visitors understand the significance of the historical record and shift from isolated presentations toward a more integrated account of Dezhou's cultural heritage.

4.3. Innovate Educational and Public Communication to Improve Transmission

Physical displays provide an entry point for learning about historical figures, but education and innovative communication are needed to bring their values into contemporary life. First, stories about local figures and the values they embodied should be incorporated into local-history materials, school culture, themed lessons, and study trips, helping young people develop a stronger connection to their hometown. Second, figures such as Dongfang Shuo and Yan Zhenqing can inspire literary works, film and television productions, theater, animation, and cultural and creative products. These works should respect the historical record while exploring contemporary forms of expression. Third, short videos, digital exhibitions, and integrated-media features can broaden public reach. Resources associated with cross-cultural exchange, such as the Tomb of the King of Sulu, could also inform communication initiatives that reflect Dezhou's distinctive local character and reach international audiences. Coordinating school education, artistic creation, and digital communication would strengthen both the visibility of Dezhou's humanistic heritage and public identification with it.

4.4. Establish Collaborative Mechanisms and Long-Term Support

Revitalizing Dezhou's humanistic spirit involves scholarship, cultural exhibitions, education, and public communication, and therefore requires sustained coordination across sectors. Local government, universities, historical and cultural research institutions, schools, and cultural organizations should strengthen cooperation through mechanisms for resource sharing, the application of research findings, and joint projects. Resources associated with local cultural development, public cultural services, and cultural-tourism integration should also be coordinated. Training should be strengthened in historical research, interpretation, educational programming, digital technology, and cultural-product management. Project grants, targeted funding, and participation by social organizations and other community partners can broaden the financial base. Finally, project evaluation and public-feedback mechanisms should be established. The quality of research, effectiveness of exhibitions, and level of audience participation can be used to refine content and delivery over time. Organizational coordination, talent development, and stable resources would help move transmission from occasional events to sustained, institutionalized practice.

5. Conclusion

The humanistic spirit embodied by Dezhou's historical figures is an important part of the region's historical and cultural legacy. It encompasses esteem for learning and literary culture, loyalty and moral courage, practical governance and public welfare, and the ability to uphold tradition while embracing innovation. Revitalizing this legacy requires sound historical research and the integration of cultural resources, as well as innovative educational and communication approaches and long-term institutional support. Only when the values represented by historical figures become part of urban cultural development and everyday public life can Dezhou's long cultural tradition acquire renewed contemporary vitality and provide lasting support for

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cultural continuity and high-quality regional development.

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