

# Research on the Design of Shimao Heritage Tourism Cultural and Creative Products Based on Visual Cultural Symbols

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**Abstract:** Cultural heritage tourism has been favored in recent years. It has become a “powerful commercial force” and also brought vitality to heritage protection and revitalization and the development of contemporary cultural and creative industries. Based on the perspective of visual cultural symbols, this article explores and creatively transforms cultural elements of Shimao culture, which contains extensive and profound Chinese civilization, and constructs methods and means for the design of cultural and creative products for heritage site tourism, aiming to broaden the activation of heritage culture. Cultural heritage tourism can better continue its cultural genes, exert its charisma and influence on cultural communication, and meet modern tourists’ needs for rich cultural experiences.

**Keywords:** Visual culture; Symbols; Cultural heritage; Shimao site; Tourism cultural and creative product design

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## 1. Introduction

General Secretary Xi Jinping once said, “Let the cultural relics collected in the Forbidden Palace, the heritage displayed on the vast land, and the words written in ancient books come alive.” This points out the direction for protecting cultural heritage – cultural heritage activation and tourism is an ideal way to revitalize cultural heritage. Culture constitutes the most important asset and attraction of tourism. Tourism can promote the protection and revitalization of heritage and the development of contemporary cultural and creative industries <sup>[1]</sup>. The vitality of culture comes from innovation and creation. This is the mission given by the development of the times, and it is also the most basic and deepest need of cultural power. Cultural and creative industries are an important direction of cultural development.

## 2. Cultural heritage and tourism industry

In the World Heritage Convention <sup>[2]</sup>, cultural heritage is defined as follows:

Cultural relics – buildings, monuments and paintings, components or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, caves, and complexes that have outstanding universal value from a historical, artistic, or scientific point of view;

Architectural group – a group of independent or connected buildings that have outstanding universal value in terms of architectural style, uniform distribution, or integration with environmental scenery from a historical, artistic, or scientific perspective;

Site – places such as human works or joint works of nature and man, as well as archaeological sites, of outstanding universal value from a historical, aesthetic, ethnographic, or anthropological point of view.

Heritage tourism has been popular in academic research in recent years <sup>[3]</sup>. Heritage tourism is different from other types of tourism in that it has become an economic and cultural resource due to its unique heritage, and it has become a “powerful commercial force” <sup>[4]</sup>.

Cultural heritage plays a vital role in tourism. Cultural heritage sites such as historical buildings and archaeological sites are great tourist attractions, and they help improve people’s understanding of history and culture, and promote cultural exchange and understanding, while bringing income, stimulating the local economy, providing business activities, creating jobs, and making economic contributions. Besides, the development of tourism promotes the protection and maintenance of cultural heritage to ensure its sustainable development.

### **3. Visual cultural symbols**

Visual culture research is an emerging field, with scholars having different insights, ideas, and methods based on different theoretical frameworks and perspectives. However, symbols and images have been the emphasis in visual culture research. Therefore, graphic symbols will be the focus of this paper.

The study of visual culture is relatively mature in the West. The first person to use the concept of visual culture was a Hungarian film esthetician, Balazs, around 1913. Later, the German thinker Benjamin penetrated this content in his research. Heidegger proposed the “age of world images” in his research. With the development of electronic technology in 1950, visual phenomena became prominent. Canadian scholar McLuhan studied visual culture from the perspective of communication. By 1980, academic circles widely accepted visual culture as an important cultural form or development trend. There are many mature theories of semiotics in the West, starting from Saussure’s “linguistic semiotics” and Peirce’s “logical semiotics” in the early days to Cassirer’s cultural semiotics and Lotman’s “semiotic field.” These theories all revolve around the connotation of symbols <sup>[5]</sup>.

Visual culture was introduced into China relatively late. 1,418 articles can be found by entering the keyword “visual culture” in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI a number that has been consistently rising since 2000. Human vision is innate, and visual culture has evolved alongside the entire history of human society, manifesting distinctive characteristics in different eras. With the rapid progress and development of science and technology, visual culture has developed innovatively in modern society. Visual culture carries and disseminates cultural content in multiple dimensions permeating into the households of ordinary individuals. The commercialization of cultural heritage has transformed visual culture into a form of popular culture, widely accessible and “consumable,” seamlessly integrating it into daily life.

### **4. Tourism cultural and creative products**

The precise origin of the concept of tourism cultural and creative products remains unclear. It essentially

represents the intersection of modern cultural and creative industries and tourism. Products with unique cultural, artistic, or innovative elements are created with tourism as their backdrop. These products can include physical goods, digital products, cultural experiences, activities, services, etc., aiming to provide tourists with rich, interesting, and culturally rich travel experiences. Tourism cultural and creative product design usually emphasizes cultural heritage, local culture, artistic creation, and innovation to meet the needs of the modern tourism market.

## **5. Design practice of cultural and creative products at Shimao site**

### **5.1. Shimao site culture under symbolic semantics**

The Shimao site is located in Gaojiabao Town, Shenmu City, Shaanxi Province, on the Liangmaotai Plateau on the north bank of the Tuwei River, a first-class tributary of the Yellow River in the northern Loess Plateau. Since its discovery, the Shimao site has received many industrial awards, including “New Archaeological Discovery in China,” “Top Ten New Archaeological Discoveries in the Country,” “Major Field Archaeological Discoveries in the World,” and “Top Ten Major Archaeological Discoveries in the World” in the past ten years. Besides, it has also gained worldwide attention and generated intense discussions in the academic community. Such a profound culture is closely related to the region where it originated. The Yellow River Basin’s special landforms and environment provided the necessary conditions for the birth of early civilization. Many stone carvings and jade articles were unearthed at the Shimao site. The artistic features of these artifacts were unprecedented at the end of prehistory. The mysterious and unpredictable graphic symbols carved on the artifacts encapsulate China’s historical grandeur over thousands of years, resonating deeply with the essence of Chinese civilization. These symbols and patterns, with their deep symbolic meanings and artistic roots, have a rich historical background. They also serve as a record of humanity’s initial understanding of the natural world <sup>[6]</sup>. These symbols, as conveyors of meaning, are artistic expressions of people’s spiritual connection. Lange <sup>[7]</sup> believes that symbols are the projection of a form of life activity and are displayed emotionally. The deep symbolic meaning, connotation, cultural metaphor, thinking, and cognition behind it are important cultural heritage carriers of the Chinese nation.

### **5.2. Principles in designing tourism cultural and creative products**

Tourism cultural and creative products should be designed based on a few principles to ensure that the charm or uniqueness of a culture or destination can be expressed through the product, while also being aesthetically pleasing.

#### **(1) Cultural inheritance and respect**

The local culture should be respected and protected. It is important to ensure that the designed products can correctly convey the content of the culture to avoid stereotypes and misinformation. Emphasis on cultural heritage allows tourists to have a deeper understanding of local history, culture, traditions, and values through products and gain a good cultural experience.

#### **(2) Innovation and uniqueness**

Innovation and uniqueness are crucial in realizing cultural and product values, and their greatest significance lies in the innovative transformation of culture. It is necessary to extract the most representative cultural elements that resonate strongly with consumers and use unique elements and stories to create products that cleverly combine functional and cultural values.

#### **(3) Participation and interactivity**

Participatory design should be incorporated into the products to allow tourists to participate and interact with products for a better experience with them. The interaction between the product and

its users should be considered in the design and should be optimized based on the users' habits and psychological needs.

(4) Sustainability

Sustainable design concepts should be adopted to avoid excessive resource consumption and reduce environmental impact. The recyclability and reuse of products should be emphasized. Besides, it is also important to support the local community by using local handicrafts and materials, so as to promote the community's sustainable development.

(5) Safety

Ensure product safety and consider the health and safety of tourists. Offer inclusive products to all visitors, considering different needs and abilities.

(6) Market adaptability

Looking at it from a product standpoint, the characteristics of cultural and creative products are well-defined, but they should also adhere to market principles. Market competition should be taken into account, and the product should align with market trends and have commercial viability. By absorbing market feedback and consistently refining products to adapt to evolving needs, these products should result in a mutually beneficial outcome that generates both social and economic advantages.

### **5.3. Translation of cultural elements and cultural information materials into visual symbols**

#### **5.3.1. Preliminary research**

Preliminary market research is crucial to ensure the recognition of tourism cultural and creative products in the market. In the design preparation stage, large-scale online and offline market surveys should be conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between public consumption concepts and cultural and creative products. This helps in ensuring that the product aligns with the market needs. Designers should deeply understand the cultural content that is to be incorporated into the product, link it to the consumers' lives and emotional appeals, and have a clear theme for the products.

To obtain the real needs of this cultural heritage, research was done on consumer demands and managerial needs. Data were collected from the interviews of three groups of people: visitors of the Shimao site, potential tourists, managers of the cultural site, and residents for research visits.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts: demographic information and measurement questions of variables involved in the theoretical research model. The first part was the demographic information; the second part was the brand equity measurement scale; and the third part was about consumer awareness, satisfaction, and demand dimensions of cultural and creative products, with a total of 30 questions.

#### **5.3.2. Cultural gene extraction**

The basic factors and elements that determine the inheritance and change of cultural systems<sup>[8]</sup> – the formation, development, dissemination, change, and inheritance of Shimao culture, cannot be accomplished in one go. Each element combines, expands, and reproduces through recombination, gene mutation, or changes in time and space. Extracting its cultural essence is necessary to study its transition into visual language and its integration into contemporary society. Building and designing a cultural gene library is important in developing cultural and creative products. The complexity and different expression forms of heritage culture increase the difficulty of extraction and integration. However, based on the consumer psychology of tourists alone, elements of visual culture with bold characteristics, high visibility, and strong appeal will be easily accepted and recognized.

The Shimao site is located on the Liangmaotai Plateau on the north bank of the Tuwei River, a first-class

tributary of the Yellow River in the northern Loess Plateau<sup>[9]</sup>. The majestic buildings, city sites, exquisite stone carvings, jades, and other important relics that have been unearthed are all evidence of an early civilization, with the Yellow River as a link. It is one of the core symbols of the Yellow River culture and a window to explore Chinese civilization<sup>[10]</sup>. But there are currently too many mysteries waiting for archaeological research and discovery. It is difficult to select and extract its cultural genes, but the remains and archaeological results discovered so far provide important clues for the extraction of cultural genes. Therefore, the image adjectives from the unit graphic symbols in the sample library were collected and analyzed using experimental methods. Besides, KJ (Affinity Diagram) and brainstorming methods were used to extract targeted semantic vocabulary.

### 5.3.3. Graphic symbol extraction method

Scholar Mihaly Hoppal said: “Prehistoric graphics are not necessarily called art. They are part of a symbol system and can be analyzed from semiotics or discussed more broadly from the perspective of social communication”<sup>[11]</sup>. Communication always depends on culture, is accompanied by culture, and depends on the environment in which the symbol is born. This will cover the entire spectrum of cultural and social life. Therefore, it is necessary to extract typical and characteristic cultural genes from Shimao culture to form the core elements of cultural product design.

In the research of Hungarian scholar Mihaly Hoppal in his monograph *Ethnosemiotics*, he adopted the perspective of ethnographic methods to study symbol systems and their functions. He describes or analyzes the semiotic system with three levels of (ethno) semiotics, which would be used as a tool in this study. The first level is for researching symbol shapes, the second level is for researching symbol meanings, and the third level is for researching symbol usage. In this way, useful information can be extracted to design Shimao’s cultural and creative products.

First-level symbol research and extraction (including pattern gene extraction and morphological gene extraction): Pattern genes can provide rich decorative references for cultural and creative product design. Patterns are mainly inspired by stone carving patterns that have been excavated and published. The patterns can be characters, animals, mythical beasts, symbols, decorative patterns, etc<sup>[12]</sup>. The shapes can be in the form of pottery or jade. At the same time, according to the survey results, it was found that there are many distinct visual and cultural symbols on the Shimao site. The three most memorable ones are human face/divine face patterns, accounting for 47.77%; and animal patterns (dragon, tiger, snake, etc.), accounting for 36.31%. %; stone carvings accounted for 36.31%, and jade articles accounted for 34.39%. Therefore, when researching and extracting symbols, the visual elements were excavated and refined with deep, typical, and representative memories of consumers to improve consumers’ desire for consumption in a targeted manner.

Second-level symbology research and condensation: different symbols have different meanings and convey different messages. Much in-depth research and detailed analyses have been done regarding symbol meanings to understand Shimao culture and art. The meaning of these ancient images is often questioned after thousands of years. Ancient humans’ imaginative and creative spiritual realm offers insights into understanding the past and exploring the enigmatic and unknown world, providing clues through combinations and structural relationships.

When creating cultural and creative products, it’s essential to relate symbolic meanings to contemporary symbols and align them with people’s psychological perceptions for better acceptance and relevance. These products should effectively convey cultural content, enabling consumers to accurately perceive, feel, and experience the associated cultural elements while using the product.

Third-level symbolism: Mihaly Hoppal explained the symbolism in his monograph *Ethnosemiotics* – it

involves the relationship between the symbol user and the image. For example, how were these symbols used, by whom, what is the relationship between users, etc? The graphic symbols found on stone carvings, jades, and various artifacts at the Shimao site, whether concrete or abstract, serve as both records of ancient life and early symbols conveying specific information. When extracting and interpreting these symbols, it is crucial to consider the connection between the present user and the object, the link between usage and underlying meaning, and the accurate expression and transmission of cultural content.

#### **5.3.4. Integration and reconstruction design method of visual cultural elements**

At present, for art and cultural relics derivatives can be divided into three categories according to the degree of combination of processing and creativity: “simple copies,” “high-end copies,” and “creative products re-created after interpreting cultural connotations”<sup>[13]</sup>. The challenge lies in transforming the abundant visual cultural elements and complex cultural contents into tangible, touchable, and usable product carriers. In terms of element fusion and reconstruction design, achieving progressive iteration can be accomplished through three methods: transitioning from concrete to abstract, from traditional to contemporary fashion, and from form to artistic conception.

The first level is the basic design and application of cultural visual images, in which local visual image elements with cultural connotations are extracted and applied directly. The elements can be amplified in operation. his method involves renovating the original collection of cultural and graphic elements using artistic techniques like reduction, repetition, transparent superposition, and integrating modern technology for typesetting. Some cultural and creative products simply attach original graphic elements to the product, representing a mapping method with minimal creative content.

The second level is the sublimation of the cultural visual image: integrating the extracted cultural elements with current fashion elements, lifestyles, etc. This integration manifests the behavioral externalization of its cultural elements, summarized as a cultural image prototype combined with a modern lifestyle. It represents an advancement beyond simply applying the cultural visual image.

The third level is the imagery expression of cultural elements: The imagery expression of cultural elements is usually euphemistic and implicit. This level skillfully transforms original cultural elements into distinctive and imaginative symbolic forms, establishing a specific relationship with consumers and evoking emotional connotations. It aims to provoke profound cultural contemplation and evoke emotional resonance. Through imagery expression, traditional cultural implications, thoughts, and concepts are subtly integrated into the product as a carrier. However, this expression needs to align with the product’s positioning, ensuring consistency with its core values and concepts, thereby enhancing its quality, uniqueness, and artistic essence. This creative stage often poses the greatest challenge while injecting vitality into traditional culture, offering a glimpse of the future through history.

## **6. Conclusion**

Cultural heritage tourism is an emerging force in the tourism market and an inevitable trend of multi-dimensional cross-border integrated development now and in the future. The combination of the two is mutually beneficial. Cultural heritage empowers the tourism industry and enhances the connotation of the industry. Cultural and creative tourism products broaden the way of revitalizing and inheriting heritage culture, integrating the connotations, thoughts, and concepts of heritage culture into tangible product carriers in an intangible way, bringing economic and social benefits, and driving the development of its related industrial chains, improving the cultural soft power and popularity of local tourist destinations.

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