

From Cultural Resources to Cultural Capital: Transformation Paths and Realization Mechanisms of Cultural Heritage Vitalization Promoted by Cultural and Creative Design

Xiaoxue Zhang

School of Arts and Design, Xi'an Technological University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

Abstract: Transforming China's vast cultural heritage from static "resource stocks" into dynamic "value-generating capital" is a central challenge in heritage revitalization. Through theoretical inquiry and case-based analysis, this study draws a clear distinction between cultural resources (as stock assets) and cultural capital (as assets that accumulate value). It then zeroes in on cultural and creative design as the pivotal engine, identifying three core value-enhancing mechanisms: reconstructing narratives to evoke emotional resonance, embedding functions through contextual re-scenarioization, and shaping aesthetics to build recognizable brands. In concert, these mechanisms convert historical data into emotional experiences, decorative artifacts into functional everyday goods, and cultural symbols into commercially viable labels. Building on this framework, the study proposes three practical pathways-productization, experiential engagement, and industrial scaling-alongside a triple-support system driven by innovation, market forces, and policy facilitation. The paper concludes that cultural and creative design acts as the essential bridge for elevating heritage into productive cultural capital, offering both theoretical grounding and actionable guidance for revitalization efforts.

Keywords: Cultural Resources; Cultural Capital; Cultural and Creative Design; Cultural Heritage Vitalization; Transformation Paths

1. Introduction

China possesses an immense quantity of cultural heritage, which, as vital cultural resources, carries the historical memory and cultural spirit of the nation. However, a considerable portion of this heritage remains "sleeping" or confined to

self-admiration, urgently requiring effective strategies to recognize its internal value and facilitate its transformation. To realize sustainable cultural heritage vitalization, the key challenge is to complete the transformation from static, preservation-oriented "cultural resources" to dynamic, value-creating "cultural capital."

Existing research has made significant contributions at two levels. The first level discusses the necessity and value of cultural heritage vitalization from a macro perspective. The second summarizes practical models such as cultural and creative product development and cultural tourism integration based on specific cases [1]. These studies have laid an essential foundation but leave room for further theoretical deepening. Although most studies frequently employ the concepts of "resources" and "capital," they lack sufficient analysis of the internal theoretical distinction between these concepts and the academic logic of transformation, resulting in superficial discussions. Moreover, regarding the core role of cultural and creative design in the transformation process, existing research mostly remains at the level of strategy description or phenomenon analysis, lacking systematic analysis of its deep mechanism as a key "transformation hub." Some studies even confuse "paths" with "mechanisms," failing to construct a clear theoretical framework in which the two jointly drive transformation [1].

Taking the transformation from "cultural resources" to "cultural capital" as the core research perspective, this paper deeply analyzes the core mechanism of cultural and creative design in this transformation process and systematically constructs its practical paths and guarantee mechanisms. By clarifying the core connotations of cultural resources and cultural capital and demonstrating the theoretical necessity of transformation, dissecting the value-added mechanism from three dimensions, exploring three key practical paths, and constructing a systematic guarantee mechanism,

this study aims to provide theoretical support and practically effective academic assistance for the innovative vitalization of cultural heritage [2].

2. Distinction and Transformation Connotation between Cultural Resources and Cultural Capital

2.1 Stock Attribute of Cultural Resources and Incremental Attribute of Cultural Capital

Although only a single word differs between “cultural resources” and “cultural capital,” they represent two fundamentally different forms of value existence. Cultural resources mainly refer to the sum of cultural elements created and accumulated through human historical practice and available for utilization, such as cultural relics, historic sites, intangible cultural heritage, folk art, and historical legends. Their core characteristics are reflected in the stock attribute: first, historicity and authenticity, which emphasize inherent and irreproducible ontological value requiring preservation as much as possible; second, staticity, as they often remain in a potential and undeveloped state whose social and economic value has not been fully circulated or manifested in the contemporary context [3].

Cultural capital is a dynamic and economic concept originating from Bourdieu’s capital theory. Bourdieu argues that objectified cultural capital, namely cultural goods, represents cultural capital objectified in materials and media, treating culture as a form of capital that can be invested, accumulated, and generate new value. Cultural capital possesses not only stock attributes but also incremental attributes: first, in the value dimension, it can generate economic benefits through market operation or social influence through symbolic power; second, in the property right dimension, it can be defined, possessed, and traded as intangible assets such as brands, copyrights, and patents; third, in the flow dimension, it can continuously appreciate and realize self-expansion through consumption, circulation, and reproduction. There are essential divergences in attribute state, functional positioning and ownership attributes between cultural resources and cultural capital, as detailed in Table 1.

The transformation from resources to capital means that cultural heritage changes from a static stock requiring maintenance costs to a

dynamic increment capable of actively creating benefits—a leap from “protected object” to “production factor.”

Table 1. Comparison between Cultural Resources and Cultural Capital

Dimension	Cultural Resources	Cultural Capital
Value Attribute	Stock assets (preservation value)	Incremental assets (value- accumulating)
State	Static, potential, undeveloped	Dynamic, circulating, reproductive
Function	Protection, inheritance, exhibition	Value creation, market operation, sustainability
Ownership	Public goods, collective ownership	Definable, possessable, tradable rights
Measurement	Historical, artistic, scientific metrics	Social, economic, symbolic value metrics

2.2 The Inevitability of Transformation in the Contemporary Context

In contemporary society, promoting the transformation of cultural heritage from resources to capital is not a simple commercial profit-seeking behavior but has profound social, economic, and cultural inevitability [4]. From the social dimension, globalization and urbanization have accelerated the risk of cultural homogenization, making the protection of cultural diversity and the enhancement of cultural identity particularly urgent. Pure static protection struggles to integrate ancient culture into contemporary life, especially to attract the attention of younger generations. From the economic dimension, the cultural industry has become an essential component of the national economy, with abundant cultural resources representing unique development advantages; if they cannot be effectively transformed into capital, these advantages will fall into the dilemma of “begging with a golden bowl.” From the cultural dimension, living inheritance is the foundation of sustainable development of cultural heritage; the transformation process itself is an innovative interpretation and communication that enables cultural heritage to be re-understood, accepted, and recreated in contemporary society [5].

2.3 Cultural and Creative Design as a Creative Hub

In the complex transformation chain from

cultural resources to cultural capital, cultural and creative design plays an indispensable role as a “transformer.” Neither simple packaging and beautification nor rigid appropriation of cultural symbols, it is a profound creative activity. Cultural and creative design serves as a “decoder” for value discovery: through in-depth research, designers keenly capture, extract, and interpret the most representative, resonant, and contemporary cultural genes within resources—such as patterns, stories, or crafts—and transform them into understandable and operable elements of modern design language. It also serves as an “encoder” for value creation: through means such as narrative reconstruction, function embedding, and aesthetic shaping, design integrates cultural symbols into products, spaces, experiences, or brands, making them retain cultural charm while conforming to modern aesthetics, practical needs, and market rules.

3. Core Functions and Value-Added Mechanisms

Cultural and creative design activates the internal value of cultural heritage layer by layer through three core mechanisms: narrative reconstruction with emotional connection, function embedding with scenario reconstruction, and aesthetic shaping with brand building. The core logic, transformation results and cultural symbols of three value-added mechanisms are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Core Elements of Three Value-Added Mechanisms

Mechanism	Core Logic	Transformation Result
Narrative Reconstruction	Translate historical stories into contemporary narratives	Historical information → Emotional resonance
Function Embedding	Integrate cultural symbols with practical functions	Ornamental objects → Usable cultural goods
Aesthetic Shaping	Build modern visual system and brand	Cultural symbols → Marketable brands (premium)

3.1 Narrative Reconstruction and Emotional Connection

The value of cultural heritage lies not only in its physical entity but also in the historical memory, humanistic spirit, and collective emotion it

carries. However, these deep narratives are often precipitated in professional terminology or historical contexts that are difficult for the contemporary public to understand. Cultural and creative design establishes emotional connections with the public through contemporary translation of cultural heritage symbols and stories combined with narrative reconstruction, endowing cultural heritage with new narrative value [6].

The Palace Museum’s cultural products exemplify successful narrative reconstruction. As a top-level cultural IP, the Palace Museum traditionally maintained a solemn and dignified image distant from the public. Through cultural and creative design, the “I Know” tape transformed Emperor Kangxi’s historical imperial comments into humorous and friendly modern social language, making the solemn imperial image vivid and approachable [7]. Similarly, the Palace Museum Cat-themed products connected stray cats living within the museum with the history of royal cats, reconstructing a lovely narrative of “royal guardians” and reducing the Forbidden City’s solemnity through “cute” narration. As of 2025, the Palace Museum has developed over 3,000 types of cultural products across 28 categories, establishing a complete ecosystem from single products to industrial ecology. A series of typical cultural and creative products developed by the Palace Museum are illustrated in Figure 1.

For Example:



Figure 1. Typical Cultural and Creative Products of the Palace Museum

3.2 Function Embedding and Scenario Reconstruction

If narrative reconstruction solves the problem of “how to be understood,” then function embedding and scenario reconstruction solve the problem of “how to be used”—how to bring cultural heritage out of museum showcases and integrate it into the capillaries of daily life. Function embedding requires design to go

beyond the aesthetic level and consider the practicality, ergonomics, and user experience of products, ensuring that cultural symbols organically integrate with functions rather than serving as rigid stickers. Scenario reconstruction expands new time and space for the realization of cultural heritage value, moving beyond original historical sites or museum spaces into diverse modern life scenarios such as home, office, travel, and study [8].

The Dunhuang Academy's cultural and creative design provides a successful model. The "Digital Dunhuang" project uses high-definition scanning and VR/AR technologies to design immersive exhibition halls and virtual roaming programs, embedding "knowledge acquisition" and "aesthetic experience" functions through interactive design. In terms of daily product transformation, Dunhuang cultural products embed elements such as flying apsaras and caisson patterns into daily necessities. The design applying caisson patterns to note paper, where the exquisite caisson structure gradually appears as paper is torn off, transforms each use into a small cultural ceremony. As presented in Figure 2, the creative note paper embeds traditional Dunhuang caisson patterns as its core decorative element. For Example:



Figure 2. Dunhuang Caisson Pattern Note Paper

3.3 Aesthetic Shaping and Brand Building

On the basis of emotional resonance and functional practicality, achieving sustainable

capital transformation ultimately requires forming stable market recognition and brand premium. Aesthetic shaping establishes a visual language system that conforms to modern aesthetics while remaining rooted in the unique genes of cultural resources [9]. Brand building establishes a clear brand image and emotional identity through core value positioning, brand storytelling, and omni-channel visual presentation, thereby forming brand loyalty and sustainable consumption momentum [10].

The brand "Shang Xia" exemplifies this mechanism. Its design reinterprets traditional crafts and philosophy with contemporary design language, creating products with both oriental charm and international aesthetics, successfully building a top brand representing "contemporary Chinese elegant life" with high brand premium. Meanwhile, the national trend brand "Miao Shou Hui Chao" focuses on cooperation with local intangible cultural heritage projects, "redesigning" traditional cultural symbols through bold and trendy visual design. By combining traditional door god images with street graffiti styles applied to clothing and skateboards, it successfully transforms "old" intangible heritage into "cool" fashion symbols, attracting a large number of Gen Z consumers and demonstrating cultural capital's strong market attraction [11].

4. Practical Path Exploration

Based on the core roles of cultural and creative design in narrative, function, and aesthetics, three key paths to realize the transformation from cultural resources to cultural capital are proposed: productization, experientialization, and industrialization. The core characteristics, application scenarios and typical practical cases of the three transformation paths are summarized comparatively in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of Three Transformation Paths

Path	Core Feature	Typical Application Scenarios	Representative Case
Productization	Physical goods, mass production	Daily necessities, souvenirs	Suzhou Museum wisteria seeds, Dunhuang stationery
Experientialization	Immersive participation	Themed parks, digital	Only Henan, Digital Dunhuang
Industrialization	Cross-format operation	IP licensing, industrial clusters	Palace Museum IP ecosystem

4.1 Productization Path

The productization path anchors the value of cultural resources onto specific, mass-producible physical products through cultural and creative design, transforming them into cultural goods available for consumption and circulation [12].

The key to this path is achieving the organic unity of cultural connotation, practical function, and market demand. The productization path requires in-depth excavation of the symbolic value of cultural resources and accurate design translation. A notable example is the "Wisteria Seeds Planted by Mr. Wen Hengshan" product

from Suzhou Museum, inspired by a wisteria tree personally planted by Ming Dynasty painter Wen Zhengming. The design perfectly combines the cultural story, natural life, and commemorative function, transforming an ordinary plant seed into a product carrying profound historical and humanistic value [13].

4.2 Experientialization Path

With consumption upgrading, public demand for cultural heritage has shifted from “watching” to “participating,” from “consuming products” to “consuming experiences”. The experientialization path creates immersive cultural experiences using cultural and creative design thinking, integrating cultural resource value into services, activities, and spaces. The Only Henan · Theatrical Magic City project serves as a representative case [14]. It transforms Henan’s Yellow River civilization, farming culture, and poetry classics into touching drama performances and spatial experiences across 56 grid spaces and 21 theaters, successfully transforming local cultural resources into a tourist destination brand with national influence. Digital experiences are also emerging: using VR/AR and digital twin technologies, cultural and creative design can break the limitations of time and space. The “Digital Dunhuang” project and Henan Satellite TV’s “Chinese Festivals” series revive Tang Sancai music figurines to dance through digital animation technology, opening new territory for the experiential transformation of cultural heritage. The landmark experiential transformation project Only Henan · Theatrical Magic City is displayed in Figure 3.

For Example:

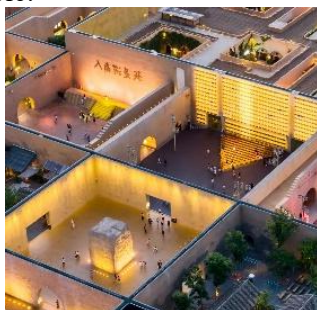


Figure 3. Only Henan Theatrical Magic City

4.3 Industrialization Path

The productization and experientialization paths ultimately need to move toward industrialization to achieve maximum value increment and sustainable development of cultural capital [15].

The industrialization path carries out systematic, matrix-based, and cross-format integrated development of cultural resources through brand building and IP operation, forming economies of scale and sustainable brand premium. The Palace Museum IP has entered numerous industrial fields including stationery, cosmetics, food, and games through licensing cooperation, forming a vast cultural creation ecosystem that not only amplifies IP value but also feeds back into the protection and research of cultural heritage through market mechanisms. These three paths form a progressive transformation map of “single product — experience chain — industrial ecology,” providing clear practical guidelines for the comprehensive vitalization of cultural heritage [16].

5. Construction of Guarantee Mechanism

To ensure the effective implementation and sustainable operation of the transformation paths, a stable and collaborative systematic guarantee mechanism must be constructed. This mechanism functions as the “operating system” of the transformation process, providing foundational support for the creative leap from cultural resources to cultural capital.

The innovation-driven mechanism builds an ecosystem that continuously generates, protects, and realizes creative value through multi-party collaborative design innovation platforms and strengthened intellectual property rights management. The market motivation mechanism unblocks the circulation channels of value realization by cultivating consumer markets, expanding marketing channels, and establishing scientific evaluation and feedback systems. The policy support mechanism creates a favorable external environment through top-level design, factor supply, fiscal and financial support, and talent training systems. These three mechanisms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, together forming a stable framework supporting the creative transformation and innovative development of culture.

6. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

This study reveals the internal logic and implementation of cultural and creative design as the key transformer in driving the transformation of static cultural heritage into dynamic cultural capital. The stock attribute of cultural resources and the incremental attribute

of cultural capital are closely linked and interdependent, together constituting the value of cultural and creative development. The transformation from cultural resources into cultural capital has inherent inevitability in the contemporary context. Cultural and creative design realizes value increment through three mechanisms—narrative reconstruction with emotional connection, function embedding with scenario reconstruction, and aesthetic shaping with brand building—jointly constructing a practical path system composed of productization, experientialization, and industrialization. The synergistic effect of innovation-driven development, market motivation, and policy support constructs a guarantee mechanism for the entire transformation process.

This study provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding cultural heritage vitalization while offering operational guidelines for cultural institutions, design practitioners, and government departments. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is largely based on typical case studies, which may have limitations in universality. Second, the proposed three-path framework requires further empirical validation across diverse cultural heritage contexts. Third, the dynamic interactions among the three mechanisms warrant more granular investigation.

Future research needs to combine quantitative methods for broader empirical testing and further explore new trends and challenges in transformation models under the background of digital technology and globalization. Particular attention should be paid to the role of artificial intelligence and generative technologies in shaping next-generation cultural and creative design practices.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by the School of Arts and Design, Xi'an University of Technology.

References

- [1] Chen, S. Z., & Hou, Z. N. Reconstruction and Practice of Teaching Paradigm of Cultural and Creative Product Design from the Perspective of Digital-Intelligent Integration. *New Horizon in Art*, 2026, (6), 126–128.
- [2] Liu, C. Application of Artificial Intelligence Technology in Digital Design of Intangible Cultural Heritage Creative Products. *Tiangong*, 2026, (15), 77–80.
- [3] Zhai, Q. J. From Inheritance to Activation: Design Exploration of Tea-related Cultural Creativity in Bayu Region under the Background of Cultural Tourism Integration. *Fujian Tea*, 2026, 48(5), 92–94.
- [4] Li, Z. D. Application of Narrative Concept in Cultural and Creative Product Design. *Packaging Engineering*, 2026, 47(10), 461–465.
<https://doi.org/10.19554/j.cnki.1001-3563.2026.10.041>.
- [5] Zhao, J. Application of Traditional Arts and Crafts in Cultural and Creative Product Design. *Jingdezhen Ceramics*, 2026, 54(2), 86–88.
- [6] Bai, O. The Dual Impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence on Museum Cultural and Creative Design. *Natural Science Museum Research*, 2026, 11(2), 54–62.
- [7] Liu, Y. R. The Corresponding Relationship and Expression of the Prominent Characteristics of Chinese Civilization in Formal Beauty from the Perspective of Central Plains Culture. *Oriental Collection*, 2026, (4), 9–11.
- [8] Fu, S. W., & Liu, J. Intelligent Narrative Design Methods in Cultural and Creative Product Design. *Packaging Engineering*, 2026, 47(S1), 225–234.
<https://doi.org/10.19554/j.cnki.1001-3563.2026.S1.029>.
- [9] Lu, L., Li, Y. N., & Sun, P. X. Construction of Three-layer Interaction Model of Lacquer Art Creative Design Based on Grounded Theory. *Industrial Engineering Design*, 2026, 8(2), 8–19.
<https://doi.org/10.19798/j.cnki.2096-6946.2026.02.002>.
- [10] Mu, H., & Zhang, M. Culture and Innovation: Integration and Regeneration of Hainan Li Brocade Elements in Cultural and Creative Design. *New Education*, 2026, (10), 95–97.
- [11] Xu, X., & Chen, P. Research on AI-Enabled Digital Cultural and Creative Design of Ouyue Culture and Cultivation of Creative Talents. *Journal of Innovation and Development*, 2026, 15(1):45-48.DOI:10.54097/3FS3WA29.
- [12] Kong X. Research on Digital Creative Design and International Communication

- Path of Yingge Dance Culture. Lecture Notes in Education, Arts, Management and Social Science, 2026, 4 (2): 181-186. DOI:10.18063/LNE.V4I2.1526.
- [13]Chen M. AIGC-Driven Pedagogical Innovation in Vocational Digital Art and Design Education: A Case Study of “Cruise Brand AR Cultural Creative Design”. International Education Forum, 2025, 3(12): 39-45. DOI:10.26689/IEF.V3I12.13464.
- [14]Lai, S., Tian, Y., Zhang, Q. The impact of AI-generated technologies-driven digital cultural heritage platforms on users’ offline cultural participation intentions.npj Heritage Science, 2025, 13(1): 574-574. DOI:10.1038/S40494-025-02148-1.
- [15]Kapecki, T., Kapecka, G. B., Ozga, A. Designing Resilient Subcenters in Urban Space: A Comparison of Architects’ Creative Design Approaches and Artificial Intelligence-Based Design.Sustainability, 2025, 17(20): 9201-9201. DOI:10.3390/SU17209201.
- [16]Yin, L. Research on Digital Cultural and Creative Design and Interactive Experience of Haikou Qilou Old Street Architecture Culture Empowered by Metaverse Technology. Literature and Art Development and Innovation, 2025, 2(8). DOI:10.12417/3029-2344.25.08.014.