

# The adherence and innovation of decorative patterns: the reasonable transformation path of traditional culture in modern design

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**Abstract:** In today's market environment, the misuse of traditional patterns has evolved from localized irregularities into a systemic crisis in cultural inheritance. So-called "innovations" that deviate from cultural origins—such as misaligned Bagua directions and fragmented Five Thunder Symbols structures—not only severely undermine the sacredness and philosophical connotations of traditional symbols, but also risk causing meaninglessness and identity fractures in traditional culture during modernization. This study uses ceramic patterns as empirical evidence, employing field investigations and interdisciplinary integration to construct a dialectical framework of "preserving orthodoxy while innovating." It proposes a "three-stage transformation" theoretical model for the modern design adaptation of traditional culture. The findings provide systematic recommendations combining theoretical depth and practical validity for the creative transformation and sustainable development of traditional culture in contemporary society.

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## 1.The manifestations and essence of the abuse of traditional patterns

### 1.1 Structural damage at the level of form

As a cultural code carrying millennia of folk wisdom, the traditional patterns of China embody rigorous philosophy and logic in their standardized forms. Taking the Bagua pattern as an example, the traditional layout strictly follows the directional system of "Heavenly Trigrams" and "Earthly Trigrams" from the Book of Changes: Qian (South) and Kun (North), Li (East) and Kan (West), Zhen (Northeast) and Dui (Southeast), Xun (Southwest) and Gen (Northwest). This directional arrangement reflects the ancients' understanding of cosmic laws and serves as a spatial expression of the "harmony between heaven and humanity" philosophical concept. Such destruction is not merely a matter of aesthetic preference, but rather a fatal injury to cultural DNA.

### 1.2 Functional alienation at the contextual level

Traditional decorative patterns maintain a strict correspondence between their usage contexts and folkloric significance. Craftsmen rigorously adhere to the "Three Non-Applicability Principles": ceremonial objects should not be adapted for daily use, sacred symbols must remain reserved for religious purposes, and specific motifs cannot be arbitrarily repurposed in different contexts. This contextual ethics ensures the precise transmission of symbolic meanings.

However, in modern design, this contextual constraint has been completely broken. The "China Fashion Brand Development Trend Report" points out: Traditional elements such as "Taiji" have become the common design language of trendy brands, but their application scenarios are rapidly shifting from solemn cultural products to fast-moving consumer goods like T-shirts, skateboards, and tattoo stickers, as well as entertainment fields. Without cultural guidance, this trend is prone to controversy and misinterpretation. Such contextual dislocation not only violates China's traditional cultural ethics but also leads to confusion in the meaning of cultural symbols.

### 1.3 Hollowing out of value at the connotation level

Traditional Chinese decorative patterns are a trinity of "form-meaning-spirit", where form conveys meaning, and meaning points to spirit—none of which can be missing. However, modern design often exhibits the phenomenon of "triple disintegration": the separation from formal norms, cultural context, and spiritual essence,

reducing patterns to soulless visual shells devoid of substance.

Take a popular online teaware collection as an example: its Bagua patterns only retain the four trigrams (Qian, Kun, Li, Kan) with reversed orientations, while the Five Thunder Symbols are simplified into wavy lines without any mention of their traditional cultural significance. The 2023 Cultural Tourism Industry Focus Report released by Baidu Qianli Engine reveals: "Among users who favor 'Guofeng' style visual content, 75% of respondents stated their purchasing decisions are primarily driven by 'aesthetic appeal' and 'design sense,' showing limited interest in the historical allusions and ritual traditions behind these elements." This cognitive disconnect is accelerating the fading of traditional cultural memory.

## **2.Three-dimensional transformation framework of abiding by the right and innovating**

### **2.1 Form dimension: protective innovation of core elements**

Form innovation is the foundational element in the modern transformation of traditional Chinese decorative patterns, with its core lying in clarifying the boundary between "unchanging" and "adaptive" elements, maintaining cultural authenticity while infusing modern design vitality. In the field of cultural heritage research, scholars generally agree that the modern transformation of traditional culture must adhere to the principle of "core authenticity" —that is, allowing adaptive innovation in non-core peripheral elements while preserving the core cultural genes unchanged. The methodology of "Design Praxis" proposed by design researchers such as Liu Guanzhong emphasizes that design should distinguish between the "internal factors" and "external factors" of an object. Internal factors remain relatively stable as constraints for design, while external factors are adaptable, offering space for innovation. To this end, constructing a "form innovation spectrum" model that categorizes decorative elements into three tiers—core zone, buffer zone, and innovation zone—can provide a clear operational pathway for the modern design transformation of traditional cultural elements.

The core area contains immutable elements that must be strictly adhered to. These elements constitute the cultural genes of China's traditional decorative patterns, directly connecting to the traditional cultural connotations and philosophical logic of China. For instance: The core textual structure of the Five Thunder Symbols must remain intact, as any stroke gaps would render their symbolic function ineffective; the directional patterns of cloud-thunder motifs must retain their swirling flow characteristics to echo the natural imagery of "cloud qi circulation and thunder resonance." The stability of these elements serves as the prerequisite for cultural identity, as any alteration would cause a rupture in the profound cultural meaning.

The buffer zone encompasses adjustable design elements that allow optimization without compromising core principles. For instance, color schemes can be innovatively developed within the same palette, such as expanding traditional blue-and-white porcelain's monochromatic tones into gradient variations like bluish-gray and sky-blue. This approach preserves cultural identity while aligning with contemporary aesthetics. Adjustments to the buffer zone must adhere to the principle of "preserving core characteristics," achieving seamless visual integration between tradition and modernity.

The innovation zone incorporates flexible design elements that provide creative freedom for designers. Decorative patterns can be freely selected according to the design theme, while surface treatments (such as glaze textures and textural effects) can be innovatively enhanced using modern techniques. For instance, matte glazes can replace traditional glossy ones to enhance tactile experience. The exploration of this innovation zone should be guided by the principle of "service-oriented core essence," ensuring that innovative elements do not overshadow the main purpose.

### **2.2 Functional dimension: transformation strategy of scenario adaptation**

The functional adaptation of traditional decorative patterns must be closely aligned with their intended contexts. Different scenarios demand varying levels of sacredness, cultural significance, and practicality from patterns, as rigidly applying a single model may lead to functional misalignment. Through systematic analysis, we have

established the "contextual adaptation" principle, categorizing usage scenarios into three types: sacred contexts, cultural contexts, and daily life contexts, each requiring corresponding transformation strategies.

Sacred scenes mainly include traditional folk customs sites in China. In such scenes, the core function of decorative patterns is to carry the significance of traditional rituals, with "preserving sanctity" as the primary principle. Specifically, the patterns must maintain their original forms—such as the eight trigrams on ritual vessels needing to fully represent all eight hexagrams. Material selection should adhere to tradition, prioritizing historically weighty materials like ceramics and bronze. Functional modifications are strictly prohibited; altering the ritual attributes of objects for convenience is forbidden. The essential function of sacred scenes lies in "inheritance rather than innovation," with its value residing in maintaining the continuity of China's traditional culture.

Cultural scenarios encompass venues such as museums and cultural centers, with their core function being to convey cultural essence while maintaining cultural authenticity and ensuring effective communication. In these settings, decorative patterns should preserve essential elements to maintain cultural distinctiveness, while incorporating interpretive systems—such as providing historical context and meanings of patterns beside exhibits, or offering QR code links for in-depth explanations. Functional expansions are permissible, like transforming static display formats into interactive installations to enhance audience engagement. The transformation of cultural scenarios requires balancing "seriousness" with "understandability," enabling the public to comprehend the cultural value of patterns through interaction with artifacts.

Life scenarios involve daily spaces such as home and office environments, with the core function being to meet practical needs, guided by the principle of "de-sacralization and prioritizing practicality." In such scenarios, auxiliary patterns with weaker traditional attributes in China (such as cloud patterns and water patterns) should be prioritized. Design should emphasize practical functions, for example, by applying cloud-and-thunder patterns on teaware handles to enhance grip. Traditional connotations may be appropriately downplayed, while instead emphasizing the aesthetic value or auspicious symbolism of the patterns. When adapting to life scenarios, cultural offensiveness must be avoided, allowing traditional patterns to naturally integrate into modern living rather than deliberately emphasizing their traditional Chinese cultural attributes.

### **2.3 Communication dimension: modern path of value transmission**

The modern reinterpretation of traditional decorative patterns transcends mere functional innovation, requiring the effective transmission of cultural essence. The conventional design philosophy that prioritizes form over spirit has reduced patterns to hollow symbols. The core of innovative communication lies in establishing a three-dimensional model integrating "symbol-meaning-value", guiding audiences to progressively engage with their spiritual core beyond superficial recognition. This model comprises three progressive tiers, achieving contemporary interpretation of cultural values through layered design.

The first layer is symbolic cognition, aiming to enable audiences to recognize decorative patterns and establish foundational associations. Specific measures include: establishing a traditional Chinese decorative pattern database to systematically document the traditional forms, variant styles, and cultural origins of core patterns such as sea water motifs, providing authoritative references for designers and the public; developing AR recognition applications that display real-time names and core elements of decorative patterns when users scan products containing traditional designs, thereby reducing cognitive barriers; producing micro-documentaries to visually present the historical evolution of decorative patterns through cinematic language, allowing the public to intuitively perceive their cultural continuity.

The second tier focuses on interpreting cultural significance, designed to help audiences comprehend the philosophical logic and cultural essence embedded in decorative patterns. This level requires moving beyond fragmented information delivery by establishing a systematic knowledge framework: Offering online courses where intangible cultural heritage inheritors explain traditional doctrines and historical narratives behind the patterns;

Hosting offline workshops through hands-on activities like simplifying Bagua patterns and experiencing traditional ceramic decoration techniques, allowing participants to grasp pattern specifications through practice; Publishing accessible books that transform obscure classical texts into easily understandable language for general readers.

The third layer is value recognition, which focuses on guiding audiences to connect the connotations of decorative patterns with contemporary life concepts, thereby internalizing cultural values. Specific approaches include: developing cultural experience programs, such as setting up a "Bagua and Nature" themed experience in Jingdezhen Ceramic Workshop where participants create works based on natural elements corresponding to hexagrams, experiencing the philosophical concept of "order in all things"; organizing thematic study tours to visit traditional cultural sites like Longhu Mountain and Wudang Mountain, combining on-site explanations of decorative patterns 'applications in China's traditional rituals to strengthen cultural context awareness; establishing community interactions through online forums and offline salons, encouraging audiences to share their understanding of decorative patterns' values, thus forming a collective effect of cultural identity.

The Palace Museum's public education effectiveness evaluation report reveals that its three-stage model—"online digital exhibitions (cognitive layer) — offline expert lectures (comprehension layer) — in-depth cultural experience camps (identification layer)" —has tripled participants' understanding of cultural significance behind specific artifacts and significantly strengthened their cultural identity. The study suggests this layered strategy, combining online-offline integration with progressive depth, serves as an effective solution to the challenge of superficial cultural communication.

### **3.Construction of professional guidance mechanism**

The cultural uniqueness and complexity of traditional decorative patterns necessitate systematic professional support for their modern adaptation, preventing cultural distortion caused by cognitive biases. Establishing a scientific guidance mechanism requires forming a closed-loop system from expert team formation and standard formulation to review processes, providing authoritative references and operational standards for practical implementation.

The establishment of a cross-domain expert committee forms the cornerstone of institutional development. The committee comprises four core groups: Traditional culture researchers who provide in-depth analysis of decorative patterns 'cultural significance and philosophical logic to ensure transformations stay rooted in cultural origins; Intangible cultural heritage inheritors who, leveraging their craft expertise, oversee traditional patterns' forms and craftsmanship standards to prevent distortion; Designers balancing traditional elements with modern aesthetics to propose feasible transformation plans; Cultural scholars evaluating design outcomes' cultural appropriateness from social impact perspectives to avoid ethical controversies. This collaborative framework creates a comprehensive guidance chain: "Cultural Interpretation → Form Control → Design Implementation → Impact Assessment".

The formulation of the "China Traditional Pattern Application Specifications" serves as a key vehicle for implementing the mechanism. The specifications should adhere to the principle of "combining text and images with clear operability," encompassing three core components: The form standards adopt a text-image comparison format to clarify the standardized forms of core patterns, marking "prohibited modification zones" and "allowable adjustment zones"; The usage taboos list negative lists specifying prohibited clauses, including requirements such as "traditional symbols used in commercial products must indicate cultural origins"; The innovation guidelines include typical cases to provide designers with reference pathways. The formulation of the specifications requires collaboration with multiple stakeholders such as the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center and design industry associations to ensure its authority and practical applicability.

The three-tier audit system serves as the operational safeguard for the mechanism. The first tier involves corporate self-audits, where design teams conduct preliminary evaluations against the "Application Specifications" to verify the completeness of core elements and scenario compatibility. The second tier requires expert reviews,

where cross-disciplinary committees assess self-audited proposals professionally and provide modification suggestions before approval for production. The third tier implements market sampling inspections, where cultural regulatory authorities collaborate with industry associations to randomly select products for examination. Products found non-compliant are required to be removed from shelves for rectification, with typical cases publicly disclosed to serve as industry warnings.

#### **4.Conclusion**

The innovation of traditional culture is not merely superficial changes in form or symbolic transplantation, but rather the profound awakening and re-narration of civilization's genetic code within contemporary contexts. The cosmology, natural philosophy, and ethical views embedded in traditional Chinese patterns are crystallizations of the Chinese nation's millennia-long philosophical contemplation and aesthetic spirit. The fundamental mission of their modern transformation lies in transcending temporal boundaries to make these ancient wisdoms participate anew in constructing contemporary spiritual landscapes and aesthetic lifestyles through perceptible, comprehensible, and resonant means. Those who uphold tradition preserve its spiritual essence, core values, and cultural dignity; innovators create new forms of expression, dissemination pathways, and contemporary implications. Only through innovation grounded in tradition can culture avoid becoming hollow symbolic accumulation. Similarly, only by sustaining tradition through innovation can cultural inheritance truly break free from the "museumization" dilemma and radiate enduring vitality in daily life. This is not merely the rebirth of patterns, but the continuation of civilization's chapter.

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