

The Cultural Identity of Chinese Lanterns: An Investigation from the Multi-Perspective of Experts, Inheritors, and Designers

Huiming Ke¹, Dr. Krisada Daoruang^{2*}

¹ Chakrabongse Bhuvanarth International College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Rajamangala University of Technology Tawan-ok, Bangkok, Thailand, 10400.

E-mail: huiming.ke@rmutto.ac.th,

ORCID: 0009-0004-3077-184X

² Chakrabongse Bhuvanarth International College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Rajamangala University of Technology Tawan-ok, Bangkok, Thailand, 10400.

E-mail: krisada_da@rmutto.ac.th,

ORCID: 0009-0009-5278-5229

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ABSTRACT:

As a core visual symbol of Chinese culture, the Chinese lantern is undergoing a complex and tense negotiation of its cultural identity amidst the transformation of contemporary society. This research focuses on the lantern, a core visual symbol of China's intangible cultural heritage, examining its dynamic construction and negotiation of cultural identity within a globalised context. To transcend the limitations of existing research, this study developed a multi-perspective analytical framework integrating insights from cultural experts, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and cultural and creative product designers. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, It systematically maps the perceptions of these three groups. This study reveal that cultural experts view the lantern as a "representation of history," highlighting its symbolic significance as a carrier of national collective memory; intangible cultural heritage inheritors emphasise the "existence and continuity of craftsmanship," focusing on concrete practice and the preservation of authenticity; cultural and creative product designers, however, transform them into marketable design vocabulary according to "market logic". These conflicting yet complementary perspectives contribute to continuously regenerating the lantern's cultural identity through interaction. The research not only reveals the complex layers of Chinese lantern cultural identity but also provides theoretical tools and practical pathways for the

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protection, inheritance and innovation of intangible cultural heritage. It further reaffirms the significance of cultural subjectivity and sustainable negotiation within the context of globalisation.

Keywords: Chinese lanterns, intangible cultural heritage, cultural identity, multiple perspectives, heritage inheritors, cultural experts, cultural product designers.

1. Introduction

As one of Chinese culture's most intuitive visual symbols, the lantern has its roots in traditional festivals and everyday life. However, it assumes a dual role as a medium of national image and cultural identity in the contemporary global context. From imperial ceremonies to rural carnivals, to urban nightscapes and trendy cultural products, the lantern's form, function, and meaning remain in a state of flux. However, under the dual pressures of globalisation and modernisation, traditional lantern-making techniques and their cultural ecosystem face an unprecedented crisis: standardised industrial products squeeze out the space for craftsmanship, while the symbol itself is repeatedly appropriated and recreated in cultural and creative design and international communication. The imaginations and practices of the lantern's cultural identity often conflict among intangible cultural heritage inheritors who uphold authenticity, cultural experts who provide academic interpretations, and designers of cultural and creative products seeking market transformation. Is it a legacy to be protected, a historical text to be read, or a freely accessible design element? The tension and negotiation between these different perspectives constitute the core issues surrounding the cultural identity of the contemporary Chinese lantern.

Existing research has explored Chinese lanterns from various perspectives. Historians and

folklorists primarily examine their origins, regional variations in style, and symbolic function in traditional festivals, laying the foundation for understanding the lantern's cultural archetype (Chen & Huang, 2009; Hou, 2024; Lv, 2001; Yan & Suhaily, 2025; Ye, 2005; Zhou, 2021). For example, Peng (2012) has explored the historical origins and cultural value of *Xinshan Huadeng* (Flower Lanterns) in Chongqing, examining perspectives such as the indigenous origin theory and the external influence theory. In intangible cultural heritage protection, scholars are more concerned about the inheritance dilemma and protecting specific lantern skills. Related research usually regards the "authenticity" and intergenerational transmission of craftsmanship as core issues (Li, 2012; Li et al., 2024; Zhao, 2022). For example, Zhang (2025) analyses the challenges of protecting and developing the Yuqing dragon lantern through its historical development, while Izudin et al. (Izudin et al., 2024) analyse the role of the Gentur lantern as a local cultural heritage in community empowerment. In design and communication, scholars (Yu & Zhang, 2017; Yu, 2022; Zhou et al., 2025) have attempted to embed the lantern's traditional elements into modern products and cross-cultural contexts, emphasising its potential for translation and recoding as a visual symbol. However, most existing research shares a standard limitation: a singular perspective. Relevant researchers often stand on the perspective of a particular actor, viewing the cultural identity of

lanterns as a fixed and static spatial entity, while ignoring that their identity is a social process constantly generated through multi-group interactions, games and negotiations (Lin et al., 2025; Xie, 2013; Zhou, 2016).

The core question explored in this research is: What are the characteristics of the Chinese intangible cultural heritage lantern? Amidst profound sociocultural transformations, how do the three key actors, cultural experts, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and cultural and creative product designers, understand, shape, and negotiate the cultural identity of the Chinese lantern? Can these intertwined identity narratives illuminate the dilemmas and possibilities of intangible cultural heritage under the modernisation? Following the above questions, this paper sets the following research objectives:

- (1) Analyse the characteristics of the Chinese intangible cultural heritage lantern.
- (2) Sort out the core understandings of the cultural identity of the Chinese lantern by cultural experts, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and cultural and creative product designers, and compare the differences among the three.

- (3) Revealing the tension, interaction, and negotiation between different perspectives, and explaining how the cultural identity of the Chinese lantern is continuously constructed in a dynamic process.

2. Materials and methods

To comprehensively grasp the fluid and negotiated nature of Chinese lantern cultural identity, this research chose a qualitative approach, capturing the complex realities and meaning-making of actors in a contextually sensitive manner (Creswell & Poth, 2024) . This approach allows researchers to delve into specific social contexts, tracing subjective experiences and meaning-making processes, making it highly relevant to the topic. The researchers employed a multi-perspective framework, systematically examining the perspectives of three key actors: cultural experts, inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, and designers of cultural and creative products. The researchers also viewed the cultural identity of lanterns as a continuously negotiated “field,” rather than a fixed spatial object, and epistemologically adhered to a social constructivist perspective.

Table 1. Information table of three types of actors.

Category	Actors information,	Coding
Chinese cultural experts	Professor of Cultural Studies, Doctoral Supervisor, Director of a cultural research institute at a research-intensive university in Southern China	E1
	Professor, Doctoral Supervisor, Vice President of a provincial academy of social sciences in Southern China	E2
	Associate Professor, Director of an industrial management research centre in Southern China	E3
Inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of Chinese lanterns	Multi-generational inheritor (13th generation) of a regional lantern tradition in Southern China	H1
	Provincial-level representative inheritor of a regional lamp-making tradition	H 2
	Municipal-level representative inheritor of a regional lantern tradition	H 3
Cultural product designers	Senior designer of cultural and creative products affiliated with a national colour and design association	D1
	Senior designer at a creative design studio	D2
	Senior designer at an advertising and creative design company	D 3

2.1. Data Collection

Primary data for this research came from semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between September 2022 and March 2024. To ensure representativeness and depth of data, the researchers employed purposive sampling to identify three key actors within the Chinese lantern production and discourse landscape (Table 1). Cultural experts (E1-E3) possessed over eight years of research experience and were responsible for interpreting cultural context and symbolic meaning; intangible cultural heritage inheritors (H1-H3) held provincial or national certifications and possessed mastery of craft processes and tacit knowledge; and cultural and creative product designers (D1-D3) had over ten years of experience, excelling in translating traditional elements into modern products and providing practical design advice. This strategy systematically captured the multidimensional discourses and practices surrounding the cultural identity of lanterns.

Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, with a flexible outline. The entire interview was audio-recorded and transcribed (Figure 1). Interviews

with cultural experts included six dimensions of Chinese lanterns: history and culture, craftsmanship and symbolism, regional and cultural diversity, emotional resonance and innovation, cultural identity and globalisation, and challenges and the future. Regarding interviews with intangible cultural heritage inheritors, the content encompassed five dimensions: craftsmanship and innovation, personal style and regional characteristics, emotional resonance and festive significance, cultural identity and heritage responsibility, and challenges and prospects. For cultural and creative product designers, interviews included five dimensions: design inspiration and reference, cultural symbols and modern aesthetics, emotional resonance and user experience, symbolic meaning and cultural identity, and interdisciplinary innovation and development. This research also employed documentary analysis to supplement and triangulate the interview data. The texts analysed included policy documents related to intangible cultural heritage protection, academic literature on the history of lanterns, industry reports on the cultural and creative market, and marketing materials from designer brands.



Figure 1. An in-person interview session conducted during fieldwork. Facial features of the participant have been obscured to protect identity.

2.2. Informed consent

Prior to each interview, participants received an information sheet detailing the research purpose, interview procedures, intended use of data, confidentiality measures, and their rights — including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All nine participants provided written informed consent before the interviews commenced. Given that all participants were adult professionals with full legal capacity, written consent was determined to be the most appropriate and transparent form of documentation for this study.

2.3. Data Analysis

This research systematically coded and interpreted qualitative materials, including interview transcripts, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. The researchers first read the texts carefully and immersively to grasp the overall context. They extracted specific contents to form preliminary codes, and clustered related codes into categories. These themes were then reviewed and refined one by one, ensuring they both aligned with the original coding and could reflect the overall data set. After multiple rounds of iteration, several core themes emerged, forming the analytical framework for the core findings of this research.

The rigorous analytical process ensures that empirical data provides a solid foundation for research conclusions, building a coherent and insightful argument for the negotiated cultural identity of Chinese lanterns and providing an indispensable space for interpretation.

2.4. Research scope and sample selection

This research takes lanterns from mainland China as the research object. It adopts a multi-stage stratified sampling method to select samples, striving for their representativeness, typicality and diversity.

Phase 1: Defining the Research Scope. The researchers first defined the research scope as lanterns listed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List. By reviewing the literature, they initially identified 16 representative types of lantern that span the eastern, southern, central, and western regions of China, while also embodying distinctive historical and stylistic lineages (Table 2). It aims to establish a macro-analytic perspective encompassing “balance between north and south, complementarity between east and west, and integration of tradition and modernity”, thereby laying a solid cultural foundation for subsequent sample selection.

Table 2. Information table on the location of Chinese intangible cultural heritage lanterns.

No.	Lantern Category	Location
1	Xianju Lanterns	Xianju County, Taizhou City, Zhejiang Province
2	Quanzhou Lanterns	Quanzhou City, Fujian Province
3	Xiashi Lanterns	Xiashi Subdistrict, Haining City, Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province
4	Dongguan Thousand Corner Lights	Dongguan City, Guangdong Province
5	Huangyuan Row of Lights	Huangyuan County, Xining City, Qinghai Province
6	Beijing Lanterns	Beijing City
7	Shanghai Lantern Festival	Shanghai City
8	Qinhuai Lanterns	Qinhuai District, Nanjing City, Jiangsu Province

9	Suzhou Lantern Festival	Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province
10	Foshan Lanterns	Foshan City, Guangdong Province
11	Chaozhou Lanterns	Chaozhou City, Guangdong Province
12	Luoyang Palace Lanterns	Luoyang City, Henan Province
13	Bianjing Lanterns	Kaifeng City (formerly Bianjing), Henan Province
14	Zhongxin Lanterns	Zhongxin Town, Lianping County, Heyuan City, Guangdong Province
15	Tongliang Dragon Lanterns	Tongliang District, Chongqing Municipality
16	Yueqing jewelry dragon	Yueqing City, Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province

Table 3. Experts' evaluation of 16 Chinese intangible cultural heritage lanterns.

Name	Dimensions and evaluation criteria (Number of valid voting experts: 9)						Average Score
	Structure	Craftsmanship	Styling	Materials	Patterns	Colour	The average score of all points added together
	The complexity, robustness, and functionality of the structure	The fineness and complexity of the craft	The innovativeness of the shape and its symbolic meaning, whether it is visually appealing	Whether the choice of materials is in line with traditional process requirements	Whether the pattern design is culturally symbolic	Whether the color choice is reasonable	
Xianju Lanterns	3	7	6	3	5	4	4.67
Quanzhou Lanterns	7	7	6	6	6	8	7.34
Xiashi Lanterns	6	6	6	6	8	8	6.67
Dongguan Thousand Corner Lantern	3	7	6	3	5	4	4.67
Huangyuan Lanterns	4	7	6	4	6	3	5
Beijing Lanterns	6	7	6	6	6	7	6.34
Shanghai Lanterns	4	7	4	3	6	4	4.67
Qinhuai Lanterns	4	7	4	5	6	3	4.83
Suzhou Lanterns	4	2	4	5	3	5	4.6
Foshan Lanterns	8	7	6	6	7	8	7
Chaozhou Lanterns	6	6	7	7	6	5	6.17
Luoyang Palace Lanterns	3	5	5	4	6	5	4.67
Bianjing Lantern	4	5	6	2	3	4	4

Zhongxin Lanterns	7	7	6	5	6	5	6
Copper Beam Dragon Lanterns	4	5	6	2	3	4	4
Yueqing Jewelry Dragon Lanterns	7	7	6	5	6	5	4

Table 4. Regional representative lantern information table.

No.	Types	Regional	Cultural Characteristics
1	Beijing Lantern	Beijing	The court-style design with red and yellow broussonetia papyrifera patterns, neatly arranged and symmetrical, reflects the imperial family’s ceremonial culture.
2	Chaozhou Lantern	Guangdong Chaozhou	The patterns are intricate, and the craftsmanship is exquisite. There is a high degree of integration between folk beliefs and temple culture.
3	Quanzhou Lantern	Fuzhou Quanzhou	Vibrant colours and diverse forms, embodying festive settings and theatrical aesthetics.
4	Foshan Lantern	Guangdong Foshan	Broussonetia papyrifera has a mature manufacturing system in commercialised forms and shows potential for traditional and modern design transformations.
5	Zhongxin Lantern	Guangdong Lianzhou	Hakka regional representative, with an exposed lamp frame and simple lamp surface decoration, emphasising family ethics.
6	Xiashi Lantern	Zhejiang Haining	Representative of Jiangnan lantern art, with exquisite patterns and emphasis on festive and folkloric functions.

Phase Two: Expert Evaluation and Refined Sampling. The research team developed an expert evaluation questionnaire to identify the most research-worthy samples from 16 lantern categories. The researchers invited 10 experts with extensive experience in intangible cultural heritage research, art design, and traditional craftsmanship to anonymously rate the lanterns according to six criteria: structure, technique, style, material, pattern, and colour. After collecting nine valid questionnaires, the researchers compiled the scores

to calculate a comprehensive score for each category, selecting the six categories with the highest total scores as the core analysis sample (Table 3).

Determination of the final sample. After the screening, the researchers finally identified six representative lanterns: Beijing, Chaozhou, Quanzhou, Foshan, CITIC and Xishi (Table 4). These six lanterns not only received the highest expert evaluation scores but also span the geographical region of North China, Lingnan, the

southeastern coast, and East China and encompass a variety of contexts, including imperial, folk, and urban settings. They thus showcase traditional Chinese lanterns’ core characteristics and significant differences in structure, craftsmanship, and cultural connotations. Subsequent research will focus on these six cases, systematically hierarchically coding and comparing their decorative techniques, modelling design, material selection, pattern and colour.

3. Results

The researchers systematically sorted out and conducted an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of traditional Chinese lanterns based on five dimensions: craftsmanship, shape, material, pattern, and colour. A multi-dimensional

comparative analysis of the 16 categories of lanterns included in the “National Intangible Cultural Heritage List of the People’s Republic of China” showed that they not only retain distinct regional characteristics but also share a set of recognisable cultural genes, which researchers can use to establish a more precise identity for them. These 16 cases of Chinese lantern, located in China’s north, south, east, and west regions, concentrate on the rich genealogy of Chinese lanterns and reflect the profound heritage of Chinese traditional culture. Southern lanterns are delicate and elegant, while northern lanterns are bold and exuberant. Although differing in form, each possesses unique beauty, achieving mastery in its own right. (Table 5).

Table 5. Analysis of the Characteristics of Lanterns, China’s Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Lanterns Type	Pictures	Decorator Craft	Styling Design	Material Selection	Pattern Designs.	Color matching
1. Xianju Lanterns		With the fine needling technique, the pattern on the lamp’s surface is formed by intensive needling.	Various shapes and small sizes are suitable for indoor decoration and outdoor lighting displays.	Mainly using paper materials, no frame design.	Dragon and phoenix, eight trigrams, lychee, hydrangea, flower basket and other needlework patterns.	Based on solid colour paper, the mainstream is magenta, bright yellow, emerald green, royal blue and other solid colour series.

2. Quanzhou Lanterns 	He is good at combining paper-cut, silk thread, boneless needles and lantern-making techniques, especially paper-cut and silk inlay.	The shape is simple and exquisite, the proportion is harmonious, and the design follows the unity of content and form.	Various materials, such as paper, silk, and fibreglass, are used.	Flower and bird, figure, dragon and phoenix, fish, rabbit, landscape and other paper-cut and engraved paper patterns.	With white and light blue as the base, the glass material is translucent in texture, and local patterns such as “all the best” are decorated with cinnabar and gold.
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Table 5. Continued.

3. Xiashi Lanterns 	The needling process is delicate and complex; the number of needle holes per square centimetre can reach 18 to 32, and the patterns are diverse.	The dynamic lights can move with the plot, while the static lights show the complex plot in comic strips.	It uses traditional materials such as rice paper, bamboo strips, lead wire, silk, and modern scientific and technological materials.	Dragons and phoenixes, floral and avian motifs, character tales, the twelve zodiac signs, a hundred children's illustrations, the Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea, etc.	The white and beige background is pierced with light, supplemented by dark red and dark green patterns.
4. Dongguan Thousand Corner Lantern 	Colourful paper-cut with paper-cut, combined with advanced lighting effects.	The structure is symmetrical, layered and thick.	Iron wire and bamboo strips are used as the skeleton, combined with modern materials such as PVC.	Dragon and phoenix, flowers and birds, fish and insects, longevity, fortune, and other auspicious patterns.	With dark red and bright yellow as the keynote, pink, green, and light blue mostly decorate the thousands of small lampshades.
5. Huangyuan Lanterns 	It integrates painting, pile embroidery, embroidery, paper cutting, calligraphy, and other art forms into one.	The shape is diverse, the decoration pays attention to artistic expression, and the content is rich and colorful.	High-quality silk thread and wood are used to combine traditional and modern materials.	Historical stories, folklore, religious motifs, seasonal flowers and birds, etc.	The visual composition's core is red and yellow, with ultramarine and lake blue echoing Qinghai Lake and the snow mountains. Flower and bird themes dot the green and lilac,

					and gold and silver lines outline patterns.	
6. Beijing Lanterns		It uses a variety of traditional crafts such as painting, paper hanging, embroidery, and carving.	The shapes are delicate and complex, full of the delicacy of the palace style.	It is made of rice paper, bamboo strips, lead wire, silk cloth, and other materials, and it is embellished with pearls, jade pieces, and other ornaments.	Dragons and phoenixes, flowers and birds, and other auspicious patterns, such as the Fu character and longevity character, symbolise nobility and beauty.	The primary colours are vermilion and bright yellow, and contrasting colours such as emerald green and royal blue supplement them.
(Continued)						

Table 5. Continued.

6. Beijing Lanterns		It uses a variety of traditional crafts such as painting, paper hanging, embroidery, and carving.	The shapes are delicate and complex, full of the delicacy of the palace style.	It is made of rice paper, bamboo strips, lead wire, silk cloth, and other materials, and it is embellished with pearls, jade pieces, and other ornaments.	Dragons and phoenixes, flowers and birds, and other auspicious patterns, such as the Fu character and longevity character, symbolise nobility and beauty.	The primary colours are vermilion and bright yellow, and contrasting colours such as emerald green and royal blue supplement them.
7. Shanghai Lanterns		The process is complicated and involves extending, tying, cutting, and pasting.	Lifelike three-dimensional animal lights, full of vitality.	Lead wire, silk, glass, colored paper, and other materials.	The contents cover traditional auspicious motifs such as flowers, birds, fish, insects, dragons, phoenixes, and divine beasts.	Red and gold are the primary colours, while blue, green and other colours are auxiliary. Silk gauze shows the haze layer; gold and silver edges coordinate with the colours.

8. Qinhuai Lanterns		Comprehensive use of paper-cutting, carving, painting, and other techniques.	The content is rich and diverse, including plants, animals, legends of characters, and so on.	Traditional materials, such as paper, silk, bamboo strips, etc.	Lotus flowers, lions, historical stories, folklore, etc.	Artisans form the gradient warm tones using the "immersion method." With pink and goose yellow as the base, they superimpose orange, red and crimson gold to create a halo effect.
9. Suzhou Lanterns		It combines Paper-cutting, embroidery, painting, and other crafts.	Geometric and analogue forms coexist, and the structure is exquisite.	Materials are high-quality silk, bamboo, lead wire, and so on.	Suzhou garden architecture, geometric and bionic shapes influenced pavilions, flowers, birds, fish and insects, and landscape figures.	Lotus roots, light yellow lotus, and gardenia lamps decorate the primary colours of the moon: white, pink, and green. Artists mostly draw the decorative horse lanterns with ink lines.

(Continued)

Table 5. Continued.

10. Foshan Lanterns		Rich decorations such as copper Paper-cuts, colourful tassels, and beads.	Multi-layer lamps with complex structures, lanterns of the God of wealth, dragon boat lanterns, etc.	Bamboo strips, yarn, paper, nylon, and other modern materials.	Dragon and phoenix auspicious beasts, flowers, birds and beasts, character stories, especially dragon boats and colourful boat lights.	The visual focus is red and emerald green, combined with bright yellow and blue, and the paper-cut decorations are mostly orange-red and pink-purple.
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11. Chaozhou Lanterns		Melt carving, painting, embroidery, and other crafts are all in one, decorated gorgeously.	With local characteristics, common shapes are auspicious dragons and phoenixes, character stories, etc.	Paper, cloth, silk, bamboo, and other traditional materials are used.	Opera figures, historical stories, pavilions, landscape gardens, and Chaozhou opera, Chaozhou embroidery.	The primary colours are red and gold. The characters' costumes in the story screen lamp are pink and green, treasure blue to distinguish roles, and the background is beige primarily.
12. Luoyang Palace Lanterns		The decorations are diverse, with standard techniques such as embroidery, hand embroidery and hollow work.	Most of its design uses symmetry, paying attention to the majesty and gravitas of the shape.	High-end materials such as satin, silk and paper are often used.	Peony, dragon and phoenix, crane, landscape, carved flowers, calligraphy and other patterns.	The dominant colours of the Tang Dynasty's heyday are vermilion and bright yellow, with blue-green and gilded patterns of Tang Dynasty cultural relics as supplements. Figures and lamps are in ochre and pink-purple to distinguish costume hierarchy.

(Continued)

Table 5. Continued.

13. Bianjing Lantern		It is mainly hand-painted and combined with traditional art forms such as calligraphy and painting.	The appearance is elegant and straightforward, reflecting the ancient style.	It is mainly made of bamboo strips and paper.	Common decorative motifs include auspicious symbols such as the “dragon and phoenix bringing prosperity” (long feng cheng xiang), the “lotus bringing a	The primary colours are red, yellow and emerald green. Large areas of pure and contrasting colours create a striking effect. Harmonious colours like peach pink, light blue, and gold and
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				noble son” (lian sheng gui zi), as well as other plants, scenes from historical stories, and geometric patterns.	silver are interspersed.	
14. Zhongxin Lanterns		It combines traditional skills such as paper- cutting, painting and weaving, and is brightly colored.	Most are geometric shapes with transparent layers, such as squares, hexagons and octagons.	Bamboo is used for the skeleton, and paper and cloth are used for the surface material.	Dragon and phoenix, rolling grass pattern, lotus fish pattern, paper cutting, painting and other auspicious meanings are integrated.	The primary colour is red, with yellow, green, purple, dark blue, pink, and light red as auxiliary colours, and gold is added to local areas.
15. Copper Beam Dragon Lanterns		Combining painting, sculpture and embroidery techniques creates exaggerated, ornate shapes.	Its most important feature is the dragon body of the 24 solar Terms, symbolising the 24 solar terms in China.	The frame is mainly bamboo and cypress, and the wallpaper is made chiefly of silk ribbon.	The shape of the dragon symbolises good luck and good harvest, and incorporates elements of the Bayu culture.	It is dominated by high-saturation primary colours like red, bright yellow and emerald green, with intense contrast. It is often outlined with gold and silver lines to highlight the eyes, and the overall colour is rich and heavy.

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Table 5. Continued.

16. Yueqing Jewelry Dragon Lanterns		Set woodworkin g, fine-grain paper-cutting, bamboo weaving, carving and other crafts in one.	The main body is a dragon boat with more than 300 lifelike figures.	It is mainly made of wood and bamboo, combined with decorative materials such as paper and rope.	Dragon heads, tails, pavilions, and small figure sculptures represent scenes of folk life.	The primary colour is vermilion, with green, blue, purple and dotted gold foil. When lit inside, the light flows and the colours are gorgeous.
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This research conducted semi-structured interviews with cultural experts, inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of Chinese lanterns, and cultural and creative product designers. The results revealed that: cultural experts explained the cultural identity of lanterns from a historical perspective; inheritors of intangible cultural heritage emphasised the continuity of skills and emotional connections; and designers proposed lantern

renewal solutions tailored to contemporary life. These three perspectives converged on the dimensions of “cultural connotations, morphological characteristics, and contemporary expression,” laying a theoretical and operational foundation for constructing a lantern identity recognition system.

Tables 6 to 8 summarise the results of detailed interviews with the three types of actors.

Table 6. Summary of interview content with three cultural experts.

Dimension elements	Content
History and Culture	Chinese lanterns are significant in traditional Chinese culture, symbolising light, reunion, and celebration. Their historical development, closely tied to the spread of Buddhism during the Sui and Tang dynasties, reflects the secularisation of Chinese society and the evolution of cultural diversity.
Raftsmanship and Symbolism	Lantern-making techniques have evolved from traditional materials like paper and bamboo to modern innovations such as electric and plastic components. While these advancements have enriched lantern designs, they may also dilute traditional cultural symbols like red (celebration), dragons (auspiciousness), and lotus flowers (Buddhist influence), which vary across regions and periods.
Regional and Cultural Diversity	Lantern designs and cultural meanings differ across regions. For example, Zigong lanterns in Sichuan are known for their large-scale installations and vibrant colours, while Jiangsu lanterns emphasise intricate craftsmanship and storytelling, reflecting local cultural preferences and lifestyles.
Emotional Resonance and Innovation	Lanterns evoke warmth, joy, and reunion through light, colour, and symbolic patterns. Modern innovations like light shows and interactive installations continue to engage younger generations, maintaining their emotional resonance in contemporary society.
Cultural Identity and Globalization	Lanterns play a vital role in fostering Chinese cultural identity, particularly during festivals like the Lantern Festival, where they symbolise family unity and cultural pride. In the context of globalisation, lanterns remain a unique cultural symbol of China, showcasing traditional art through innovative designs and international promotion.
Heritage and Future	The future of lanterns lies in balancing tradition with innovation. Education, cultural promotion, and modern design can attract younger generations, ensuring lanterns retain their cultural essence while adapting to modern life. However, this requires careful navigation to avoid diluting traditional elements.

Table 7. Summary of interview content with three inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of Chinese lanterns.

Dimension elements	Content
Craftsmanship and Innovation	Inheritors, often from multi-generational families or through apprenticeship, emphasise the meticulousness and complexity of traditional lantern-making techniques. They integrate modern materials (e.g., eco-friendly materials, electric lighting) and tools (e.g., spray painting, geometric designs) to innovate while preserving the core of traditional craftsmanship.

Personal Style and Regional Characteristics	Each inheritor has a distinct style, such as H3's focus on modern lighting technology, H2's incorporation of geometric patterns, and H1's integration of local cultural stories. Lantern designs vary by region, with Zigong lanterns known for large-scale installations, Jiangsu lanterns for intricate craftsmanship, and Zhongxin Lanterns for local cultural motifs.
Emotional Resonance and Festive Significance	Lanterns evoke emotions of reunion, happiness, and nostalgia, particularly during festivals like the Lantern Festival and Spring Festival. Traditional lanterns foster cultural identity and nostalgia, while modern lanterns emphasise visual impact and interactivity to engage younger audiences.
Cultural Identity and Heritage Responsibility	Inheritors view lanterns as a vital symbol of Chinese culture, carrying historical memory and cultural pride, especially in overseas Chinese communities. They stress the importance of retaining traditional elements (e.g., craftsmanship, classic patterns) in innovation to avoid diluting cultural value.
Challenges and Future Prospects	Challenges include a lack of youth participation and the difficulty of preserving intricate handcrafted details. Future efforts should focus on education, cultural promotion, and modern design to attract younger generations while balancing tradition and innovation.

Table 8. Summary of interview content with three cultural product designers.

Dimension elements	Content
Design Inspiration and Reference	Designers extensively draw inspiration from the historical and cultural elements of lanterns, such as the structure of traditional palace lanterns, tassel decorations, and paper-cut patterns, integrating them into modern product designs. The intricate craftsmanship, rich patterns, and symbolic shapes of traditional lanterns provide multi-layered inspiration for modern designs, particularly in lighting, home decor, and fashion products.
Cultural Symbols and Modern Aesthetics	Designers simplify and reinterpret traditional lantern symbols (e.g., dragons, phoenixes, lotuses, and auspicious clouds) to retain their traditional essence while aligning with contemporary aesthetics. Using modern materials (e.g., acrylic, LED lighting) and technologies enhances the practicality and modern appeal of lantern elements in design.
Emotional Resonance and User Experience	Lantern designs evoke emotional connections to festivals, family, and reunion through colors (e.g., red, warm yellow), lighting effects, and traditional shapes (e.g., round, hexagonal). By replicating traditional lantern forms or incorporating festive elements, designers successfully evoke users' nostalgic memories and cultural pride, receiving positive feedback.

Table 8. Continued.

Symbolic Meaning and Cultural Identity	The patterns (e.g., dragons, phoenixes, lotuses), colours (e.g., red, gold), and shapes (e.g., round, octagonal) of lanterns carry strong symbolic meanings in modern products, conveying messages of auspiciousness, reunion, and nobility. Designers enhance cultural identity by preserving traditional patterns and colours while innovating to make lantern elements more adaptable to modern lifestyles.
Cross-disciplinary Innovation and Development Potential	Designers believe that innovation can enhance the charm and practicality of lanterns instead of weakening the cultural characteristics of lanterns. For example, the use of environmentally friendly materials, modern lighting technology, and geometric design makes the lantern elements more suitable

for the needs of modern life. Designers widely use these elements in various product categories, such as carved-out designs in home lighting, embroidery prints in fashion accessories, and lighting effects in tech products. The designers suggest that strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration, such as integrating lantern elements with technology and sustainability concepts, could further enhance its attractiveness and competitiveness in the global market.

3.1. Representing History: The lantern as Cultural Memory

Chinese lanterns are not silent objects sealed in museums, but rather a field of cultural memory that is repeatedly narrated, interpreted, and reshaped by different social actors, and ongoing practice constantly activates their historical information. Researchers have noted that cultural experts, inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, and designers of cultural and creative products have each “represented” the history of the lantern in diverse ways, giving this cultural memory a distinct layering and fluidity. These three narratives together paint a complex picture of the construction of lantern memory: cultural experts elevate it into a national symbol through grand narratives; inheritors of intangible cultural heritage maintain its authenticity and roots through dynamic craftsmanship; and designers, through commercial translation, give it a new lease of life in the context of consumption. The intertwining and colliding of these three forces make the historical writing of the lantern not a frozen past, but a fluid space that is constantly negotiated and dynamically generated.

Cultural experts often interpret lanterns as symbols of collective memory, closely tied to the narrative of the nation-state. They adopt a macro-historical perspective, viewing lanterns as a visual anchor that embodies the Chinese nation’s shared emotions and cultural identity. Folklorist E1 stated, “Lanterns are no longer merely a means of illumination; they are more like living fossils left

behind by agricultural civilisation, carrying for millennia the Chinese people’s shared aspirations for light, reunion, and hope. From the Lantern Festival to the Spring Festival, they have consistently served as a cultural bond that unifies society and maintains national ties.” From this perspective, cultural experts temporarily put aside the lanterns’ specific shapes and craftsmanship differences. They put their identity as symbols of the imagined community of “Chinese culture” in the forefront. This top-down historical narrative legitimises the lantern’s status as a national cultural heritage and establishes a clear and unified coordinate for the public’s cultural identity.

In the daily narratives of intangible cultural heritage inheritors, the cultural memory of lanterns is condensed into a “living history” that resonates intimately and takes root within specific communities. For these inheritors, history is not an abstract entry in a book, but rather a life experience that seeps into their bones through family genealogy, oral traditions, festival rituals, and intergenerational transmission. H3, a longtime lantern maker, repeatedly stated in interviews, “Our family has been making these lanterns this way since my great-grandfather’s generation... Every year, we hang them during the village ancestral worship ceremony. Lanterns are more than just a craft; they are our family’s roots and the village’s aspirations.” At this moment, the history of lanterns sheds grand national narratives and condenses into tangible family, village, and personal histories. This bottom-up retelling, informed by its vivid locality and embodiment,

constitutes lantern cultural memory's most solid and authentic core. It reveals the threads of cultural inheritance in a specific time and space, providing essential supplements and footnotes to the grand narrative.

In the daily practice of cultural and creative product designers, they treat history as a pool of symbols that can be freely extracted and collaged to serve contemporary brand narratives and marketing communications. Designers first identify the most striking visual cues from traditional lanterns—the frame, tassels, the red hue, and old patterns—and then appropriate and translate them to create a product that embodies classical memories and modern aesthetics. As senior designer D2 stated, “Consumers buy not just an object but a cultural story. We capture the lantern’s most recognisable Eastern symbols and repackage them with contemporary design language, making them fashionable and engaging.” This market-focused historical re-creation is, in essence, a strategic re-narration: it deliberately downplays the complexity of traditional craftsmanship and the sacredness of the ritual site, preserving only the visual spectacles most easily captured by the current consumer market.

3.2. The Existence and Continuation of Craftsmanship: The Lantern as a Dynamic Practice

As the core of intangible cultural heritage, the existence and continuation of craftsmanship provides an indispensable material foundation for the continuity of the lantern cultural identity. However, different actors exhibit significant differences in understanding and position regarding the connotation, evaluation criteria, and contemporary practical approaches of “craftsmanship.” This research suggests that craftsmanship is not a static set of technical

specifications but a dynamic field constantly reshaped through the ongoing interaction between inheritors’ adherence, expert evaluation, and designer adaptation. Regarding the question of whether craftsmanship can survive, inheritors, experts, and designers have formed three interrelated yet distinct positions: inheritors are the “subjects” of craftsmanship, safeguarding its “authenticity” between “preservation” and “transformation”; experts act as “diagnostics”, constructing the knowledge framework of craftsmanship between “endangerment” and “protection”; and designers act as “translators”, exploring possible commercialization paths between “tradition” and “modernity”. The interaction, collision, and even conflict between these three forces have shaped the complex landscape of contemporary Chinese lantern craftsmanship and determined its uncertain future.

For inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, the lifeblood of their craft lies in the ongoing dialogue between preservation and change, ultimately aiming to safeguard authenticity. Preservation is the foundation of an inheritor’s livelihood, encompassing the specific materials, tools, and processes involved and a reverence for ancestral experience and industry norms. Many interviewees repeatedly emphasised the importance of “not losing the traditional craft”, believing this is the only way to preserve the lantern’s “authentic flavour”. Palace lantern inheritor H1 gave an example: “From selecting bamboo, splitting the strips, to boiling the strips, every step is meticulously crafted. One wrong step can dissipate the lantern’s spirit.” However, faced with a shrinking market and the impact of modern life, they also understand that “if you do not change, it would die.” Change involves careful adjustments without compromising core skills: replacing traditional fish bladder glue with more durable modern glues, or reducing the size of

lanterns to accommodate modern living spaces. In the tug-of-war between “preservation” and “innovation”, the inheritors have formed a unique understanding of authenticity: it is not a mechanical retro, but rather a continuation of the core technical lineage while allowing craftsmanship to adapt dynamically today.

In contrast, cultural experts examine the craft with a relatively objective and systematic academic perspective, focusing on its lineage, endangered status, and conservation strategies. Their assessment framework transcends individual workshops, placing lantern craft within the broader intellectual spectrum of intangible cultural heritage. Scholars have catalogued the schools and styles of lantern craft across various regions, and undertook urgent documentation and assessment of their current state of preservation. Cultural expert E2 said, “Many unique lantern techniques, such as boneless and needle-stitched lanterns, which require unique craftsmanship, currently have only one or two elderly inheritors left, and the inheritance system is extremely endangered. We must first complete the digitisation and archiving to pass on this cultural gene to future generations.” Regarding conservation strategies, experts advocate the introduction of productive conservation and training centres, highlighting the systematic and public nature of inheritance. This stance embodies an “external guardianship” perspective, attempting to ensure that craftsmanship, as an objective system of cultural knowledge, transcends individual life cycles and achieves orderly inheritance through academic organisation and policy intervention.

Cultural and creative product designers have the most pragmatic approach to craftsmanship: they view it as a production factor that can be “modularised” and redesigned to connect with modern business logic. Instead of replicating traditional techniques perfectly, designers consider

integrating the craft’s “aesthetic DNA” with new materials, technologies, and mass production lines to create products that possess cultural appeal and market potential. The founder of the D1 brand offers an example: “We retain the traditional lantern’s mortise and tenon structure and proportions, but replace the body with more environmentally friendly DuPont paper and the light source with LEDs, preserving both its classical charm and modern safety and convenience.” Nevertheless, this deconstruction and reconstruction would inevitably lead to a dilemma: oversimplification can hollow out the craftsmanship, reducing it to a mere patchwork of symbols. On the other hand, it would also build new platforms for integrating traditional crafts into modern industrial chains and reaching young consumers.

3.3. The Logic of the Market: The Lantern as Cultural Commodities

The “market” functions like a prism, splitting lantern culture into distinct colored beams that illuminate the value coordinates of each actor. Designers use it as a stage for realising their creativity and profit; inheritors tread carefully between the accommodation and preservation, sustaining craftsmanship while making a living; Standing outside the arena, cultural experts use rules and ethics to correct this commercial tide. The collaboration, negotiation, and clashes among these three parties weave together the tortuous trajectory of the Chinese lantern, from a “sacred object” to a “cultural commodity”, providing researchers with a vivid example of the contemporary context of intangible cultural heritage.

As lanterns move beyond the specific context of traditional festivals and the modern consumer chain incorporates them, their cultural identity

inevitably encounters the recoding of the logic of commodification. As a powerful mechanism for measuring value and allocating resources, the market continues to reshape the lantern's production process, visual style, and even the flow of its meaning. Field research reveals that designers, inheritors, and cultural experts hold varying perspectives on "commodification," their intertwined interactions reflect the possibilities and tensions of intangible cultural heritage in marketisation.

For designers of cultural and creative products, the market is the starting point for inspiration and the endpoint for realising value. Their creations are always centred around the gaze of "Orientalism", which could be seen as a demand-driven branding exercise. Designers quickly capture the imagination of "Oriental aesthetics" both domestically and internationally and develop products accordingly. This external gaze often fixates on stereotyped Eastern symbols: red, symmetry, Zen, dragons and phoenixes. Designer D3 frankly stated, "Foreign consumers' understanding of Chinese elements is highly symbolic, so our designs must convey a sense of Chineseness at first glance, and the classic shape of the lantern perfectly meets this requirement." Following this logic, designers and marketers have extended the lantern to become a "cultural commodity" adaptable to diverse consumer scenarios: pocket-sized souvenirs, atmospheric home accessories, and even art installations used in high-end brand visual displays. They simultaneously implement a comprehensive brand strategy that transforms the cultural significance of the lantern into a tradable brand premium through sophisticated packaging, narrative copywriting, and social media marketing.

Unlike designers who actively embrace the market, most inheritors of intangible cultural heritage face a dilemma when faced with

commercialisation: they need income from the market, yet they worry about excessive commercialisation would dilute the cultural essence of their craft. For most inheritors, commercialising handicrafts is the only way to maintain their livelihoods, improve their lives, and attract young apprentices. As inheritor H2 stated, "Without the market, we would starve doing this craft. Now that it makes money, at least my children see hope in this profession." However, market pressure also makes them anxious. To satisfy tourists' desire for "speed and cheapness," they are forced to simplify processes, use cheap materials, and even mass-produce crude "souvenirs." These compromises pain them deeply, as they feel the resulting products lack soul, which betray their ancestral skills. This tug-of-war between survival and perseverance reflects a common "value paradox" in the marketisation of intangible cultural heritage: achieving economic value often comes at the expense of authentic cultural value.

Cultural researchers are more wary of market forces, focusing on deeper issues such as over-commercialisation, cultural appropriation, and the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage. Scholars are generally concerned about the disorder driven by capitalism and criticise "pseudo-cultural creations" that are stripped of context and reduced to mere symbolic shells. Cultural expert E3 bluntly argued: "A large number of so-called lantern cultural creations are nothing more than printing patterns on assembly-line products. This practice is a typical example of cultural appropriation, not cultural creation. It consumes culture without giving back to it." In their view, healthy marketisation must be rooted in the community, with economic benefits rationally flowing back to the inheritors and contributing to the continuation of skills. They call for the establishment of a strict quality certification and brand licensing system to define cultural ethical

boundaries for capital, allowing commercial power to become a constructive, rather than destructive, factor in the protection of intangible cultural heritage, thereby forging a sustainable path for the symbiosis of culture and economy.

4. Discussion

4.1. A “Flowing Feast”: The Lantern as Cultural Spaces

The core findings of this research reveal that the Chinese lantern has transcended its physical attributes as a single cultural object and evolved into a “field” in Bourdieu’s (1986) sense. This dynamic cultural space brings together diverse actors, capital, and power relations. Like a fluid feast, a single authority does not define its meaning; multiple actors co-construct it through ongoing interaction and negotiation (Hemingway, 2009). Within this space, three key actors—cultural experts, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and cultural and creative product designers—each bring their own heterogeneous “capital” into the field and engage in complex meaning-making practices (Bourdieu, 1994; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Cultural experts primarily leverage their deep cultural capital—the knowledge and discursive power acquired through academic training—to play the role of “interpreter” and “legitimator.” By constructing grand historical narratives, assessing the endangerment level of crafts, and criticising market turmoil, they anchor the lantern’s authoritative position within the system of national culture and intangible cultural heritage preservation. This discursive practice endows lanterns with an officially recognised “symbolic capital” of high value.

The foundation of intangible cultural heritage inheritors depends on the embodied craftsmanship capital accumulated through long-term practice and intergenerational transmission. This ability is

difficult to imitate or replicate. Faced with changing circumstances, they choose to “persist”, and consolidate their core position in the cultural space and maintaining their identity through the continuous practice of authentic craftsmanship. The presence of inheritors provides this space with an “authentic core”, which becomes an unavoidable dialogue and reference point for other actors in reproducing meaning.

Cultural and creative product designers, armed with commercial and design capital closely tied to market logic, enter the market, acting as “translators” and “market intermediaries”. They excel at decoding and then re-encoding the cultural interpretations of experts and the symbols of craftsmanship of inheritors, shaping them into product forms and brand narratives that align with current consumer aesthetics. The intervention of designers has accelerated the circulation and monetisation of lantern symbolic capital in the market, significantly broadening the boundaries and audience of this cultural space.

This “moving feast” is not always harmonious. Experts target “cultural appropriation” to discipline designers’ commercial practices. Inheritors worry about “simplification of craftsmanship”, exposing the deep-seated contradiction between traditional craftsmanship and market logic. Designers, however, recast traditional symbols into fashionable language, forcing inheritors and experts to re-examine the meaning of “tradition.” The constant tug-of-war, negotiation, and game between different capitals has liberated the cultural identity of the lantern from static and rigidity, revealing a constantly shifting, tense, and open character. Therefore, understanding the contemporary cultural identity of the Chinese lantern lies in understanding this space where multiple subjects coexist and clarifying the complex dynamics of power and meaning-making underlying it.

4.2. “My Being”: Negotiation and Construction of the Cultural Identity of Chinese Lanterns

The cultural identity of the Chinese lantern is dynamically constructed through this series of endless negotiations. It is not simply an “old object” held by inheritors, nor is it merely a “cultural heritage” described by scholars or a “fashion item” in a display window. Instead, it is a “relational assemblage” interwoven with perseverance and compromise, interpretation and practice, inheritance and innovation. It is precisely this multifaceted negotiation that has endowed the cultural identity of the lantern with remarkable resilience and adaptability to the times.

Cultural identity is not a pre-existing, fixed essence, but rather an evolving construction process constantly reshaped in its fluidity (Hall, 1996). This research demonstrates that the cultural identity of the Chinese lantern is the product of an ongoing “negotiation” among experts, inheritors, and designers. This negotiation process is not always harmonious, but rather a complex interaction characterised by mutual influence, compromise, and revision, thereby addressing the identity question of “How I become who I am”.

This negotiation process is embodied in three levels:

The “persistence” of inheritors and the “innovation” of designers should meet in negotiation, with market feedback serving as the key to this dialogue. When designers present data demonstrating that a complex traditional craft drives up costs and weakens market acceptance, some inheritors will adapt their techniques accordingly. This adjustment is not a simple concession but a strategic “adaptation” aimed at preserving the craft. Conversely, the inheritors’ commitment to core processes and the aesthetic of “authenticity” provides designers with

unimaginable inspiration and legitimacy for their brand narratives, preventing designs from becoming “cultural shells” without roots or sources.

Second, there is a continuous negotiation between experts’ interpretation and designers’ practice, while systematic research by scholars supports the symbolism of lanterns. For example, they can transfer the discussions of Song Dynasty aesthetics and Lantern Festival customs into marketing narratives and product concepts, injecting cultural capital into commercial ventures. Conversely, designers’ innovative attempts to embed lanterns in smart homes or digital art are prompting experts to transcend the static framework of folklore and advance their research into the dynamic realm of contemporary culture.

Finally, there is the negotiation between the “dynamic practices” of inheritors and the “theoretical construction” of experts. The vivid and concrete craftsmanship and oral histories of inheritors provide indispensable field evidence and empirical material for the experts’ theoretical refinement, freeing the academic construction from being empty and vague. The experts’ theoretical refinement and value assessment elevate inheritors’ individualised and fragmented experiences to the strategic “intangible cultural heritage” level, providing them with a powerful discourse weapon to gain policy support and social respect. This interaction connects the “bottom-up” practical wisdom with the “top-down” theoretical framework, jointly enriching the connotation of lantern cultural identity.

4.3. “From the East to the World”: Reflections on the Globalisation of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Moving from the “East” to the “World” is not a geographical shift, but a profound cultural and political experiment. The overseas journey of

Chinese lanterns suggests that the result whether intangible cultural heritage can take root globally depends on if we can break free from the “Orientalist” gaze and cultivate an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem that cherishes diversity and supports effective dialogue. Placing the lantern case within the larger picture of globalisation, its trajectory from East to West offers both a mirror and a cautionary tale for the cross-cultural dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. It demonstrates that globalisation is not a neutral, one-way channel, but a complex arena rife with power negotiations, requiring constant vigilance against the hidden traps of “Orientalism.”

The key to the global circulation of Chinese lanterns lies in their packaging, which is instantly recognisable as “Orientalism.” Designers extract their shapes and colours to align with Western consumers’ expectations of exoticism. This approach has yielded significant commercial success and has also boosted cultural exports. However, this approach carries hidden risks. As Said (1978) pointed out, when others compress a culture into a few fixed symbols for them to gaze upon, it slides into the trap of “Orientalism”. This “othered” presentation might increase the market share in the short term. However, it reinforces stereotypes about Chinese culture and risks obscuring or even crowding out the more complex historical context and dynamic craftsmanship behind the symbols.

The example of Chinese lanterns reveals at least two key issues worth pondering in cross-cultural dialogue regarding global intangible cultural heritage projects:

First, we must carefully balance “comprehensibility” and “cultural fidelity”. Cross-cultural communication to succeed certainly requires the creative translation of local symbols, making them understandable and accessible to audiences from diverse backgrounds. However,

this translation must never sacrifice core values and inherent logic. The lantern case reminds us that the “authenticity of craftsmanship” upheld by inheritors and the “cultural depth” expounded by experts should become an insurmountable “cultural red line” in the process of commercialisation and globalisation. Consequently, any intangible cultural heritage project in the global narrative must be wary of the temptation of self-exoticisation and proactively present its rich and dynamic holistic image, rather than simply catering to external stereotypes.

Secondly, “cultural subjectivity” must be at the core of communication strategies. Intangible cultural heritage going global should not simply passively wait to be seen and defined by external discourse; instead, it should actively tell its own story and achieve self-expression (Spivak, 1988). Such practices often indicate that the valid cultural holders—inheritors and local communities—should win greater voice in the global value chain and share more equitable benefits. The lantern case suggests that a healthy globalisation of intangible cultural heritage requires a multi-party and equal partnership: designers and the market should manage the channels, scholars should provide the theories, and the narrative and ultimate interpretation should, as much as possible, return to the hands of practitioners.

5. Conclusions

This research examines the cultural identity of the Chinese lantern from multiple perspectives, arguing that its essence is not a fixed spatial symbol but a dynamic field formed through the ongoing interaction between cultural experts, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and cultural and creative product designers. Cultural experts emphasise the grand narrative of history and the legitimacy of symbols, while intangible cultural heritage inheritors focus on the dynamic practice

of craftsmanship and the preservation of authenticity. Designers are responsible for commercial translation and exploring the boundaries of innovation. The innovative exploration process of cultural and creative product designers also highlights the opportunities presented by the expanded distribution of lanterns globally and the risks posed by cultural appropriation and dilution. Therefore, for the Chinese lantern as an intangible cultural heritage, researchers call for a community-oriented preservation and inheritance mechanism that balances cultural and economic value. This research complements existing research, in addition, through the lantern case study, provides a scalable analytical model for the sustainable negotiation of intangible cultural heritage. It contributes to deepening people's understanding of cultural complexity, also, it provides both theoretical insights and practical experience for the preservation and creative transformation of intangible cultural heritage worldwide. However, factors such as the sample size, the exclusion of consumer and government perspectives, and the geographic focus on mainland China may limit the generalizability of the conclusions. Future research could expand to cross-cultural comparisons of lanterns, incorporate more actor perspectives, or incorporate quantitative methods to deepen empirical research. Additionally, further studies could explore the identity construction mechanisms of intangible cultural heritage in the context of diverse globalisation.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting these conclusions of this article will be made available by the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics statement

This study involves non-sensitive interviews with adult experts, inheritors, and designers. The interviewees do not belong to vulnerable groups, and the study poses no risks whatsoever. In accordance with OHRP 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2) and COPE guidelines, this type of study is exempt from IRB approval. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews, and anonymity has been ensured.

Author contributions

Ke: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Project administration, Data curation, Writing original draft, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Visualization. Daoruang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing– review & editing.

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