

A Study on Design Strategies for Quanzhou Maritime Silk Road Ancient Architectural Souvenirs from a Cultural Translation Perspective

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Abstract: This study aims to resolve the paradox of coexisting "high cultural identity" and "high cognitive barriers" in cultural heritage souvenir development. Taking Quanzhou's Maritime Silk Road ancient architecture as the subject, a mixed-methods approach (N=611 questionnaires + 30 in-depth interviews) reveals:(1) Visitors exhibit high recognition of the cultural value of architectural symbols (85.00%), yet their profound connotations constitute the primary purchasing barrier (51.88%), revealing a disconnect between "symbolic recognisability" and "meaning accessibility";(2) "Combination design" (27.69%) and "functional design" (25.20%) represent dominant preferences, confirming the paradigm shift of souvenirs from "memorabilia" to "everyday cultural carriers"; [1](3) Significant demand disparities exist across generations (Gen Z prioritises digital interaction, core generation values practicality) and groups (local residents versus tourists);(4) The market exhibits a dual stratification: mass-market (≤ 50 yuan, prioritising value for money) and premium-quality (> 100 yuan, willing to pay cultural premiums). Based on this, this study constructs a three-stage cultural translation mechanism-"prototype decoding-narrative translation-functional anchoring"-alongside a "dual-dimensional generational-consumption capacity design stratification model". This aims to systematically bridge cognitive divides, advance the "living transmission" of cultural heritage, and provide an actionable strategic framework for global counterparts.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of global cultural tourism consumption upgrading, the role of tourist souvenirs has undergone profound transformation: no longer merely physical tokens of travel or simple decorative items, they now serve as key mediators embodying local cultural DNA, constructing visitor identity, and facilitating global cultural dialogue [2]. The deeper motivations for consumers purchasing souvenirs often lie in "taking a story home," "possessing a memory," or even "declaring a cultural stance." However, for World Heritage sites steeped in history, souvenir

development frequently encounters an intractable dilemma: their unique cultural symbols—be it the imposing silhouette of architecture or intricate decorative details—can instantly evoke strong visual impact and emotional resonance among visitors; the complex historical contexts, diverse religious-cultural backgrounds, and profound spiritual essences behind these symbols remain obscure to the average visitor due to the absence of effective "translation" mechanisms. This paradox of "high identity resonance coupled with high cognitive barriers" has become a core bottleneck constraining cultural heritage's transition from static preservation to living transmission, and its transformation from cultural resource into cultural asset [3].

Quanzhou, a city hailed by UNESCO as "the maritime trade centre of Song and Yuan China," offers an ideal terrain for exploring this paradox. Scattered throughout the urban fabric, ancient maritime silk road architectural complexes—such as the Eastern and Western Pagodas of Kaiyuan Temple with their celestial musicians and flying apsaras, the Islamic domes and arches of Qingjing Mosque, the Manichaean Buddha statues at Caoshan Temple, and the Song Dynasty ship-shaped piers of Luoyang Bridge—are not isolated material relics. Rather, they form a living epic, inscribed upon stone and timber, chronicling the peaceful coexistence and mutual learning of diverse civilisations along the ancient Maritime Silk Road [4]. These structures themselves constitute cultural texts of cross-cultural negotiation and symbiosis, crystallising the collision and fusion of Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and maritime commercial cultures within specific spatio-temporal contexts. The core proposition of this research lies in how contemporary design language can precisely "translate" this grand and complex "cultural text" into objects that modern consumers can comprehend, appreciate, cherish, and willingly integrate into their daily lives.

This study adopts cultural translation theory as its core analytical framework. Systematically proposed by Bassnett and Lefevere [5], this theory emphasises transcending literal or formal replication, stressing the creative reconstruction and dynamic adaptation of cultural meaning during cross-contextual transmission. Under this perspective, the designer's role transforms from passive replicator to active "cultural translator". Drawing upon Holt's [6] theory of cultural branding, we contend that successful Quanzhou Maritime Silk Road souvenirs must transcend the stereotypical presentation of "Minnan charm". Instead, they should strive to construct a contemporary "identity myth" resonating with the global era's profound yearning for "civilisational dialogue" and "harmonious coexistence". What consumers acquire should not merely be commodities, but credentials of identity and qualifications for cultural experiences within this grand historical narrative [7]. By synthesising data from 611 valid questionnaires and 30 in-depth interviews, this paper aims to construct a systematic, actionable design strategy framework. This framework bridges the gap between cultural identity and cognitive barriers, offering a new paradigm originating from China yet possessing universal reference value for similar heritage sites worldwide.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Branding: From Commodity to Identity Myth

Holt[6] profoundly observes in his seminal work *How Brands Become Idols* that truly vibrant and culturally influential brands are not built through one-way marketing messages. Rather, they actively engage in socio-cultural dialogue, keenly identifying and responding to epochal "cultural contradictions," ultimately offering "identity myths" that effectively resolve collective public identity anxieties. This theory provides a fresh perspective for understanding the commodification of cultural heritage. For Quanzhou souvenirs to transcend their fate as "disposable tourist trinkets," they must ascend to the level of "cultural brands." This implies that their design objectives should not merely showcase regional customs aesthetically, but delve deeply into the core cultural essence of the "Maritime Silk Road Spirit"—openness, inclusivity, mutual learning, and shared

prosperity-transforming it into a grand narrative that resonates with contemporary consumers' questions about "how we coexist in a multicultural world." When consumers use a tea set inspired by Luoyang Bridge, they experience not merely tea drinking but a philosophy of "connection"; when young people wear brooches blending elements of Kaiyuan Temple's celestial musicians and Nanyin pipa, they declare not just adornment but an affirmation of cultural diversity.

2.2 Cultural Translation: Creative Reconstruction of Symbolic Meaning

Cultural translation theory provides a methodological pathway to achieve these objectives. Bassnett and Lefevere[5] assert that translation constitutes a cross-cultural journey of meaning, wherein the original intent inevitably undergoes transformation, addition, deletion, and recreation to adapt to new contexts. Applying this concept to souvenir design necessitates vigilance against superficial appropriation of ancient architectural symbols. The designer's role is to serve as a competent "cultural translator," whose workflow comprises three critical stages: Firstly, decoding-through rigorous historical research and field investigations, precisely grasping the functional, symbolic, and social significance of ancient architectural elements such as swallowtail ridges, drip-water beasts, and stone guardians within their original contexts; Second, decoding-stripping away outdated, inapplicable formal shells to extract enduring cultural archetypes such as "guardianship," "blessing," "heaven-earth communication," and "East-West connection"; finally, encoding-embedding these archetypes into novel consumption scenarios and product forms aligned with contemporary lifestyles, thereby endowing them with modern relevance[8]. For instance, the "guardian" archetype of stone lions can be translated into a tabletop nightlight, where its warm nocturnal glow provides reassurance, seamlessly shifting meaning from "warding off evil" to "tender protection." Successful cultural translation demands a delicate equilibrium between cultural authenticity and market translatability [2].

2.3 Narrative Design: Bridging the Gap in Meaning

Facing the core paradox of "high recognition yet high cognitive barriers," narrative design offers a pivotal solution. Carroll[9] has long demonstrated in human-computer interaction that stories constitute humanity's most natural and effective means of understanding and retaining information. Extending this concept to heritage souvenirs, the product itself becomes a narrative vessel. Through meticulously crafted narrative elements, abstract cultural symbols can be transformed into concrete, palpable emotional experiences. These narratives can be realised through multiple channels: micro-history cards accompanying packaging inject dynamic historical context into static symbols; augmented reality (AR) technology enables users to scan QR codes on their phones to trigger short videos or 3D animations about design inspirations; even the product's usage process itself can be designed as a small ritual, allowing users to experience cultural connotations through operation [1]. Collectively, these narrative elements form a "cultural scaffolding" that effectively lowers consumers' comprehension barriers. This aids them in making the meaningful leap from "seeing" to "understanding" and ultimately to "identifying with" the product, forging a robust and profound emotional connection with the cultural heritage.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, aiming first to reveal macro trends and variable relationships through quantitative data, then to provide in-depth interpretation and contextual understanding via qualitative data.

3.1 Phase One

Questionnaire Survey. The research team conducted on-site questionnaire distribution at Quanzhou's three core World Heritage sites (Kaiyuan Temple, Qingjing Mosque, Luoyang Bridge) during spring 2025. The questionnaire design strictly adhered to scientific standards, comprising four core sections: (1) Visitor demographics (age, gender, occupation, monthly income, place of origin); (2) Cultural Archetype Recognition (CAR) Scale, adapted from Torelli et al.'s [10] classic instrument, measuring visitors' comprehension of cultural meanings behind symbols such as swallowtail ridges and stone lions; (3) Functional Needs (FN) and Aesthetic Preferences (AP) Scales, referencing Wang and Bramwell's [11] research, respectively gauging visitors' expectations regarding souvenir utility and aesthetic style; (4) The Cultural Understanding Impairment (CUI) scale, developed by this study and validated through pre-testing (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$), specifically quantifies the degree of difficulty tourists encounter in comprehending cultural connotations. All scales employed a 5-point Likert scale. A total of 611 valid questionnaires were retrieved.

3.2 Second Phase

In-depth interviews. Based on questionnaire findings, the research team selected 30 representative tourists (encompassing diverse ages, occupations, and spending levels) for semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview outline centred on three key themes: (1) Specific perceptions and personal interpretations of cultural symbols in Maritime Silk Road heritage architecture; (2) Satisfaction assessments and improvement suggestions for the existing souvenir market; (3) Detailed expectations regarding functionality, pricing, interactivity, and other aspects of ideal souvenirs. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with thematic analysis employed for hierarchical coding to extract deep user insights.

4. Research Findings and Empirical Analysis

4.1 Analytical Framework

Quantitative data underwent descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modelling (SEM) using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. Qualitative interview data were analysed through open-ended, axial, and selective coding in NVivo 12, culminating in core themes.

4.2 Empirical Validation of the Core Paradox

Survey data unequivocally validated the core theoretical paradox proposed herein. Statistics revealed that 85.00% of respondents attributed "highly important" or "relatively important" cultural value to Maritime Silk Road architectural symbols such as the swallowtail ridge, stone lions, and eastern/western towers. However, 51.88% concurrently identified "profound cultural connotations that consumers struggle to comprehend" as a key barrier in their purchasing decisions. This pronounced tension between high cultural recognition and high cognitive barriers ($\chi^2=186.32$, $p<0.001$) precisely demonstrates the structural disconnect between "symbolic recognisability" and "meaning accessibility" in the commodification of cultural heritage. This constitutes the core problem domain for strategic design.

4.3 Analysis of Market Preference Structures and Group Differences

4.3.1 Distribution Characteristics of Design Preferences

"Combination design" (27.69%) and "functional design" (25.20%) collectively accounted for 52.89%, forming the dominant market preference. This outcome indicates that contemporary tourists' expectations for souvenirs have transcended static symbolic display, shifting towards dual demands for "innovative combination potential" and "everyday utility value." This confirms the shift in the consumption paradigm of souvenirs from "memorial objects" to "cultural carriers integrated into daily life" [1].

4.3.2 Generational Differences in Consumption Logic

Generation Z (18-25 years): As digital natives, 44.58% of respondents prioritised "digital interaction" (e.g., AR storytelling, scanning QR codes to unlock cultural content). Their consumption logic emphasises social sharing, personalised customisation, and experiential immediacy, viewing souvenirs as conduits for constructing digital identities and community belonging.

Core Generation (36-45 years): 24.03% prioritised "functional utility," focusing on product safety, durability, and suitability for domestic settings (e.g., parent-child shared use, home integration). Their choices reflect a "rational value orientation," emphasising the substantive connection between cultural products and quality of life.

4.3.3 Cognitive Divide between Local Residents and Tourists

Local residents (61.34%) exhibit a marked preference for products embodying "traditional craftsmanship revival," viewing them as custodians of local cultural memory and symbols of identity (here, "culturally endogenous groups" specifically denote local residents and cultural custodians). Conversely, external visitors (i.e., "culturally exogenous groups") prioritise "modular" and "functional" designs, seeking lightweight, portable cultural experiences with novel appeal. This divergence reveals that souvenir design must simultaneously address the heritage aspirations of the "culturally endogenous group" and the experiential demands of the "culturally exogenous group", avoiding the narrowing of meaning caused by a singular perspective.

4.4 Price Sensitivity and Market Segmentation Mechanisms

The study identifies a distinct dual-tier pricing structure underpinned by deep-seated divergences in cultural value perception and consumption motivations:

Mass Market (≤ 50 RMB): Covers 56.12% of consumers (primarily students and early-career professionals). This demographic prioritises value for money and everyday practicality, with relatively basic expectations for cultural narrative depth. Product design should emphasise universality, ease of use, and subtle emotional touchpoints.

Premium Market (≥ 100 RMB): Dominated by high-income groups (freelancers, corporate executives, etc.). Data indicates freelancers exhibit 5.7 times greater willingness to pay for premium products compared to students (OR=5.70, 95% CI [4.12, 7.89]). This demographic views consumption as cultural investment and identity expression, willing to pay significant premiums for exquisite craftsmanship, narrative depth, collectible value, and community empowerment. Their demands directly address the core of "cultural brand" construction.

5. Discussion: Systematic Strategies for Cultural Branding

5.1 "Prototype Decoding – Narrative Translation – Functional Anchoring": Operational Pathways for Cultural Translation

To effectively translate abstract cultural translation theory into design practice guidelines, this study proposes a clear, progressive three-stage operational pathway. This pathway functions not merely as a design process but as a meaning-generation process, aiming to transform consumers from passive recipients of symbols into active co-creators of cultural meaning.

5.1.1 Phase One: Archetype Decoding

This phase constitutes the foundation and starting point of the entire cultural translation process. Its core task is to extract cultural archetypes capable of evoking cross-temporal and spatial emotional resonance from complex material heritage. Jung (1968) noted that archetypes are primal images within the collective unconscious—such as "Guardian," "Sage," or "Bridge"—that transcend time and space to stimulate universal human emotional responses. Within Quanzhou's Maritime Silk Road context, designers must transcend superficial depictions of visual symbols like twin pagodas or swallowtail ridges. Instead, they should delve into historical textures, collaborating with historians, local cultural experts, and intangible heritage practitioners to decode their spiritual essence. For instance, the East and West Pagodas of Kaiyuan Temple transcend mere landmark status as the material embodiment of the "Twin Pagodas Watching Over" archetype, symbolising millennia of unwavering faith and profound attachment to the homeland. Luoyang Bridge is not only a Song Dynasty engineering marvel but also an exceptional metaphor for the "Bridge of Civilisations" archetype, silently narrating the historical tale of different civilisations meeting, conversing, and ultimately converging here. This precise decoding of archetypes ensures the cultural authenticity and spiritual depth of all subsequent design work.

5.1.2 Phase Two: Narrative Translation

Following precise archetypal decoding, the critical challenge lies in transforming these profound, abstract archetypes into contemporary narratives that modern consumers can comprehend, perceive, and emotionally resonate with. Narrative design plays a pivotal role in this phase. Successful narrative translation is not merely appending a story, but embedding narrative logic within the product experience, enabling consumers to 'actively discover' and 'construct' meaning through interaction. Taking the 'Bridge of Civilisations' prototype as an example, if its form were merely replicated as a static ornament, its cultural significance would be easily overlooked. Through narrative translation, a modular lamp assembly could be designed: post-purchase, users would personally assemble components representing distinct cultural elements—such as a lotus base symbolising Buddhism, an arch-shaped element representing Islamic culture, or a ship-shaped pedestal signifying maritime trade—ultimately "constructing" a complete bridge of light. This participatory process itself constitutes a micro-cultural ritual. Through hands-on assembly, users not only gain intuitive understanding of the bridge's structural ingenuity but also psychologically experience the sense of achievement from "connection" and "co-creation". This transforms the abstract concept of "multicultural symbiosis" into profound personal experience. This user-driven process of meaning-making carries far greater impact than passive information reception.

5.1.3 Phase Three: Functional Anchoring

Without grounding in daily life, narrative translation risks becoming a one-off emotional

experience. Hence, the third stage-functional anchoring-is crucial. Its objective is to firmly anchor the cultural narratives and emotional values established in the first two stages into users' everyday contexts through thoughtful functional design, transforming them into cultural carriers that become "unnoticed in daily use" [7]. This necessitates seamless integration of cultural expression with practical utility, rather than forced grafting. Consider an incense holder inspired by the classic Islamic arches of the Al-Qasr Mosque: its elegant curved structure pays homage to architectural aesthetics while serving as a precisely engineered functional solution. This curvature perfectly aligns with the incense stick's contour, ensuring stable combustion and preventing tipping hazards. Here, the cultural symbol (the arch) achieves perfect unity with the practical function (secure incense insertion). Each time the user lights an incense stick, it constitutes a micro-interaction with Quanzhou's Maritime Silk Road heritage. It is through such high-frequency, low-barrier daily usage that cultural narratives permeate continuously. Ultimately, through subtle, immersive cultural permeation, this shapes the user's cultural identity, elevating the souvenir from a mere 'travel memento' to a 'cultural brand' embodying local spirit and global vision.

5.2 "Dual-Dimensional Design Stratification Model: Generational and Consumption Capacity"

To achieve precise product development and market positioning, this study constructs a 2x2 matrix model (Table 1):

Table 1: Dual-Dimensional Design Stratification Model

Generational Groups	Consumption Capacity Tier	Product Strategy Examples
Generation Z (18–25 years)	Mass Market (≤ 50 RMB)	AR Interactive Postcards (scan QR code to trigger Maritime Silk Road story animations), Eco-material Nanyue Musical Instrument Combination Bookmarks
	Premium Market ($> \text{¥}100$)	Limited-edition digital collectibles (NFTs) + physical miniature architectural models; hand-carved jewellery with in-depth cultural interpretation manuals
Middle-aged Generation (36-45 years old)	Mass Market (≤ 50 RMB)	Dripstone-shaped tea strainer, swallowtail ridge pattern silicone phone stand, Maritime Silk Road map canvas tote
	Premium Market ($> \text{£}100$)	Premium Maritime Silk Road-themed tea set (incorporating ancient ship timber elements), art reproductions of architectural components supervised by intangible cultural heritage inheritors

Note: The table employs a three-line format, strictly defining generational segments as Generation Z and Core Generation, while clearly distinguishing consumption capacity into mass and premium markets.

The value of this model lies not only in fulfilling differentiated functional and aesthetic demands across distinct market segments, but also in enabling every consumer to discover a unique point of resonance with Quanzhou's "Maritime Silk Road spirit" through tailored narrative approaches (e.g., digital narratives for Generation Z, family narratives for the core generation, and collectible narratives for the premium market).

5.3 Ethical Implications and Sustainable Development Pathways of the Model

The design strategy framework established in this research extends far beyond enhancing market conversion rates or generating economic returns. At a deeper level, it offers a viable pathway to resolve the long-standing ethical dilemma in cultural heritage commercialisation-balancing

revitalisation with respectful preservation-while embedding multiple mechanisms to foster community sustainability.

Firstly, at the level of cultural empowerment, this model fundamentally avoids the tokenistic, superficial consumption of cultural heritage through deep interventions of "prototype decoding" and "narrative translation". Traditional souvenir development often stagnates at the visual appropriation of architectural silhouettes or motifs. Such "symbolic extraction" not only fails to convey the profound value of heritage but may also undermine its cultural dignity through oversimplification and misinterpretation. This model requires designers to deeply comprehend and respect the historical complexity and spirit of multicultural coexistence embodied within ancient Maritime Silk Road architecture. By transforming cultural archetypes such as "guardian," "bridge," and "fusion" into warm contemporary narratives, products become active cultural interlocutors rather than passive commodities. This process itself constitutes a "recontextualisation empowerment" of local culture, revitalising heritage within the new era's discourse. It confidently narrates Quanzhou's story and the tale of human civilisations' mutual learning to the world.

Secondly, at the level of community engagement and economic empowerment, the dual-dimensional layered model creates unprecedented development opportunities for local communities, particularly artisans and intangible cultural heritage bearers. The model clearly distinguishes between mass and premium markets, where the high-end product line targeting the premium market (such as limited-edition artistic reproductions and tea sets supervised by intangible cultural heritage masters) inherently requires deep collaboration with traditional craftsmasters. This collaborative model transcends mere outsourcing, evolving into value co-creation grounded in a shared cultural mission. On one hand, it provides stable, high-value market demand for endangered traditional crafts (such as Minnan brick carving and woodworking), securing the economic foundation for skill transmission. On the other, it confers upon artisans new identities as "bearers of cultural knowledge" and "creative collaborators," elevating their social standing and cultural confidence. This economic development model, grounded in endogenous cultural capital, profoundly embodies UNESCO's advocacy for "community-centred heritage conservation," effectively fostering community economic resilience and sustainable development.

Finally, in the realm of public education and awareness cultivation, souvenirs within this model are redefined as highly effective informal educational tools. Whether functional products for the mass market (accompanied by concise historical story cards) or artworks for collectors (featuring in-depth scholarly interpretations), they all serve as "cultural messengers". When gargoyle-shaped tea strainers grace household tea tables and AR postcards circulate across social media, Maritime Silk Road culture transcends museum display cases and scenic spot information boards, permeating public life through intimate, everyday means. This subtle cultural immersion effectively sparks curiosity and a sense of belonging towards local heritage among the public, particularly the younger generation, fostering a conscious awareness of heritage preservation. In this sense, successful souvenirs transcend mere commodities to become bridges connecting past and future, heritage sites and the wider world, yielding long-term societal benefits that far exceed their direct economic value.

6. Conclusion

Through rigorous mixed-method research, this study has uncovered the core contradiction within cultural heritage commercialisation-the paradox of "high affinity coupled with high cognitive barriers"-and proposed systematic solutions grounded in cultural translation theory. The research confirms that the ultimate value of souvenirs lies not in faithful replication of heritage's physical form, but in their capacity as exceptional "cultural translators"-through sophisticated narrative

design and seamless functional anchoring, transforming profound, distant cultural archetypes into everyday experiences that modern consumers can perceive, use, share, and pass on.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in successfully integrating Holt's cultural brand theory, Bassnett's cultural translation framework, and concrete design practices. It constructs a three-stage mechanism-"archetype decoding, narrative translation, functional anchoring"-alongside a "dual-dimensional generational-consumption capacity design stratification model." This provides heritage sites globally facing commodification challenges with a new paradigm combining theoretical depth and practical operability.

Naturally, limitations exist. Samples primarily focused on Quanzhou's three core scenic areas; future research may extend to more diverse linear cultural heritage sites like the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Grand Canal to test the model's cross-cultural applicability. Furthermore, this study concentrated on front-end design strategy development; subsequent research could employ methods such as A/B testing to quantitatively assess how different narrative strategies influence actual consumer purchasing behaviour and long-term brand loyalty. Simultaneously, the localisation challenges of cultural translation warrant attention-maintaining accuracy and sensitivity across cultural contexts while avoiding misinterpretation or oversimplification remain critical issues for future exploration. Nonetheless, this study undeniably contributes a practical Chinese solution to advancing cultural heritage from "static preservation" towards "living transmission," demonstrating design's unique value in fostering civilisational dialogue and sustainable development.

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