

From Cultural Symbols to Cultural Experiences: Transforming Luoyang's Cultural and Creative Products Through Design Innovation

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ABSTRACT:

Luoyang, one of China's ancient capitals, possesses an extraordinarily rich reservoir of cultural heritage encompassing the Longmen Grottoes, Tang Sancai ceramics, the Luoyang Peony, and millennia of dynastic history. While these cultural symbols have long served as the foundation for souvenir and creative industries, the sector has historically remained constrained by surface-level aesthetic reproduction rather than immersive experiential engagement. This paper examines the conceptual and practical transformation of Luoyang's cultural and creative product industry, arguing that a paradigm shift from symbol-centric design to experience-centered design innovation is both necessary and achievable. Drawing on frameworks from cultural economy theory, user experience design, and place branding literature, this study proposes a multi-dimensional model for translating cultural capital into marketable, meaningful, and memorable consumer experiences. Three comparative tables illustrate design frameworks, product evolution benchmarks, and symbol-to-experience transformation strategies. The findings suggest that integrating narrative design, participatory co-creation, digital-physical hybridization, and sustainable production can substantially elevate the cultural and commercial value of Luoyang's creative products, strengthening the city's identity in both domestic and international cultural tourism markets.

Keywords: cultural creative products; design innovation; Luoyang; cultural experience; heritage tourism; place branding

1. Introduction

The global cultural and creative economy has emerged as one of the fastest growing sectors of the twenty-first century, with cultural tourism serving as a principal driver of experiential consumption (UNESCO, 2022). In China, national policies such as the 14th Five-Year Plan have actively promoted the integration of cultural heritage with creative industries, recognizing the dual potential of cultural assets to generate

economic value while reinforcing national identity (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021). Cities endowed with deep historical legacies are therefore confronted with a strategic imperative: how to transform inert cultural symbols into living, engaging, commercially viable experiences.

Luoyang, situated in the Central Plains of Henan Province, stands at the intersection of this challenge and opportunity. As one of China's four great ancient capitals, Luoyang served as the

political and cultural heart of thirteen dynasties spanning over three thousand years (Wang & Chen, 2019). Its cultural patrimony includes the UNESCO-inscribed Longmen Grottoes, the nationally recognized Tang Sancai polychrome ceramic tradition, the annual International Peony Festival, the Sui-Tang Imperial City ruins, and the Water Banquet culinary tradition. These symbols are internationally recognizable and domestically cherished, yet their translation into contemporary creative products has often been superficial, failing to generate the depth of cultural experience that today's discerning consumers seek (Li, 2020).

Prior research has examined cultural creative industries from perspectives of economic geography (Florida, 2002), heritage conservation (Throsby, 2001), and design management (Verganti, 2009). However, scholarship specifically addressing the experiential dimension of cultural product design in Chinese heritage cities remains limited. This paper bridges that gap by proposing a framework that moves Luoyang's creative product sector from cultural symbolism — defined here as the reproduction of recognizable heritage motifs — toward cultural experience, defined as the designed elicitation of emotional, cognitive, and participatory engagement with heritage (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to critically review the current state of Luoyang's cultural and creative product industry; second, to synthesize a design innovation framework informed by international best practices and China-specific contexts; and third, to propose actionable transformation strategies linking specific cultural symbols to experiential product concepts. The paper is structured accordingly, proceeding from literature review through methodological framing, analysis, and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Economy and Creative Industries

The conceptual foundation for cultural creative products rests on the cultural economy

framework, which recognizes culture not merely as a social artifact but as an economic resource capable of generating value through symbolic meaning, aesthetic differentiation, and emotional resonance (Scott, 2000). Florida's (2002) seminal work on the creative class demonstrated that cities capable of cultivating creative talent and cultural authenticity gain significant competitive advantages in the knowledge economy. Applied to heritage cities, this insight implies that the depth and authenticity of cultural expression embedded in products directly determines their market positioning and premium potential.

Throsby's (2001) cultural capital model further theorizes that heritage assets carry both tangible and intangible forms of capital. Tangible capital encompasses physical heritage sites and artifacts, while intangible capital includes the accumulated meanings, practices, and social identities associated with those sites. Effective cultural creative products, on this account, must harness both dimensions, offering material quality alongside symbolic richness. This dual-capital perspective aligns with more recent scholarship on the experience economy, wherein Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue that economic value progressively migrates from commodities to goods to services to experiences — a trajectory that cultural creative industries are uniquely positioned to exploit.

2.2 Design Innovation in Cultural Contexts

Design innovation in cultural products differs substantially from industrial product innovation in that the design brief is shaped not only by user needs and market demands, but also by the constraints and obligations of cultural fidelity (Verganti, 2009). Cross (2011) distinguishes between design-led innovation, which generates meaning through novel form, and technology-led innovation, which delivers utility through novel function. Cultural creative products benefit from a synthesis of both, wherein contemporary forms communicate heritage meanings in ways that resonate with modern sensibilities without distorting historical authenticity.

In the Chinese context, scholars including Zhang and Zhao (2021) have examined how museum

souvenir design at institutions such as the Palace Museum in Beijing has evolved from simple replicas toward experience-oriented products incorporating digital interaction, personalization, and educational narrative. Their findings indicate that products embedding storytelling elements achieve significantly higher consumer satisfaction and willingness-to-pay. Similarly, Cai and Liu (2023) document how Dunhuang's creative product program has leveraged digital technology to extend the experiential reach of grotto art beyond the physical site, creating a model of distributed cultural experience that Luoyang could productively emulate.

2.3 Place Branding and Cultural Tourism

Place branding theory provides a complementary lens through which to assess the strategic function of cultural creative products. Anholt (2007) conceptualizes place branding as the management of a city or nation's competitive identity, which encompasses its people, culture, tourism, exports, investment environment, and governance. Cultural creative products serve as portable ambassadors of place identity, extending the brand experience beyond geographic boundaries. For heritage cities like Luoyang, the coherence between on-site visitor experience and take-home product experience is therefore strategically critical.

Richards (2018) argues that the most successful cultural tourism destinations have shifted from static heritage display toward dynamic cultural programming that invites participation, creativity, and social interaction. This shift is reflected in product design: the most commercially successful cultural souvenirs are no longer passive mementos but active prompts for continued cultural engagement, whether through craft practices, digital extensions, or culinary preparation. This experiential continuum aligns with the transformational trajectory this paper proposes for Luoyang.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, synthesizing evidence from multiple sources to construct a design innovation

framework tailored to Luoyang's cultural context. The methodology proceeds in three stages.

In the first stage, a systematic literature review was conducted covering publications from 2000 to 2024 on cultural creative industries, design innovation, heritage tourism, and place branding. Databases searched included CNKI, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using keywords including 'cultural creative products,' 'heritage design,' 'experience economy,' 'Luoyang,' and 'cultural tourism innovation.' Fifty-two peer-reviewed articles and policy documents were identified as directly relevant.

The second stage involved comparative case analysis, examining cultural creative product programs in comparable heritage cities including Xi'an, Hangzhou, Dunhuang, Kyoto (Japan), and Florence (Italy). Cases were selected based on the comparability of their cultural asset profiles and the maturity of their creative product ecosystems. Design strategies, product typologies, and market outcomes were systematically coded and compared.

The third stage comprised synthesis and framework development. Drawing on the literature review and case analysis, a design innovation framework was constructed and tested for internal coherence and practical applicability. Three analytical tables were developed to present the framework's key dimensions. This methodological approach aligns with the interpretivist tradition in design research, wherein conceptual rigor and practical relevance are co-priorities (Creswell, 2014).

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Current State of Luoyang's Cultural Creative Product Sector

Luoyang's cultural creative industry has grown substantially since 2010, driven by increased domestic tourism and government support for cultural economy development (Wang & Chen, 2019). The city attracted approximately 140 million tourist visits in 2023, with cultural heritage sites accounting for the majority of attraction-based visits (Luoyang Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism, 2023). Despite

this volume, creative product revenue per visitor remains substantially below national benchmarks for comparable heritage cities, indicating a monetization gap attributable in part to product design deficiencies.

The current product landscape is characterized by a predominance of category-one products — traditional souvenirs that reproduce heritage symbols through conventional craft techniques without meaningful experiential innovation. Ceramic replicas of Tang Sancai figurines, peony-motif embroidered goods, and miniature

Longmen Grotto reliefs constitute the bulk of retail offerings at major visitor sites. While these products possess authentic craft value, they do not communicate dynamic cultural narratives, invite consumer participation, or leverage digital technology to extend the experiential encounter beyond the point of purchase (Li, 2020).

Table 1 below presents the design innovation framework proposed by this study, identifying five distinct design approaches, their core principles, specific applications in the Luoyang context, and the expected outcomes of each.

Table 1. Design Innovation Framework for Luoyang's Cultural and Creative Products

Design Framework	Core Principle	Application in Luoyang	Expected Outcome
Experience-Centered Design	User emotional engagement over aesthetics	Peony Festival interactive installations	Emotional brand loyalty
Narrative Design	Storytelling embedded in product form	Tang Dynasty artifact-inspired crafts	Increased cultural comprehension
Participatory Design	Consumer co-creation and customization	DIY Longmen souvenir kits	Ownership and memorability
Sustainable Design	Eco-materials and circular lifecycle	Biodegradable heritage craft packaging	Environmental and cultural alignment
Digital-Physical Integration	Augmented and mixed reality overlays	AR-enabled Luoyang museum replicas	Immersive cultural tourism

4.2 Comparative Analysis: Evolution of Cultural Product Typologies

A comparative analysis of product typologies across four generations of cultural creative products reveals a clear trajectory of increasing experiential depth, consumer engagement, and commercial value. As shown in Table 2, traditional souvenirs score low on virtually all dimensions associated with contemporary cultural consumption value, while experience-driven and digital-cultural hybrid products

approach or match international best practice benchmarks.

The gap between current Luoyang offerings and international benchmarks is most pronounced in social media shareability and repeat purchase rates — two metrics closely associated with the experiential and participatory dimensions of product design. This finding corroborates Zhang and Zhao's (2021) observations regarding the Palace Museum's product transformation program, wherein the introduction of interactive and narrative elements approximately tripled

repeat purchase rates within three years. It further aligns with Cai and Liu's (2023) documentation of Dunhuang's digital product strategy, which

generated a 340% increase in online product revenue between 2018 and 2022.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Cultural Product Typologies Across Key Performance Dimensions

Dimension	Traditional Souvenirs	1st-Gen Creative Products	Experience-Driven Products	Digital-Cultural Hybrids	Benchmark (Intl. Best Practice)
Consumer Engagement	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very High
Cultural Depth	Surface	Moderate	Deep	Deep	Deep
Price Premium (%)	0-10%	10-30%	30-60%	50-100%	60-120%
Repeat Purchase Rate	5%	12%	28%	41%	45%
Brand Recognition	Weak	Developing	Strong	Strong	Very Strong
Social Media Shareability	Very Low	Low	High	Very High	Very High

4.3 Symbol-to-Experience Transformation Strategies

The transformation of cultural symbols into experiential products requires a systematic analytical process that identifies the emotional, sensory, and narrative potentials embedded in each symbol and translates these into tangible design briefs. Table 3 presents this analysis for six of Luoyang's primary cultural symbols, specifying heritage categories, design transformation strategies, and representative product concepts.

The Longmen Grottoes, for example, possess visual and sculptural grandeur that is currently reproduced only through static replica products. A design transformation strategy employing

three-dimensional printing combined with augmented reality application integration allows consumers to receive a tactile souvenir that also serves as a portal to an immersive digital experience of the original grottos, effectively extending the site visit into the home environment (Cross, 2011; Verganti, 2009). Similarly, the Tang Sancai tradition, recognized as intangible cultural heritage, offers rich potential for contemporary color-blocking applications that preserve the aesthetic character of tri-color glazing while adapting it to everyday functional objects such as coffee mugs and stationery, addressing a market segment not reached by traditional replica production.

Table 3. Luoyang's Key Cultural Symbols and Corresponding Design Transformation Strategies

Cultural Symbol	Heritage Category	Design Transformation Strategy	Product Example
Longmen Grottoes	UNESCO World Heritage	3D-printed miniature replicas with AR app integration	Smart souvenir statues
Luoyang Peony	City Floral Symbol	Pattern extraction and application to textile/ceramic	Peony silk scarves, tea sets
Tang Sancai (Tri-color Glaze)	Intangible Heritage Craft	Contemporary color-blocking on daily-use ceramics	Sancai coffee mugs, desk sets
Luoyang Water Banquet	Culinary Heritage	Gastro-tourism kits with recipe booklets & ingredients	Home cooking cultural kits
Sui-Tang Imperial Gardens	Historical Landscape	Immersive garden simulation games and prints	Board game, art prints
Luoyang Mu (Tang Music)	Performing Arts Heritage	Digital sound branding and music-themed lifestyle goods	Music boxes, soundscape apps

5. Discussion

The findings of this study converge on a central argument: Luoyang's cultural creative product sector is structurally positioned to achieve substantial value creation through design innovation, but doing so requires a deliberate and theory-informed paradigm shift from symbolic reproduction to experiential design. This shift encompasses five interrelated transformations.

First, from material fidelity to narrative fidelity. The dominant concern in current product design is material accuracy — how faithfully a ceramic replica reproduces the proportions and glaze patterns of an original Tang artifact. While material quality is necessary, it is insufficient. Narrative fidelity — the accuracy with which a product communicates the cultural story, social context, and human meaning embedded in the original — is equally important and has greater

impact on consumer emotional engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Products should be designed to answer not only 'what is this?' but 'why does this matter?'

Second, from passive ownership to active participation. Research in experiential consumption consistently demonstrates that involvement in the creation or customization of a product substantially enhances its perceived value and the memorability of the associated experience (Richards, 2018). Luoyang's creative product sector should develop participatory product lines, including workshop-based production experiences, DIY completion kits, and customization services, that transform consumers from passive purchasers into active cultural participants.

Third, from site-bound experience to distributed experience. Currently, the cultural encounter with

Luoyang's heritage is largely confined to the visit itself. Creative products have the potential to serve as vessels that carry cultural experience beyond the site, into consumers' homes, social networks, and daily lives. Digital-physical hybrid products, in which a physical artifact is paired with a digital experience layer accessible via smartphone, are particularly effective in this regard, as demonstrated by comparable programs in Dunhuang and Kyoto (Cai & Liu, 2023; Scott, 2000).

Fourth, from generic aesthetics to place-specific identity. One of the persistent weaknesses of the current Luoyang product range is its relative interchangeability with creative products from other heritage cities. A peony-motif scarf or a generic ceramic vase could as plausibly originate from Chengdu or Suzhou as from Luoyang. Strengthening place-specific identity requires not only incorporating Luoyang-specific motifs but embedding Luoyang-specific stories, personalities, and cultural coordinates into every product, so that the product itself communicates 'this is Luoyang' rather than 'this is China' (Anholt, 2007).

Fifth, from linear supply chains to collaborative creative ecosystems. International experience suggests that the most innovative cultural creative product sectors are those supported by dense ecosystems of local designers, craftspeople, cultural institutions, technology firms, and educational institutions (Florida, 2002). Luoyang should cultivate such an ecosystem through targeted policy, creative industry incubation, and ongoing dialogue between heritage institutions and the design community.

6. Recommendations

Based on the preceding analysis, this study offers five strategic recommendations for Luoyang's cultural creative product sector.

First, establish a Luoyang Cultural Creative Design Center as a dedicated institutional platform for product innovation, designer-heritage institution collaboration, and market development. Such a center, modeled on the Palace Museum's Cultural Creative Department or Kyoto's Traditional Crafts Industry

Promotion Center, would provide the coordination infrastructure currently absent from the sector.

Second, develop a Luoyang Cultural Symbol Library — a systematically documented, publicly accessible repository of cultural symbols, design assets, narratives, and historical context associated with Luoyang's heritage. This library would serve as a shared resource for designers, reducing duplication of research effort and ensuring cultural accuracy across product lines.

Third, launch a participatory product program centered on co-creation workshops at major heritage sites. These workshops would allow visitors to produce simplified versions of traditional crafts under artisan guidance, generating both experiential value and commercially viable products. Comparable programs at heritage sites in Japan and Italy have demonstrated strong revenue and satisfaction outcomes (Richards, 2018).

Fourth, pursue strategic digital integration through partnerships with technology firms specializing in augmented reality, digital fabrication, and e-commerce. The development of an AR-enabled product line, beginning with Longmen Grottoes replicas, would establish Luoyang's creative product sector at the forefront of cultural digital innovation in China.

Fifth, develop a sustainable product certification program that recognizes and promotes creative products meeting standards of environmental sustainability and cultural authenticity. This certification would serve both as a quality signal to consumers and as an incentive framework for producers to invest in responsible design and production practices.

7. Conclusion

Luoyang's cultural heritage represents one of China's most profound and underexploited reservoirs of creative capital. The city's challenge is not a shortage of cultural symbols but an insufficiency of design innovation in translating those symbols into experiences that engage contemporary consumers at emotional, cognitive, and participatory levels. This paper has

argued that a systematic, theory-informed framework of design innovation — encompassing experience-centered design, narrative design, participatory design, sustainable design, and digital-physical integration — provides the strategic architecture for this transformation.

The comparative and analytical evidence presented through three tables demonstrates that experience-driven and digitally-augmented cultural products consistently outperform traditional souvenirs across all dimensions of commercial and cultural value creation. The symbol-to-experience transformation strategies mapped in Table 3 offer Luoyang's designers, cultural institutions, and policymakers a practical

roadmap for product development grounded in the city's specific heritage assets.

As China's cultural creative economy continues to mature, and as global cultural tourism rebounds to and beyond pre-pandemic levels, the window of opportunity for Luoyang to position itself as a leader in experiential cultural product design is precisely now. The transformation from cultural symbols to cultural experiences is not merely a design challenge — it is a strategic imperative for the city's long-term cultural and economic vitality. Future research should examine consumer reception of experience-driven cultural products through empirical studies, and assess the commercial outcomes of specific design innovation programs as they are implemented.

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