

A Study on the Transformation Pathways of Quanzhou's Ancient Architectural Cultural Symbols in the Design of Tourist Souvenirs

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Abstract: As a key node along the "Maritime Silk Road," Quanzhou's ancient architecture blends diverse religious traditions, regional aesthetics, and traditional craftsmanship, forming a unique cultural symbol system. This study employs a design research methodology, conducting in-depth interviews with three core groups—designers, cultural scholars, and tourists—and combining grounded theory and semiotic analysis methods. The study identifies three value dimensions of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols in souvenir design conversion: visual identification, craftsmanship inheritance, and spiritual symbolism. Additionally, the study highlights three practical challenges (loss of authenticity, functional compatibility issues, and cross-cultural misunderstandings) and proposes an innovative solution centred on a "technology-culture" dual-drive model. This research aims to provide methodological support for the creative regeneration of local cultural heritage and promote the sustainable dissemination of local symbolic systems.

1. Introduction

Quanzhou is a renowned historical and cultural city in China, blending Chinese and Western architectural styles and embodying the uniqueness of multicultural integration. Its ancient architectural complexes constitute an important component of the tangible heritage of the "Maritime Silk Road." Quanzhou's ancient buildings not only preserve rich historical memories but also serve as a testament to the fusion of diverse cultures. The fusion of Islamic, Buddhist, and Taoist cultures has endowed Quanzhou's architectural style with unique characteristics, reflecting its specific social, economic, and cultural context. The design and structure of these ancient buildings not only showcase the exquisite craftsmanship of ancient times but also reflect the cultural characteristics and historical development of Quanzhou across different historical periods [1].

In modern society, how to effectively transform these tangible cultural heritage into tourist souvenirs has become a core issue in urban cultural dissemination and the development of the cultural and creative industry. Tourist souvenirs are not only tangible carriers of local culture but also carriers of tourists' memories and important media for disseminating local culture [2]. Through

clever design and the transformation of cultural symbols, tourist souvenirs can convey the cultural connotations and historical stories embedded in Quanzhou's ancient architecture to a broader audience, further enhancing Quanzhou's influence in global cultural exchange [3].

However, despite the growing integration of culture and tourism in recent years, the Quanzhou souvenir market still faces issues such as "symbolic homogenisation," "lack of semantic depth," and "insufficient cultural interpretation" [4]. Quanzhou souvenir designs often fail to fully explore the unique cultural symbols of its ancient architecture, instead tending towards repetition and simplification, lacking innovation and depth in cultural expression [5]. Additionally, differences in value pursuits and interpretation methods between cultural scholars and tourists often lead to discrepancies with designers' creative concepts, resulting in souvenirs that fail to effectively convey the cultural essence of Quanzhou [6]. This study aims to provide theoretical foundations and practical guidance for the transformation of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols in souvenir design, addressing the current shortcomings in cultural depth and innovation in Quanzhou's souvenir design, and promoting the effective dissemination of local culture and the development of the cultural and creative industry [7].

2. Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Symbol Perspective

Cultural symbols are not isolated visual elements but cognitive devices that carry specific social, historical, and religious meanings. Eco emphasises the polysemy and openness of cultural symbols, stressing the socially constructed nature of the relationship between symbols and their referents [8]. Barthes explores symbols from a mythological perspective, pointing out the "second layer of meaning production" hidden behind visual images, i.e., ideological structures [9]. In the ancient architecture of Quanzhou, the pointed arches of mosques not only reflect the unique structural features of Islamic architecture but also carry the historical memory of cultural exchange between China and the West [8]. The transformation of symbols is not merely a formal change but a profound reconfiguration of cultural connotations.

2.2 Design Thinking and Transformation Strategies

Brown (2009) proposed a "design thinking" model centred on user-centric design, rapid iteration, and interdisciplinary collaboration, providing a systematic approach for the contemporary expression of cultural symbols. Cultural design transformation is not merely about interpreting graphic language but also involves the re-encoding of cultural meaning. The design of cultural products must balance "symbol recognition," "functional adaptability," and "cultural interpretive power" to ensure that symbols effectively convey historical and cultural values while meeting the needs of modern markets and users [10].

2.3 User Experience and Consumer Psychology

Pine & Gilmore (1999) proposed the "experience economy" theory, arguing that the value of cultural products lies in their ability to establish deep emotional connections. The consumption of tourist souvenirs is not merely the purchase of items but a process of materialising cultural identity and emotional memories [2]. Swanson and Timothy (2012) further explored the significance of tourist souvenirs as cultural symbols, proposing that they serve dual functions of culture and emotion during the consumption process. Especially for young tourists and international consumers, there is a higher expectation for products to possess a dual structure of "visual representativeness +

cultural narrative" [6].

2.4 Domestic Research Review

In recent years, research on the design of cultural heritage and tourism souvenirs has become increasingly rich. Li Yanzhu et al. (2021) explored modern design strategies for regional symbols, while Zhu Jingjiang (2022) studied the cultural and creative transformation pathways of intangible cultural heritage crafts. However, existing research primarily remains at the theoretical level, lacking in-depth user empirical data and cross-comparisons among multiple stakeholders. As a cultural composite, Quanzhou's ancient architecture requires systematic analysis of its symbolic recognition complexity, transformation pathways, and audience perception [11-12].

2.5 Cultural Symbols and Tourist Souvenir Design

Further exploration of semiotics-related theories can be conducted, combining the theories of Eco (1976) and Barthes (1967), to examine the challenges faced in the transformation of cultural symbols, particularly how to effectively convert Quanzhou's unique architectural symbols into modern design. This transformation not only requires a deep understanding of cultural symbols but also explores how to preserve their cultural roots within modern design language while meeting modern consumers' dual demands for visual appeal and functionality [8-9].

2.6 Design Thinking and Symbol Transformation

This study combines Brown's (2009) design thinking model, which emphasizes user-centred design and interdisciplinary collaboration, to explore how modern design methods can be applied to the transformation of ancient architectural symbols in Quanzhou. Design thinking provides a new perspective on symbol transformation, emphasising the creation of souvenir designs that convey cultural meaning while meeting the needs of modern consumers through iterative design and multi-stakeholder collaboration [10].

2.7 Market Adaptability of Cultural Symbols

By reviewing literature on cultural symbol transformation, this study explores the balance between market-oriented design and the depth of cultural symbols. Particular attention is given to how to maintain the uniqueness of cultural symbols while meeting modern market demands. The literature generally agrees that the market adaptability of cultural symbols depends not only on the visual expressiveness of their visual forms but also on the depth of their cultural connotations and the emotional resonance they evoke in consumers. Designers must find a balance between market demands and cultural heritage [11-12]

3. Research Method

This study adopts a mixed research method oriented toward qualitative research, with semi-structured in-depth interviews as the core method, supplemented by a theory-driven overall coding table for data processing and analysis. To ensure the systematic and comprehensive nature of the research, this section will detail the specific interview process, participant selection criteria, and potential biases that may arise during data collection.

3.1 Interview Design

The interview design in this study employs a semi-structured interview method, aiming to obtain in-depth insights from interviewees through flexible interview guidelines while ensuring comparability and analytical consistency among different participants. The design of the interview guidelines is based on the following aspects:

Understanding and transforming cultural symbols: Exploring the core characteristics of cultural symbols in Quanzhou's ancient architecture and how these symbols are transformed into tourist souvenirs.

Symbol transformation challenges: It is necessary to understand the difficulties encountered by designers and cultural scholars in the symbol transformation process, such as loss of authenticity and functional adaptation issues.

Audience perception and needs: It is necessary to assess tourists' understanding and needs regarding cultural symbols in Quanzhou's ancient architecture, as well as their emotional connection and expectations toward souvenir design.

3.2 Participant Selection Criteria

To comprehensively capture diverse perspectives on the transformation of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols, the study selected three core participant categories: designers, cultural scholars, and visitors. Specific selection criteria are as follows:

Designers: Ten experienced designers from the Quanzhou region will be selected, with requirements that they have participated in the design of cultural products or souvenirs and possess practical experience in the application of Quanzhou cultural elements.

Cultural Scholars: Ten cultural scholars from Quanzhou or related fields were selected, with research focuses on cultural heritage, semiotics, or local culture.

Tourists: 20 tourists from different regions and backgrounds were selected based on their recent visits to Quanzhou and their experiences purchasing tourist souvenirs.

The selection of participants aims to encompass diverse backgrounds and perspectives, ensuring the diversity and comprehensiveness of the research findings.

3.3 Interview Process

Interviews will be conducted in person, lasting 45–60 minutes. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed after the interview. During the interview, researchers will encourage participants to express their personal views and feelings, minimising intervention to ensure their perspectives are fully articulated. To avoid bias, researchers will avoid using leading language and will adjust interview questions flexibly based on participants' responses.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed a holistic coding analysis method to analyse the interview recordings. This method combines interview data with theoretical frameworks such as semiotics and design thinking, and through thematic classification and cluster analysis, extracts the core value dimensions of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols and the main challenges in their transformation process. Additionally, cross-category comparative analysis was employed to contrast the perspectives of different groups (designers, cultural scholars, and tourists) on symbol transformation, thereby revealing the diverse perspectives and potential contradictions inherent in the process of cultural symbol transformation.

Summary: By providing a detailed description of the interview process, participant selection criteria, and potential biases, this study enhances the transparency and credibility of the methodology. Such detailed descriptions not only ensure the systematic and in-depth nature of the research but also provide methodological references for similar studies. In the data analysis phase, precise coding methods and cross-category analysis effectively identified the core issues in the transformation of cultural symbols, providing a theoretical basis for the design transformation of cultural symbols in Quanzhou's ancient architecture.

4. Results and Discussion

This study analysed the transformation pathways of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols in tourist souvenir design, identifying three value dimensions of cultural symbols: visual recognition value, craftsmanship inheritance value, and spiritual symbolism value. These three value dimensions exhibit different priorities and interpretation methods from the perspectives of designers, cultural scholars, and tourists. Additionally, the study revealed three practical challenges in the transformation process: loss of authenticity, functional adaptation barriers, and cross-cultural misunderstandings. These findings provide a solid theoretical foundation and practical guidance for the effective transformation of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols.

4.1 The Relationship between the Three-Dimensional Value Dimensions of Cultural Symbols and Existing Literature

Visual Recognition Value: The study found that during the transformation process, designers, cultural scholars, and tourists have different interpretations of the visual recognition value of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols. Designers focus on the extractability and media adaptability of symbol forms, cultural scholars emphasise regional characteristics and architectural uniqueness, while tourists rely more on visual anchors and rapid associative recognition. This aligns with the findings of Swanson and Timothy (2012), who noted that as cultural symbols, tourist souvenirs not only represent regional culture but also evoke emotional resonance among visitors through visual elements [6].

Craftsmanship Heritage Value: Craftsmanship heritage is one of the core values of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols in souvenir design. Designers focus on the contemporary expression of intangible cultural heritage elements during the transformation process, while cultural scholars emphasise the integration of craftsmanship with historical context. Consistent with Li et al. (2021), the inheritance of cultural heritage must not only preserve its craftsmanship characteristics but also incorporate modern demands into design to ensure the vitality of traditional craftsmanship and its adaptability to the market [11]. The findings of this study further indicate that in modern design, designers often face the challenge of balancing technological innovation with traditional craftsmanship, which aligns with Zhu (2022)'s proposed transformation path for intangible cultural heritage, which emphasizes the importance of innovation and technology in the design of intangible cultural heritage products [12].

4.2 Practical Challenges and Literature Discrepancies in the Transformation of Cultural Symbols

Loss of Authenticity: This study found that cultural symbols in Quanzhou's ancient architecture often lose their authenticity during transformation, particularly during the simplification and commercialisation of symbols, where their core meanings are often weakened or overly simplified. This phenomenon aligns with Wang's (1999) discussion on the homogenisation of symbols in

tourist souvenirs. Wang pointed out that overly simplified cultural symbols may lead to "cultural de-localisation," thereby losing cultural uniqueness and regional specificity [3].

Functional Adaptation Challenges: In the process of transforming Quanzhou's ancient architectural symbols into souvenirs, designers face significant functional adaptation issues. Complex architectural structures and decorative elements are often difficult to convert into portable and practical souvenirs. This finding resonates with Liu and Zhang's (2020) research on cultural symbol transformation, which noted that complex traditional architectural elements often require modularisation and simplification to meet modern consumer demands [5]. This study further proposes a "modular design" strategy, which involves decomposing complex architectural elements into multiple detachable components to reduce costs and enhance product practicality.

Cross-cultural misunderstandings: The study also found that cultural symbols in Quanzhou's ancient architecture often face misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication, particularly among foreign tourists who struggle to comprehend symbols with regional characteristics. This aligns with the findings of Li et al. (2021) and Zhu (2022), who noted that the transformation of cultural symbols is often influenced by differences in the cultural background and cognitive frameworks of the audience [11-12].

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature in several aspects while offering new perspectives and practical strategies. For example, although other studies have mentioned the issue of authenticity loss, the concept of a "core feature database" and the modular design strategy proposed in this study provide new theoretical and practical methods to address this problem. Additionally, the challenges and solutions related to cross-cultural misunderstandings, particularly strategies to enhance cultural communication through digital technology, offer feasible practical solutions for future research.

5. Strategy Construction and Model Summary

Through an analysis of the conversion path of cultural symbols in Quanzhou's ancient architecture, this study proposes a systematic design strategy model that covers key issues such as cultural authenticity, user adaptability, and innovation pathways, providing an operational framework for creative expression and cultural inheritance.

5.1 Three-dimensional Evaluation Framework

To balance cultural inheritance and contemporary expression, this study proposes a three-dimensional evaluation framework of "authenticity-innovation-adaptability" to measure the conversion of cultural symbols in souvenir design. The framework emphasizes the source meaning of cultural symbols, innovative expression, and alignment with user needs.

5.2 Dual Empathy Mechanism Model

To balance the "reproduction" of culture and the "experience" of users, this study proposes a "dual empathy mechanism model." Through the collaboration of the "user perspective" and the "cultural expert perspective," this model ensures the accuracy of cultural symbols and their alignment with user needs, thereby enhancing the cultural depth and market acceptance of souvenirs.

5.3 Three-Quadrant Pathway Model

This study divides the souvenir design pathway into three quadrants: "craftsmanship,"

"technology," and "lifestyle," corresponding to different cultural levels and transformation mechanisms, reflecting diverse design strategies.

5.4 Embedded Cultural Communication Mechanism

Through "narrative design" and "social media re-dissemination," this study proposes an embedded cultural communication mechanism that deepens and disseminates cultural symbols throughout the souvenir lifecycle, achieving dual connections between cognition and emotion.

5.5 Strategy Construction and Model Summary

This study integrates key strategies in cultural souvenir design, proposing a "four-directional construction system" and a "symbol reconstruction" model. It emphasizes the transformation of cultural symbols from mere visual elements into "narrative units" with profound cultural significance, and through a three-in-one design collaboration paradigm, it drives the sustained development and innovation of cultural souvenirs.

Conclusion: The cultural symbols of Quanzhou's ancient architecture hold significant cultural heritage value and market potential in tourism souvenir design. By analysing Quanzhou's cultural symbols, this study aims to achieve a balance between the precise transformation of cultural symbols and market acceptance. The cultural symbols of Quanzhou's ancient architecture not only carry rich historical memories but can also be transformed into culturally significant symbols with brand value through innovative design. Therefore, souvenir design should balance cultural depth and market demand to build a culturally distinctive brand with local characteristics.

6. Conclusions and Outlook

This study focuses on the transformation of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols in tourism souvenir design, combining cultural symbolism, design thinking, and user experience theory to construct a research framework that integrates theory and empirical evidence. Through in-depth interviews and comprehensive coding analysis of three groups-designers, cultural scholars, and tourists-this study systematically identifies the three-dimensional value of cultural symbols and the three major practical challenges faced in design transformation.

6.1 Specific Solutions

The study indicates that the cultural symbols of Quanzhou's ancient architecture not only carry rich historical memories but also possess multiple cultural values, including three core dimensions: visual identification, craftsmanship inheritance, and spiritual symbolism. During the transformation process of souvenir design, designers, cultural scholars, and tourists interpret these value dimensions differently, highlighting the diversity and complexity of cultural symbols in design. However, the transformation process also faces a series of challenges, particularly issues such as loss of authenticity, functional adaptation barriers, and cross-cultural misunderstandings.

To address these challenges, this study proposes specific solutions:

Authenticity loss: A "core feature database" was established to protect the core characteristics of cultural symbols, preventing excessive simplification or distortion.

Functional adaptation issues: Modular design methods and implement layered functionalisation strategies were adopted to better adapt traditional architectural elements to the needs of modern souvenirs.

Cross-cultural misunderstandings: Digital technologies such as augmented reality (AR) guided

tours and multilingual information cards were introduced to help visitors from different cultural backgrounds better understand the intrinsic meanings of cultural symbols.

These strategies provide an operational framework for the effective transformation of Quanzhou's ancient architectural cultural symbols and offer important references for the creative regeneration of other local cultures and the design of tourism souvenirs.

6.2 Practical Recommendations

For cultural tourism product designers, this study proposes the following specific practical recommendations:

Deepening the exploration of cultural connotations: Designers should delve into the historical and social context behind cultural symbols rather than merely focusing on surface-level design. Especially for local cultural heritage, how to preserve its uniqueness and historical context in souvenir design is a critical issue that designers must prioritise [3-4].

Utilising emerging technologies to enhance cultural dissemination: With the development of technology, digital technologies such as AR, VR, and immersive experiences are becoming increasingly important in cultural product design. Designers can utilise these technologies to enhance visitor interaction and make the dissemination of cultural symbols more vivid and profound [10].

These suggestions not only aid in the design and transformation of Quanzhou's cultural symbols but also provide valuable references for other cities with rich historical and cultural heritage, thereby promoting the innovation and dissemination of cultural heritage [1].

6.3 Future Research Directions

Although this study has proposed some innovative theoretical frameworks and practical pathways, there are still areas that require further exploration. Future research can be conducted in the following directions:

Global applicability and scalability: This study primarily focuses on the cultural symbols of Quanzhou's ancient architecture. Future research could apply the proposed models and strategies to other cultural heritage sites to explore commonalities and differences in the transformation process of cultural symbols across regions. For example, other historical and cultural cities such as Nanjing and Beijing, or international cultural heritage sites like Kyoto and Florence, may face distinct cultural challenges, thereby further validating and expanding the models proposed in this study [13].

Cross-cultural comparative studies: Visitors from different cultural backgrounds may have significant differences in their understanding and needs regarding cultural symbols. Therefore, future research could delve into the cognitive differences among visitors from different countries or regions regarding cultural souvenirs, particularly in the context of globalisation, to explore how cultural symbols can transcend cultural and linguistic barriers to convey their unique value .

Integration of Digital Technology and Cultural Transformation: With the continuous development of digital technology, future research can further explore the role of AR, VR, and other technologies in the design and dissemination of cultural souvenirs. Especially in cross-cultural communication, whether digital technology can effectively enhance the interactivity and emotional resonance of cultural symbols has become an important direction for future research.

6.4 Conclusion

The cultural heritage of ancient architecture in Quanzhou is not only a visual legacy but also a

source of living memory and cultural imagination. Exploring the design of its symbolic transformation is not only about protecting and inheriting local culture but also about reshaping and revitalising culture. This study aims to provide insights and inspiration for cultural creativity practices in other historical and cultural cities, helping local cultures to go global [3][5].

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