

Transforming Traditional Cultural Elements in the Development of Cultural and Creative Products

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Abstract: Traditional cultural elements provide an important foundation for the cultural value and differentiated characteristics of cultural and creative products. Some products currently suffer from arbitrary combinations of symbols, inadequate cultural interpretation, disconnection between function and form, and repetitive product categories. Cultural and creative product development should establish an integrated process connecting cultural-resource research, meaning extraction, design translation, prototype testing, and market feedback. It should coordinate cultural research, product design, manufacturing techniques, and consumer demand while improving cultural review and intellectual property management. These measures can enhance products' cultural accuracy, practicality, and capacity for continuous development.

Keywords: cultural and creative products; traditional culture; element transformation; product design; cultural communication

Introduction

Traditional cultural resources encompass objects, patterns, written characters, colors, techniques, rituals and customs, stories, and systems of thought, providing abundant material for the development of cultural and creative products. As demand for cultural consumption grows, museums, cultural institutions, tourist attractions, and intangible cultural heritage organizations have increasingly developed such products. Traditional patterns, the forms of cultural artifacts, and historical figures now appear on stationery, clothing, household items, and digital products, creating new connections between traditional culture and everyday life.

Cultural and creative products possess both commercial and cultural communication attributes. They must satisfy functional, aesthetic, and consumer needs while accurately presenting their cultural origins and meanings. Simply printing a traditional pattern on the surface of an ordinary commodity may create a certain visual identity but does not constitute genuine cultural transformation. When cultural elements lack an internal connection with product function, materials, production techniques, and contexts of use, products tend to exhibit formal similarity, repetitive categories, and superficial cultural expression.

In 2024, enterprises above the designated size in China's cultural and related industries generated operating revenue of RMB 14.151 trillion, representing a year-on-year increase of 6.0%. The content creation and production sector and the creative design services sector generated RMB 3.1258 trillion and RMB 2.4148 trillion, respectively, corresponding to year-on-year increases of 6.9% and 6.8%^[1].

The expansion of the cultural industries provides a market foundation for cultural and creative product development while requiring developers to strengthen their capabilities in cultural research and design transformation.

1. Fundamental Meaning of the Transformation of Traditional Cultural Elements

1.1 Principal Types of Traditional Cultural Elements

Traditional cultural elements are forms of cultural content that express particular historical experiences, aesthetic approaches, and social values. According to their mode of expression, they can be divided into visual, object-based, technical, narrative, and conceptual elements.

Visual elements include patterns, calligraphy, painting, colors, and decorative forms and possess strong image-recognition functions. Object-based elements include ceramics, bronzeware, furniture, clothing, and architectural components, whose forms, structures, and functions record ways of life from particular historical periods. Technical elements primarily refer to traditional crafts such as weaving and embroidery, carving, firing, printing and dyeing, and plaiting, with an emphasis on material treatment and production processes.

Narrative elements include myths and legends, historical events, literary works, and folk stories and can provide content for product naming, product-series development, and brand communication. Conceptual elements involve the ethical values, aesthetic ideals, and practical wisdom embedded in traditional culture. Because conceptual elements lack fixed forms, they must be

expressed through product functions, modes of interaction, and contexts of use.

A single cultural resource may contain several types of elements. Ancient ceramics, for example, encompass vessel forms and glaze colors while also involving firing techniques, ritual functions, and the aesthetics of particular historical periods. Designers must understand the relationships among these elements rather than reducing cultural resources to isolated graphic materials.

1.2 Distinguishing Cultural Transformation from Simple Reproduction

The reproduction of cultural elements directly replicates existing patterns, colors, or forms and primarily aims to maintain visual similarity. The transformation of cultural elements requires analysis of cultural meanings, forms, and conditions of use, followed by their reorganization according to the functions, materials, production techniques, and consumption settings of contemporary products.

Reproduction has value for documentary preservation and visual presentation and is appropriate for replicas of cultural artifacts, teaching models, and commemorative products. Everyday cultural and creative products must accommodate contemporary life. A complete replication of an original object may not satisfy ergonomic requirements, production-cost constraints, or safety standards. Design transformation must therefore preserve the defining characteristics of cultural resources while adjusting dimensions, structures, materials, and modes of operation.

Jing argues that integrating traditional culture with creative design requires cultural understanding, formal extraction, and contemporary design expression and that cultural content should not remain merely decorative^[2]. The core of transformation lies in establishing a connection between the meanings of traditional culture and the needs of contemporary life. A product achieves more complete cultural and creative value only when it allows users to understand its cultural content and use it naturally in

everyday life.

2. Industrial Foundations and Transformative Value of Cultural and Creative Product Development

2.1 Continued Development of Cultural Consumption and the Creative Design Industry

Growth in the cultural industries provides the design, manufacturing, communication, and consumption conditions required to transform traditional cultural elements. Data released by the National Bureau of Statistics on enterprises above the designated size in the cultural industries in 2024 reflect the development of cultural content, creative design, and emerging digital business models.

Table 1. Selected Indicators for Enterprises Above the Designated Size in China's Cultural and Related Industries in 2024

Indicator	Operating revenue	Year-on-year growth	Share of total operating revenue
Cultural and related industries	RMB 14.151 trillion	6.0%	100.0%
overall Industries representing new forms of cultural business	RMB 5.9082 trillion	9.8%	41.8%
Core cultural sectors	RMB 9.2644 trillion	6.3%	65.5%
Content creation and production	RMB 3.1258 trillion	6.9%	22.1%
Creative design services	RMB 2.4148 trillion	6.8%	17.1%
Cultural communication and distribution channels	RMB 1.5741 trillion	1.6%	11.1%
Cultural entertainment and leisure services	RMB 191.7 billion	4.9%	1.4%

Source: Compiled from the National Bureau of Statistics report "Operating Revenue of Enterprises Above the Designated Size in China's Cultural and Related Industries

Increased by 6.0% in 2024”^[1].

Operating revenue in industries representing new forms of cultural business grew faster than that of all cultural enterprises above the designated size. Content creation and production and creative design services also maintained growth. Cultural and creative products consequently operate within an industrial environment in which content, design, manufacturing, and digital communication are interconnected. The transformation of traditional cultural elements must address both physical products and digital content and create product systems suited to different contexts of use.

2.2 Traditional Cultural Elements Enhancing Product Distinctiveness

Ordinary consumer products compete primarily through function, materials, and price. Traditional cultural elements can add historical content and aesthetic characteristics, creating a cultural identity that distinguishes cultural and creative products from generic commodities. Regional characteristics, museum collections, and traditional techniques can also help developers establish relatively stable brand identities.

Distinctiveness derives from the uniqueness of cultural content. Different museums, regions, and intangible cultural heritage practices possess distinctive objects, stories, and technical resources. When developers select content closely connected with their own cultural identity and apply it consistently across product series, products can share a coherent cultural theme.

Cultural identity also requires stable design standards. The colors, graphics, materials, and packaging of products within the same series should remain connected, while product names and descriptions should relate to the core cultural content. The fragmented use of symbols from multiple periods and regions can easily create a confused brand image.

2.3 Cultural and Creative Products Expanding the Communication of Traditional Culture

Traditional cultural resources are often preserved in museums, cultural institutions, traditional villages, or the workplaces of heritage bearers, limiting public access in time and space. When cultural and creative products enter homes, schools, and workplaces, cultural content can be communicated continuously through everyday use.

Liu argues that museum cultural and creative products

should be based on research into collections while also addressing cultural communication, visitor education, and market principles^[3]. Such products are not merely ancillary goods sold alongside exhibitions but important media through which cultural institutions connect with the public. Bookmarks, stationery, clothing, and household items can carry cultural content beyond exhibition galleries and increase opportunities for engagement with traditional culture.

Product-based communication is also interactive. Consumers create new cultural communication relationships when they purchase, use, give, and share cultural and creative products. Product descriptions, digital pages, and online content can explain the origins, historical contexts, and design processes of cultural elements, helping consumers move from visual exposure toward deeper cultural understanding.

3. Principal Problems in the Transformation of Traditional Cultural Elements

3.1 Symbolic Collage and Product Homogenization

Some cultural and creative products directly employ common symbols such as auspicious clouds, dragons and phoenixes, blue-and-white porcelain patterns, and calligraphy without analyzing their cultural origins or contexts of use. The same graphics are widely applied to tote bags, notebooks, cups, and refrigerator magnets, with products differing only in color and size. Such products struggle to represent the distinctive characteristics of individual regions and cultural institutions.

Traditional elements may also be combined arbitrarily. Patterns originating from different dynasties, regions, and ritual systems may be placed on the same product without a valid cultural relationship. Some designs pursue visual effect while disregarding the original identity, hierarchical significance, and appropriate uses of the graphics, potentially distorting their cultural meanings.

Product-category homogenization is also related to development methods. Some institutions lack specialist design capabilities and purchase generic products to which they add their logo or a traditional pattern. This approach shortens the development cycle but rarely creates products with distinctive functions or cultural value. As similar products proliferate, price competition and inventory risks also increase.

3.2 Disconnection among Cultural Interpretation, Product Function, and Market Demand

Insufficient cultural research can result in products with little substantive content. Designers may be skilled in graphic processing but unfamiliar with the dates of cultural artifacts, the meanings of patterns, or the characteristics of traditional techniques. Cultural researchers may possess specialist knowledge but lack modes of expression suited to product design and public communication. Without collaboration between these groups, traditional cultural content cannot be translated accurately.

Product functions and cultural forms may also become disconnected. Some forms seek to replicate the appearance of cultural artifacts but prove inconvenient to carry, structurally complicated, or difficult to clean. Other products emphasize cultural narratives while offering inadequate basic quality, material safety, or durability. When consumers cannot use a cultural and creative product over an extended period, its cultural communication also ends.

Ju et al. observe that some museum cultural and creative products exhibit low levels of development, insufficient product individuality, inadequate market segmentation, and weak brand awareness^[4]. Product development should investigate cultural value and consumer demand simultaneously rather than searching for a target market only after a product has been completed.

4. Pathways for Transforming Cultural Elements in Cultural and Creative Product Development

4.1 Establishing Mechanisms for Cultural-Resource Research and Element Selection

Cultural and creative product development should begin with research into cultural resources. Developers need to organize information on cultural artifacts, ancient texts, architecture, traditional techniques, folk customs, and historical figures and record each resource's date, geographical origin, cultural significance, preservation status, and rights ownership. Historians and specialists in museums, folklore, and intangible cultural heritage should be invited to interpret highly specialized content.

After completing a resource survey, developers can select elements according to cultural representativeness, visual recognizability, product adaptability, and rights-related risk. Cultural representativeness indicates whether content can express the characteristics of an institution or region. Visual recognizability affects consumers' ability to

remember the product. Product adaptability concerns the conditions under which an element can be combined with functions, materials, and production techniques.

Element selection should not be restricted to well-known cultural artifacts. Details of objects, traces of production, inscriptions, modes of use, and associated stories may also become design content. Developers can establish cultural-resource archives that integrate images, texts, research findings, and licensing information to provide a foundation for the development of product series.

4.2 Translating Cultural Meaning into Product Language

Design translation begins with identifying the core meanings of a cultural resource. In the case of a traditional object, designers may extract its form, patterns, and colors while also analyzing its ritual use, technical knowledge, and underlying concepts of everyday life. Different meanings are suitable for different products. The structure of an object can inform product form, production techniques can inform materials and manufacturing processes, and related narratives can be used in packaging and communication.

Formal transformation can involve simplification, recombination, proportional adjustment, and functional correspondence. Simplification preserves the most recognizable lines and structures. Recombination reorganizes several related characteristics according to the requirements of contemporary products. Proportional adjustment adapts elements to the human body and the spaces in which products are used. Functional correspondence identifies behavioral connections between traditional objects and modern products.

Li argues that product design must coordinate function, form, materials, and human emotional experience and that the meanings of objects are expressed through their practical use^[5]. Traditional elements should enter product structures, operating methods, and contexts of use rather than remaining superficial decoration. For example, the compositional principles of traditional window lattices can inform storage structures, mortise-and-tenon relationships can be incorporated into detachable product designs, and embroidery techniques can be combined with contemporary fabrics and household products.

Cultural translation must also control the degree of change. Excessive replication may impair contemporary use, whereas excessive modification may eliminate cultural

distinctiveness. Design proposals should identify the original cultural basis, characteristics to be retained, and intended adjustments, facilitating cultural review and design revision.

4.3 Using User Research to Validate Products

Before development begins, target users and contexts of use should be clearly defined. Products for children must address safety, educational value, and operational difficulty. Products for young adults can emphasize aesthetics, social sharing, and individual expression. Tourist souvenirs must consider price, size, and ease of transport, while collectible products should emphasize craftsmanship and the completeness of accompanying cultural information.

After prototypes have been produced, feedback can be collected through interviews, observation, and usability testing. Cultural comprehension tests can determine whether users recognize the origins and basic meanings of cultural elements. Functional testing examines whether products are easy to use. Aesthetic testing assesses the acceptability of form, color, and materials, while purchase-intention surveys evaluate the relationship between price and demand.

User feedback cannot replace professional judgment. Consumers may prefer a particular visual effect without recognizing errors in its cultural representation. Cultural researchers are responsible for determining content accuracy, designers for function and form, manufacturers for technical feasibility, and users for providing information about use and market response. Product quality becomes relatively stable only when these different forms of feedback enter the revision process together.

Small-batch trial production can reduce development risks. Developers can initially observe sales, returns, user reviews, and communication outcomes before deciding whether to expand production or revise a design. When products have low sales, developers should determine whether the problem lies in price, function, cultural expression, or distribution channels rather than simply copying supposedly popular categories.

5. Support Mechanisms for the Transformation of Traditional Cultural Elements

5.1 Improving Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Intellectual Property Management

Cultural and creative product development involves cultural research, visual design, product structure, materials and production techniques, market operations, and brand

communication. Developers can establish project teams in which cultural specialists provide the evidentiary basis for content, designers perform design translation, manufacturers assess costs and technical feasibility, and marketing personnel analyze users and distribution channels. Joint participation from the beginning of the design process can reduce repeated revisions after a product has been finalized.

Commissioned and collaborative development projects must clearly define the use of cultural materials, ownership of design outcomes, production quality, and distribution of revenue. Collection images, trademarks, traditional techniques, and design works may involve different rights holders. Before a project begins, developers should verify the status of these rights and define the scope of authorization, period of use, and relevant product categories.

Traditional cultural resources possess a public cultural character and cannot be treated entirely as ordinary commercial marks. For folk customs, intangible cultural heritage, and ethnic cultural content shared by communities, developers should respect the cultural concerns of the relevant groups and invite heritage bearers or community representatives to participate in discussions. Revenue from commercial development can also support cultural transmission through procurement, collaborative production, and talent development.

5.2 Establishing Cultural Review and Product-Evaluation Systems

Cultural review should be conducted throughout element selection, design development, prototype production, and the preparation of promotional materials. Review should address the authenticity of sources, accuracy of interpretation, rules governing the use of graphics, and cultural restrictions. Product packaging and descriptions should identify the element's name, date, source, and design rationale and avoid exaggerated or unsupported cultural narratives.

Product evaluation should consider cultural, design, market, and social outcomes. The cultural dimension assesses content accuracy and communication effectiveness. The design dimension examines function, aesthetics, and materials. The market dimension analyzes sales, repeat purchases, and inventory. Social outcomes include the safeguarding of traditional techniques, employment creation, and public education.

Evaluation findings should be incorporated into resource archives and development procedures. Cultural content that consumers find difficult to understand requires revised explanations. Inconvenient structures require redesign, while product categories already overrepresented in the market should be developed less frequently. Continuous evaluation allows an institution to accumulate design experience and gradually establish a stable cultural and creative brand.

Conclusion

The transformation of traditional cultural elements is a process involving cultural research, contemporary design, and product development. The cultural value of a cultural and creative product does not depend on the number of traditional symbols it contains but on whether cultural meanings are accurately translated into product functions, forms, materials, and user experiences. Symbolic collage without a cultural basis cannot establish lasting distinctiveness, while products that neglect function and demand cannot become integrated into everyday life.

Cultural and creative product development should establish a connected process encompassing resource research, element selection, meaning extraction, design

translation, prototype testing, and outcome evaluation. Cultural researchers, designers, manufacturers, heritage communities, and consumers should participate at different stages. Only by coordinating cultural accuracy, product practicality, and market adaptability can traditional culture achieve a stable, natural, and everyday contemporary expression through cultural and creative products.

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