

Reimagining Jingdezhen: A Review of Porcelain Design Innovation Between Cultural Preservation and Contemporary Aesthetics.

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Abstract: Jingdezhen, known as the 'Porcelain Capital' for over a millennium, represents one of the world's most significant and enduring craft heritage sites. Its ceramic traditions spanning imperial kilns, intangible craftsmanship, and global trade networks face profound challenges in the twenty-first century as the city navigates pressures of modernization, globalization, and contemporary design innovation. This critical review systematically examines how Jingdezhen's porcelain heritage has been reimagined through contemporary design practice, synthesizing scholarship from design studies, heritage studies, art history, cultural policy, and anthropology. The review is organized around seven thematic areas: (1) the historical legacy of Jingdezhen's porcelain culture; (2) transitions during the Republican and Maoist eras; (3) the reform period and globalization; (4) contemporary aesthetics and design innovation; (5) cultural preservation and policy interventions; (6) the creative ecosystem of studios, residencies, and institutions; and (7) critical debates on authenticity, commodification, and sustainability. Drawing on over 100 sources spanning Chinese and international scholarship, the paper identifies a central tension between heritage conservation and creative reinvention that manifests across material, economic, and institutional dimensions. The review proposes a conceptual framework the Preservation-Innovation Spectrum for understanding how craft heritage sites navigate competing demands of cultural continuity and aesthetic transformation. Key findings reveal that successful innovation in Jingdezhen depends on hybrid strategies combining traditional techniques with contemporary design principles, institutional support through creative clusters and education, and negotiated approaches to authenticity that resist both rigid preservationism and uncritical commodification. The paper concludes with implications for design practice, heritage policy, and future research directions, including comparative studies with other ceramic heritage sites and empirical investigations of consumer and producer perspectives.

Keywords: Jingdezhen porcelain; design innovation; cultural heritage; contemporary aesthetics; intangible cultural heritage; craft preservation.

1. Introduction

For over a thousand years, the city of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province has been synonymous with porcelain. From its elevation as the imperial kiln site under Emperor Zhenzong in 1004 CE to its contemporary status as a UNESCO-recognized craft city, Jingdezhen has produced some of the world's most celebrated ceramics qingbai ware under the Song dynasty, the first true blue-and-white porcelain in the Yuan period, and the polychrome famille rose and famille verte wares of the Qing (Gillette, 2016; Pierson, 2013). Its kilns supplied emperors,

fueled a global trade network across the Maritime Silk Road, and shaped ceramic traditions as far afield as Persia, Japan, and Europe (Miksic, 2022; Fang, 2024). No other city in the world has sustained continuous porcelain production at such scale and cultural significance for so long. Today, however, Jingdezhen confronts a fundamental question that echoes across craft heritage sites worldwide: How can a community preserve its intangible cultural heritage the techniques, skills, and aesthetic knowledge accumulated over centuries while embracing contemporary design innovation, global market demands, and the expectations of a new generation of makers and consumers? This tension between preservation and innovation is not unique to Jingdezhen, but its longevity, scale, and cultural centrality make it an exceptionally valuable case for examining the dynamics of heritage-based design innovation. The literature on Jingdezhen has expanded considerably in the past two decades, driven by growing interest in Chinese contemporary art and design, UNESCO's frameworks for intangible cultural heritage, and broader debates about the future of craft in the global creative economy. Scholars from design studies, heritage studies, art history, anthropology, and cultural policy have produced important but fragmented insights into different aspects of Jingdezhen's transformation. What is lacking is a critical synthesis that connects these diverse perspectives and offers an integrated understanding of how design innovation operates within a living heritage context. This review addresses that gap by systematically examining the scholarly literature on Jingdezhen's porcelain design innovation, with particular attention to the interplay between cultural preservation and contemporary aesthetics. The paper is guided by five research questions:

- (1) How have Jingdezhen's porcelain design practices evolved in response to modernization and globalization?
- (2) What strategies have been employed to balance cultural preservation with aesthetic innovation?
- (3) How do contemporary designers reinterpret traditional techniques, materials, and motifs?
- (4) What role do institutions, policies, and markets play in shaping this creative ecosystem?
- (5) What are the implications for other craft heritage sites facing similar challenges?

The review makes three original contributions to the literature. First, it provides the first comprehensive synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship on Jingdezhen's contemporary design transformation, integrating perspectives that are typically siloed within separate disciplinary literatures. Second, it proposes a conceptual framework the Preservation–Innovation Spectrum for analyzing how heritage crafts navigate the competing demands of cultural continuity and creative change. Third, it identifies critical gaps in the existing scholarship and suggests a research agenda for future work. The temporal scope of the review extends from the late imperial period (c. 1912) to the present, with particular emphasis on developments since China's economic reforms of 1978. Geographically, the focus is on Jingdezhen itself, though the paper draws on comparative insights from other ceramic heritage sites. Thematically, the review covers design innovation, cultural preservation, contemporary aesthetics, institutional frameworks, and the creative economy.

The review methodology follows a systematic approach to literature identification and synthesis. Searches were conducted across Crossref, Europe PMC, DOAJ, OpenAIRE, and arXiv using keywords including 'Jingdezhen,' 'porcelain,' 'ceramic design,' 'cultural heritage,' 'intangible cultural heritage,' 'design innovation,' 'contemporary ceramics,' and 'Chinese craft.' Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and book chapters published primarily between 2000 and 2026, supplemented by foundational historical texts and seminal works on heritage theory. Both Chinese and English-language sources were included. The initial search yielded approximately 150 potentially relevant sources, which were screened by title and abstract, resulting in the 106 sources cited in this review. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the thematic literature review, organized into seven subsections covering Jingdezhen's historical legacy, transitional periods, reform-era developments, contemporary design innovation, preservation policy, creative ecosystem, and critical debates. Section 3 synthesizes findings across themes and presents the Preservation-Innovation Spectrum framework. Section 4 concludes with implications and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Legacy and Cultural Heritage of Jingdezhen Porcelain

The historical literature on Jingdezhen establishes its unique position in world ceramic history. Gillette's (2016) comprehensive monograph, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, provides the most authoritative English-language account of the city's evolution from imperial kiln center to contemporary creative hub. She traces the development of Jingdezhen's porcelain industry from the Song dynasty (960–1279), when the city first gained prominence for its qingbai (blue-white) ware, through the Yuan period (1271–1368), which saw the perfection of underglaze blue-and-white porcelain that would become Jingdezhen's signature product. The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) marked the formal establishment of the Imperial Kiln Factory at Zhushan (Pearl Hill) in 1369, a watershed moment that institutionalized state patronage of ceramic production (Gillette, 2016; Pierson, 2013). Under imperial control, Jingdezhen's kilns produced porcelain of extraordinary technical refinement, supported by rigorous quality control defective pieces were destroyed on-site to prevent market circulation. The private kilns (minyao) operated alongside the imperial factory, producing wares for domestic consumption and export, creating a dual-track system that would persist in various forms into the modern era (Xu & Wu, 2000). Jingdezhen's rise depended on a confluence of geological and geographical advantages. The region possessed high-quality deposits of petuntse (porcelain stone) and kaolin, essential raw materials for hard-paste porcelain, while surrounding pine forests provided abundant fuel for the kilns (Dillon, 2008). The Chang River connected Jingdezhen to the Yangzi River system, enabling the transport of fragile wares to domestic and international markets. These material conditions, combined with the concentration of skilled artisans and state patronage, created a ceramic ecology that has sustained production for over a millennium. The intangible cultural heritage of Jingdezhen encompasses not only material techniques but also embodied knowledge transmitted through apprenticeship systems, family workshops, and community-based

practice (Ma, 2020). Key techniques include the preparation of porcelain bodies and glazes, hand-building and wheel-throwing methods, underglaze painting in cobalt blue and copper red, overglaze enameling (fencai and doucai), and the precise control of kiln atmospheres for reduction firing. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) provides an international framework for recognizing such knowledge systems, and in 2006, Jingdezhen's handcrafted porcelain production techniques were inscribed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list (Yang, 2022). Jingdezhen's role in global cultural exchange has been extensively documented. Chinese porcelain reached the Middle East via the Maritime Silk Road as early as the Tang dynasty, and by the Ming period, it had become a global commodity, inspiring ceramic traditions from Iznik in Turkey to Delft in the Netherlands (Miksic, 2022; Fang, 2024). The export trade profoundly shaped Jingdezhen's production, with specialized wares designed for specific overseas markets a precursor to the market-responsive design strategies that characterize the contemporary period (MacGuire, 2025). This historical openness to external influence complicates any simple narrative of authentic tradition versus foreign contamination, a point that resonates with contemporary debates about globalization and cultural hybridity.

2.2 Jingdezhen in Transition (1912–1978)

The collapse of the imperial system in 1911 precipitated a profound crisis for Jingdezhen's porcelain industry. Without imperial patronage, the official kilns lost their primary market and source of funding, while the broader economic dislocation of the Republican period (1912–1949) disrupted supply chains and export networks (Gillette, 2016). The response to this crisis took several forms. Some kilns attempted mechanization and modernization, adopting European industrial technologies for ceramic production, including steam-powered mills and mechanized forming processes (Dillon, 2008). Others focused on the domestic market, producing everyday wares for Chinese consumers rather than luxury exports. The Republican period also saw the emergence of a new class of ceramic entrepreneurs who sought to bridge traditional craftsmanship with modern business practices, laying the groundwork for later developments. The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 brought radical transformation. Under Mao Zedong's leadership, Jingdezhen's porcelain industry was collectivized, with private kilns consolidated into state-owned factories (Gillette, 2016). The ten largest state-owned porcelain factories known collectively as the 'Top Ten Porcelain Factories' dominated production, employing tens of thousands of workers and implementing standardized manufacturing processes. This period saw the subordination of ceramic design to political imperatives: porcelain vessels carried revolutionary slogans, portraits of Mao, and socialist realist imagery (Gillette, 2016). The scale of production was unprecedented; at its peak in the 1970s, Jingdezhen's state-owned sector produced over 300 million pieces annually, supplying both domestic markets and export trade. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had a devastating impact on Jingdezhen's traditional craftsmanship. Artisans associated with 'feudal' and 'bourgeois' aesthetic traditions were persecuted, historic kiln sites were damaged, and the transmission of intangible heritage was disrupted as apprenticeship systems gave way to political indoctrination (Gillette, 2016). Yet this period also saw the production of some technically accomplished political wares, including the famous 'Chairman Mao' porcelain produced for

elite use, which maintained high technical standards while adhering to revolutionary aesthetics. The production of the '7501' porcelain a special service commissioned for Mao Zedong exemplifies this paradox: technically among the finest porcelain ever produced in Jingdezhen, yet created within a political environment that was otherwise deeply hostile to traditional craft values (Gillette, 2016). The transitional period from imperial collapse to the end of the Mao era is important for understanding contemporary dynamics for several reasons. First, it established the pattern of state intervention in ceramic production that would continue in different forms after 1978. Second, it created a rupture in the transmission of traditional knowledge that contemporary revival efforts must address. Third, it generated a complex heritage of political aesthetics that contemporary designers must negotiate either by rejection, appropriation, or critical engagement. The material legacies of this period the factory buildings, kilns, and workers' housing have also become resources for the creative cluster development that characterizes Jingdezhen's current phase.

2.3 Reform Era and Globalization (1978–Present)

Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, initiated in 1978, fundamentally restructured Jingdezhen's porcelain industry. The gradual dismantling of the state-owned enterprise system, which accelerated in the 1990s, led to the closure or privatization of most of the 'Top Ten' factories (Gillette, 2016). Between 1994 and 2010, Jingdezhen experienced what Gillette (2016) terms 'de-industrialization without post-industrialization' the collapse of large-scale industrial production without the immediate emergence of a viable 替代 system. Unemployment soared, and the city's economy contracted sharply. By the early 2000s, Jingdezhen's position as a ceramics manufacturing center had been severely eroded by competition from mass-production centers in Guangdong, Fujian, and other Chinese provinces. The recovery, when it came, was built on a different model. Rather than reviving large-scale industrial production, Jingdezhen's renaissance has been driven by small-scale studios, individual artists, and creative entrepreneurs (Gong, 2018; Xu, 2018). This shift from factory to studio has profound implications for design: where the state-owned factories produced standardized wares for mass markets, contemporary studios emphasize individual expression, artistic originality, and niche markets. The creative turn in Jingdezhen's economy reflects broader global trends in the creative industries and the 'artisan economy' (Leonardi & Pareschi, 2025). By 2020, Jingdezhen was estimated to host over 10,000 ceramic studios and workshops, employing a diverse population of local artisans, university graduates, and international artists (Ge, 2024). Globalization has been a double-edged sword for Jingdezhen. On one hand, the opening of China's economy has brought international artists, collectors, and tourists to the city, creating new markets and opportunities for exchange. On the other hand, competition from mass-produced ceramics from other Chinese regions and from low-cost manufacturing centers abroad has compressed prices for commodity porcelain (Ke, 2017). The response has been a strategic shift toward higher-value, design-intensive products that leverage Jingdezhen's brand equity as a heritage site. This 'heritage premium' the added value conferred by association with Jingdezhen's history is a recurring theme in the literature on the city's contemporary development (Ge, 2024). High-end porcelain from established Jingdezhen studios can

command prices hundreds of times greater than mass-produced equivalents, a differential that reflects the market valuation of heritage authenticity combined with design quality.

Tourism and cultural industries have become increasingly important to Jingdezhen's economy. The city has been promoted as a cultural tourism destination, with historic kiln sites, museums, and working studios drawing domestic and international visitors (Cheng & Chen, 2025). Visitor numbers have grown steadily, reaching an estimated 50 million domestic tourists and 1 million international visitors annually by the mid-2020s. The branding of Jingdezhen as China's 'Porcelain Capital' has been carefully cultivated by local government and industry stakeholders, positioning the city within national strategies for cultural heritage protection and creative economy development (Gong, 2018). However, scholars have raised concerns about the commodification of heritage and the potential for tourism to reduce complex craft traditions to consumable spectacles (Corsale, 2021).

Table 1. Chronological Overview of Jingdezhen Porcelain Development

Period	Key Developments	Design/Aesthetic Characteristics
Song Dynasty (960–1279)	Rise of qingbai ware; establishment of Jingdezhen as major kiln site under Emperor Zhenzong (1004 CE)	Jade-like celadon glazes; refined, understated elegance; monochrome aesthetic
Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)	Perfection of underglaze blue-and-white porcelain; expansion of export trade	Cobalt underglaze painting; bold, dynamic compositions; Persian influence
Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)	Imperial Kiln Factory established at Zhushan (1369); peak of global export trade	Five-color wares (doucai); standardized imperial forms; technical refinement
Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)	Famille rose and famille verte enamels; technical peak; European market expansion	Polychrome overglaze decoration; intricate, ornate style; export-specific designs
Republican Era (1912–1949)	Decline of imperial patronage; mechanization attempts; entrepreneurial innovation	Transitional styles; early modern design influences; market diversification
Mao Era (1949–1978)	Collectivization; Top Ten state-owned factories; Cultural Revolution disruption	Political iconography; revolutionary aesthetics; technical excellence in political wares
Reform Era (1978–2000)	Market liberalization; decline of state sector; emergence of private studios	Diversification; early studio movement; experimentation with forms
Contemporary (2000–present)	Creative clusters (Taoxichuan); global artists-in-residence; digital innovation	Hybrid aesthetics; conceptual and minimalist approaches; global-local fusion

2.4 Contemporary Aesthetics and Design Innovation

A growing body of scholarship examines how contemporary designers and ceramic artists in Jingdezhen reinterpret traditional forms, glazes, and motifs through modern aesthetic

frameworks. This literature reveals several distinct strategies for navigating the tension between heritage and innovation.

The first strategy involves formal abstraction the reduction of traditional decorative motifs to their essential geometric elements. Designers associated with the 'New Blue-and-White' movement take the iconic cobalt blue underglaze patterns and strip them of their representational content, creating minimalist compositions that reference tradition without reproducing it (Zhao et al., 2025). For example, the work of contemporary ceramicist Zhu Leqi reimagines the classic lotus scroll motif as a series of simplified, almost calligraphic brushstrokes that evoke rather than depict the original form. This approach resonates with broader trends in contemporary Chinese design, where artists seek to transcend the binary of tradition versus modernity by creating works that are simultaneously rooted in cultural heritage and oriented toward global contemporary aesthetics (Liu et al., 2025). The second strategy concerns the reinterpretation of traditional glaze technologies. Jingdezhen's historical glazes including celadon, qingbai, copper red, and the various famille rose enamels represent centuries of accumulated technical knowledge. Contemporary ceramists have experimented with these glaze families in new contexts, applying traditional glazes to modernist vessel forms, combining glaze types in novel ways, or using ancient glaze recipes on sculptural rather than functional objects (Guo & Fan, 2017; Huo & Jeong, 2024). The Taiwanese-born artist Peng Wei, who maintains a studio in Jingdezhen, has gained international recognition for her 'Contemporary Celadon' series, which applies Song dynasty celadon glaze chemistry to abstract sculptural forms inspired by natural landscapes. This technical experimentation demonstrates that heritage is not static but a living resource for creative exploration. The third strategy involves the fusion of traditional ceramic techniques with design principles derived from Western modernism and contemporary conceptual art. Chinese ceramists trained at institutions such as the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (now Jingdezhen Ceramic University) and through international exchanges have absorbed influences from Bauhaus functionalism, Japanese mingei (folk craft) philosophy, and Anglo-American studio pottery movements (Crabbe, 2009; Wu, 2016). The resulting hybrid aesthetics resist easy categorization as either 'traditional' or 'contemporary,' instead occupying what might be termed a 'third space' of heritage-based innovation. This space is productively ambiguous: it invites audiences to recognize multiple cultural references without requiring allegiance to any single tradition. Digital technologies represent a fourth, more recent frontier in Jingdezhen's design innovation. Computer-aided design (CAD), 3D modeling, and digital ceramic printing have begun to transform design processes, enabling forms that would be impossible to achieve through traditional hand-building or wheel-throwing techniques (Lv & Fu, 2020; Yang, 2022). The 'Digital Porcelain' project at the Taoxichuan Creative Zone exemplifies this trend, using parametric design algorithms to generate vessel forms that are then fabricated through a combination of 3D-printed molds and traditional hand-finishing. Generative AI has also entered the conversation, with experiments in AI-assisted design of ceramic patterns and forms that blend historical motif databases with novel combinations (Li & Huang, 2026). However, the adoption of digital technologies in Jingdezhen remains uneven, with significant variation across different segments of the industry. Master craftspeople and traditional workshops have been slower

to adopt digital tools, while younger, formally educated designers have embraced them more readily (Huang et al., 2016). Cross-cultural collaboration has been a hallmark of Jingdezhen's contemporary design scene. International artists-in-residence programs, particularly at institutions like the Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute and the Taoxichuan Art Community, have brought diverse global perspectives to the city (Pihua & Ghazali, 2024; Tang et al., 2024). These exchanges have produced hybrid works that blend Chinese ceramic techniques with foreign aesthetic traditions, contributing to what some scholars describe as a 'global ceramic vernacular' (Fang, 2024). Notable examples include collaborations between Jingdezhen painters and European designers, resulting in porcelain that combines Chinese brush techniques with Scandinavian minimalist forms. However, critical voices caution against romanticizing these exchanges, noting persistent power asymmetries between Chinese and Western participants and the risk of extractive creative tourism (Rico, 2025).

2.5 Cultural Preservation and Policy Interventions

The policy landscape for Jingdezhen's ceramic heritage is multilayered, encompassing UNESCO frameworks, national legislation, and local government initiatives. China's ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004 marked a significant shift in official attitudes toward traditional crafts, which had been marginalized during the Mao era as 'feudal' remnants (Logan, 2017). The subsequent creation of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list provided formal recognition for Jingdezhen's handcrafted porcelain techniques, inscribed in 2006 (Yang, 2022). This recognition has important material consequences: designated 'inheritors' of intangible cultural heritage receive government stipends, access to training programs, and official status that enhances their market position. At the national level, the Chinese government has pursued a dual strategy of heritage protection and creative industry development. The Cultural Industry Promotion Law and related policies have channeled resources toward the preservation of traditional crafts while simultaneously encouraging their commercialization (Ke, 2017). This approach reflects a broader policy logic that sees cultural heritage not merely as something to be protected from market forces but as a resource for economic development a perspective that generates both opportunities and tensions. The 'Belt and Road Initiative' has further positioned Jingdezhen as a cultural ambassador, with the city's porcelain symbolizing China's historical role in global trade and cultural exchange. At the local level, the Jingdezhen municipal government has implemented a range of initiatives to support the ceramic industry. These include the establishment of the Taoxichuan Creative Zone, a repurposed industrial district that now houses studios, galleries, and exhibition spaces (Tang et al., 2024); the preservation and restoration of historic kiln sites; and the promotion of Jingdezhen as a destination for cultural tourism (Cheng & Chen, 2025). The city has also invested in education and training, supporting the Jingdezhen Ceramic University and vocational schools that train the next generation of ceramic artisans and designers (Wu, 2016). Local tax incentives and subsidized studio spaces have been used to attract creative talent to the city, contributing to the rapid growth of the studio sector. Institutional actors play a crucial role in mediating between preservation and innovation. Museums, including the Jingdezhen China Ceramics Museum and the Imperial Kiln Museum, serve as repositories of technical knowledge and aesthetic

standards, while also presenting contemporary work in dialogue with historical collections (Zhang, 2017). The newly built Imperial Kiln Museum (opened 2021), designed by architect Zhu Pei, itself embodies the preservation-innovation dynamic: its building form references the traditional stepped kilns of Jingdezhen while using contemporary architectural language and materials. The Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute functions as a key node in the knowledge ecosystem, linking traditional apprenticeship with formal design education (Crabbe, 2009). Artist residency programs, particularly at the Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute and Taoxichuan, create spaces for experimentation that would be difficult to sustain within purely commercial or purely heritage-preservation frameworks (Pihua & Ghazali, 2024). Critical scholarship has raised important questions about the politics of heritage preservation in Jingdezhen. Rico (2025) argues that heritage regimes in China often serve state agendas of cultural governance, selectively valorizing certain traditions while marginalizing others. The official recognition of Jingdezhen's porcelain techniques as intangible cultural heritage, while valuable for legitimation and resource allocation, may also freeze dynamic traditions into officially sanctioned forms (Ma, 2020). Concerns about commodification and authenticity echo broader debates in heritage studies about the tension between preservation as conservation and preservation as living practice (Smith, 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). The challenge, as several scholars note, is to develop policy frameworks that protect heritage without museumifying it, and that support innovation without undermining the cultural foundations on which innovation depends.

2.6 The Creative Ecosystem of Jingdezhen

The contemporary creative ecosystem of Jingdezhen has attracted increasing scholarly attention as a model for heritage-based urban regeneration. At its center is the Taoxichuan Creative Zone, a former state-owned porcelain factory complex transformed into a cultural district housing artist studios, galleries, design shops, and exhibition spaces (Zhang & Yoon, 2019; Han, 2018). Taoxichuan embodies the model of 'creative cluster' development that has been influential in urban policy globally, adapted to Jingdezhen's specific heritage context. Unlike many creative clusters that are planned from scratch, Taoxichuan's redevelopment of existing industrial buildings preserves the material memory of Jingdezhen's industrial past while creating spaces for contemporary production. Its success has made it a reference case for how industrial heritage sites can be repurposed for creative production while maintaining connections to local craft traditions. The Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute, founded in the 1990s by American ceramic artist Jack Doherty and Chinese partners, pioneered the artist residency model in Jingdezhen (Tang et al., 2024). Located in a valley outside the city center, Sanbao offered international artists the opportunity to work with Jingdezhen's materials and craftspeople, creating a template that has been replicated and adapted by other residency programs. The development and value of Sanbao Art Village has been the subject of recent case study research (Tang et al., 2024), which highlights its role in facilitating cross-cultural exchange and technical experimentation. Since its founding, Sanbao has hosted hundreds of artists from over 40 countries, creating a global network of ceramic practitioners with connections to Jingdezhen. The role of young designers and entrepreneurs in Jingdezhen's revival deserves particular attention. A new generation of Chinese ceramists many trained at Jingdezhen Ceramic University or through international

study has established studios in the city, attracted by its concentrated expertise, material resources, and cultural cachet (Ge, 2024; Crabbe, 2009). These younger practitioners often occupy an ambivalent position in relation to tradition: they draw on Jingdezhen's heritage as a source of inspiration and technical knowledge, but they also seek to distinguish their work from the 'old-fashioned' associations of mass-produced porcelain. This generational dynamic creates both productive tension and potential conflict within the creative community. Young designers describe a sense of 'creative pressure' the expectation that their work should simultaneously honor tradition and be original, a demanding brief that not all practitioners successfully navigate. Knowledge transfer in contemporary Jingdezhen operates through multiple, overlapping channels. The traditional apprenticeship system (shifu dai tu) continues to function, particularly in workshops focused on specialized techniques like underglaze painting and glaze formulation (Ma, 2020). Alongside this, formal education at Jingdezhen Ceramic University and other institutions provides systematic training in ceramic art and design, incorporating both traditional techniques and contemporary design theory (Wu, 2016). Informal networks including social media groups (particularly on WeChat and Douyin), studio visits, exhibition openings, and the ubiquitous tea drinking sessions that punctuate Jingdezhen's working day serve as channels for knowledge exchange that are less visible but arguably as important as formal institutions (Huang & Chen, 2026). The digital dimension of knowledge transfer has grown significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic, with livestreaming platforms enabling Jingdezhen ceramists to reach national and international audiences. Exhibitions, fairs, and events play a crucial role in connecting Jingdezhen's creative community with broader markets and discourses. The Jingdezhen International Ceramic Fair, held annually since 2004, has become a major platform for showcasing contemporary ceramic design, attracting exhibitors from over 50 countries (Ke, 2017). International exhibitions featuring Jingdezhen-based artists, both in China and abroad, have raised the global profile of the city's contemporary design scene. The Jingdezhen section of the Venice Biennale collateral events and dedicated exhibitions at major museums in London, New York, and Tokyo have positioned the city within global contemporary art and design circuits. These events create opportunities for market access and critical feedback, but they also introduce pressures toward formulaic 'fair-friendly' work that may constrain creative risk-taking.

Table 2. Key Institutions and Organizations in Jingdezhen's Creative Ecosystem

Institution/Organization	Type	Function	Year Established
Jingdezhen Ceramic University (formerly Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute)	Educational	Higher education in ceramic art, design, and engineering; key research center	1958 (as institute); 2021 (as university)
Taoxichuan Creative Zone	Creative cluster	Artists studios, galleries, shops, exhibition spaces on former factory site	2016 (redevelopment)
Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute	Artist residency	International artist residency programs; cross-cultural exchange; workshops	1990s

Imperial Kiln Museum	Museum	Preservation and exhibition of Ming-Qing imperial porcelain heritage	2021 (new building by Zhu Pei)
Jingdezhen China Ceramics Museum	Museum	Comprehensive collection of Jingdezhen ceramics from Song to contemporary	1954 (founded); 2020 (relocated)
Jingdezhen International Ceramic Fair	Event	Annual trade fair; international exhibition and market platform	2004
Zhushan Imperial Kiln Site Park	Heritage site	Protected archaeological site of Ming-Qing imperial kilns; tourist attraction	Listed as national heritage site

2.7 Critical Debates and Gaps in the Literature

The literature on Jingdezhen's porcelain design innovation, while rich and growing, reveals several critical debates and notable gaps that warrant attention.

Tensions between heritage preservation and commercial innovation.

A central debate concerns whether commercialization supports or undermines heritage preservation. Some scholars argue that market demand creates incentives for maintaining traditional skills and provides economic sustenance for artisans (Ge, 2024; Xu, 2018). Others contend that commercial pressures lead to the simplification of techniques, the prioritization of saleable over innovative work, and the reproduction of formulaic 'heritage' products that appeal to tourist expectations rather than advancing the craft (Corsale, 2021; Wang, 2025). This debate parallels broader discussions in heritage studies about the relationship between economic value and cultural value (Smith, 2006). What is missing from the literature is systematic empirical evidence: studies that trace the causal pathways from commercial engagement to craft outcomes, controlling for the many confounding variables.

Authenticity, tradition, and modernity in Chinese ceramics.

The concept of authenticity in Chinese ceramic heritage is contested and culturally specific. Scholars working within Chinese aesthetic traditions may understand authenticity differently from Western frameworks, emphasizing continuity of practice rather than material originality (Scott, 2023; Tomaszek, 2022). The Chinese concept of *chuancheng* (transmission/inheritance) implies a dynamic process of handing down and transforming, which may be more compatible with innovation than static preservation models. However, the literature has not yet fully theorized how different cultural frameworks of authenticity shape design practice in Jingdezhen. The concept of 'creative heritage' which recognizes transformation as integral to heritage rather than opposed to it offers one promising direction for this theorization.

Gender, class, and labor in the ceramic industry.

The labor dynamics of Jingdezhen's ceramic industry remain significantly underexplored. Historical accounts note the gendered division of labor men typically handled kiln firing

and heavy forming work, while women specialized in painting and decoration but contemporary scholarship has not adequately examined how these patterns have evolved or their implications for design practice (Gillette, 2016). Similarly, the class dimensions of Jingdezhen's creative transformation the differential access to resources, education, and markets that shapes who can participate in the studio economy deserve more critical attention. The romanticization of the 'artist-artisan' in much of the literature obscures the fact that Jingdezhen's creative economy depends on a large, often invisible workforce of production potters, glaze mixers, kiln operators, and workshop assistants whose labor is essential but whose voices are rarely heard in scholarship.

Environmental sustainability.

Porcelain production has significant environmental impacts, including clay mining, high-temperature firing (which consumes large quantities of energy), glaze chemistry (involving heavy metals and other pollutants), and waste disposal. Recent research has begun to examine the environmental footprint of Jingdezhen's ceramic industry (Li et al., 2025; Xue & Lin, 2025), but this work remains in its early stages. The energy intensity of traditional dragon kilns and the pollution from coal-fired factories pose particular challenges. The transition to gas and electric kilns has reduced some forms of pollution but introduced new questions about energy sourcing and carbon emissions. The intersection of environmental sustainability with heritage preservation and design innovation represents a critical area for future research, particularly given China's commitments to carbon neutrality by 2060.

Consumer and user perspectives.

The literature overwhelmingly focuses on producers designers, artists, craftspeople, and institutions. Much less is known about how consumers and users perceive, value, and engage with Jingdezhen's contemporary porcelain. Studies of consumer preferences, market dynamics, and the social life of porcelain objects in everyday contexts are rare. This gap is significant because design innovation is ultimately shaped by the relationship between producers and users, and understanding consumer perspectives is essential for both design practice and heritage policy. Preliminary evidence suggests significant differences between Chinese and international consumers in their valuation of heritage versus innovation attributes, but systematic research is lacking.

Comparative studies.

While individual case studies of Jingdezhen are valuable, comparative research with other ceramic heritage sites remains limited. Japan's Arita, the Netherlands' Delft, Italy's Faenza, and the UK's Stoke-on-Trent face similar challenges of balancing heritage preservation with contemporary design innovation (Leonardi & Pareschi, 2025). Systematic comparison across these sites could reveal transferable insights and context-specific factors. Early comparative work suggests that institutional frameworks, policy environments, and cultural attitudes toward tradition significantly shape outcomes, but a robust comparative literature has yet to develop. The proposed Preservation-Innovation Spectrum framework could serve as a basis for such comparative analysis.

Digital transformation.

The impact of digital technologies on Jingdezhen's design practices is an emerging area of study. Research on 3D printing, digital modeling, and online platforms for ceramic design and marketing is growing (Huang & Chen, 2026; Yang, 2022), but the literature has not yet fully addressed how digital tools interact with traditional craft knowledge. Questions about deskilling, the democratization of design, and the potential for digital technologies to support rather than supplant traditional techniques remain largely unanswered. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption in Jingdezhen, particularly through livestreaming sales platforms, but the longer-term implications of this shift for design practice, market structure, and heritage transmission are only beginning to be studied.

3. Synthesis and Discussion

The preceding review reveals both the richness of existing scholarship and the need for integrative frameworks that connect diverse perspectives on Jingdezhen's design innovation. This section synthesizes findings across themes, identifies patterns and contradictions, and proposes a conceptual framework for understanding design innovation in heritage contexts.

3.1 Cross-Cutting Patterns

First, the literature consistently demonstrates that Jingdezhen's contemporary design transformation is not a simple story of tradition giving way to modernity. Rather, it involves complex, multidirectional negotiations in which heritage is selectively mobilized, reinterpreted, and even invented in response to contemporary needs. This finding aligns with broader scholarly understandings of heritage as a dynamic, processual phenomenon 'heritage as a verb' rather than a noun (Härkönen, 2020; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). The most successful design innovations in Jingdezhen are those that maintain explicit connections to tradition while transforming it, a pattern evident across formal, technical, and conceptual approaches. The 'New Blue-and-White' movement exemplifies this: practitioners use traditional materials (cobalt oxide, porcelain body) and techniques (brush painting under glaze) while embracing contemporary compositional strategies that owe more to abstract expressionism than to Ming dynasty conventions. Second, institutional frameworks matter enormously. The presence of supportive institutions educational, cultural, and commercial is a consistent predictor of vibrancy in Jingdezhen's design scene. The Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Taoxichuan Creative Zone, Sanbao residency program, and the network of museums and fairs constitute an institutional ecology that enables innovation while maintaining connections to heritage (Pihua & Ghazali, 2024; Tang et al., 2024; Wu, 2016). Where institutional support is weak for example, in the preservation of endangered techniques or the provision of social safety nets for traditional artisans the literature documents decline and loss. The concentration of institutional resources in Jingdezhen is itself a product of historical path dependence: the city's thousand-year ceramic legacy has created an infrastructure of expertise, materials, and reputation that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. Third, the tension between preservation and innovation manifests differently across different segments of the industry. For master craftspeople specializing in historical reproduction techniques, preservation may mean faithful adherence to traditional methods and aesthetics. For young designers with formal

art school training, preservation may involve the creative reinterpretation of heritage rather than its literal reproduction. These different orientations reflect not simply personal preferences but also different positionings within the market, different educational backgrounds, and different relationships to the state heritage apparatus. The literature would benefit from more explicit attention to how these differences shape design outcomes and community dynamics. Conflict can arise when different stakeholder groups hold incompatible views about what constitutes 'appropriate' innovation a dynamic that policy interventions must navigate carefully. Fourth, the global dimension of Jingdezhen's design innovation is inescapable. From the historical export trade that shaped Jingdezhen's product range to contemporary international artist residencies and global markets, external influences have been constitutive of Jingdezhen's ceramic culture, not external impositions upon it (Fang, 2024; Miksic, 2022). This historical reality complicates any preservationist agenda that would seek to insulate 'authentic' local tradition from 'corrupting' foreign influences. Jingdezhen's heritage is itself hybrid, shaped by centuries of cross-cultural exchange. The cobalt for blue-and-white porcelain was originally imported from Persia; the famille rose palette was influenced by European enamel techniques. Contemporary designers who draw on global aesthetic vocabularies are continuing a tradition of openness that is as old as Jingdezhen's porcelain industry itself. Fifth, a consistent finding across the literature is the importance of materiality in mediating heritage-design relationships. Jingdezhen's porcelain is not merely a symbolic bearer of cultural meaning but a material substance with specific properties plasticity when wet, hardness when fired, translucency when thin that shape what can be designed and made. Designers who work in Jingdezhen must engage with these material affordances and constraints, whether they are practicing traditional techniques or experimenting with digital fabrication. This material dimension of heritage-based design innovation is often overlooked in favor of cultural and symbolic analysis, but it is fundamental to understanding how tradition and innovation interact in practice.

3.2 The Preservation–Innovation Spectrum: A Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the synthesized findings, I propose a conceptual framework for understanding design innovation in heritage contexts: the Preservation–Innovation Spectrum (PIS). This framework maps the range of strategies that designers, artisans, and institutions employ in navigating the tension between cultural preservation and creative innovation. Rather than positing preservation and innovation as mutually exclusive opposites, the spectrum conceptualizes them as poles of a continuum along which different actors and practices are situated.

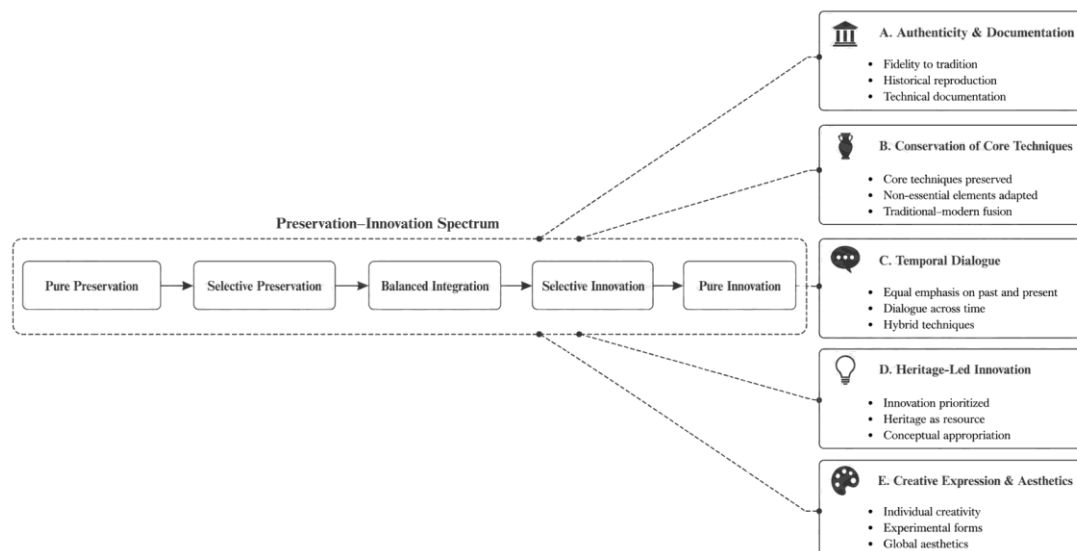


Figure 1. The Preservation–Innovation Spectrum: A Conceptual Framework for Heritage-Based Design

Figure 1 illustrates the spectrum, which ranges from 'Pure Preservation' at one end to 'Pure Innovation' at the other, with three intermediate positions: Selective Preservation, Balanced Integration, and Selective Innovation. Each position represents a distinct logic for relating heritage to design:

Pure Preservation:

The logic of conservation. Heritage must be protected from change. Design strategy emphasizes exact reproduction, historical accuracy, and technique documentation. This position is represented in Jingdezhen by master artisans who reproduce Ming dynasty blue-and-white forms using traditional methods, and by museum conservation protocols that prioritize material integrity over creative intervention.

Selective Preservation:

The logic of adaptation. Core techniques and motifs are preserved while non-essential elements are adapted to contemporary contexts. Strategy involves applying traditional forms with contemporary glazes, or classical motifs on modern vessel shapes. Jingdezhen's contemporary celadon wares that use Song dynasty glaze formulas on minimalist forms exemplify this approach.

Balanced Integration:

The logic of dialogue. Equal emphasis is placed on heritage and innovation, creating a productive conversation between past and present. Strategy includes hybrid techniques, fusion aesthetics, and collaborative practice between traditional and contemporary practitioners. The Taoxichuan artist collaborations and the New Blue-and-White movement occupy this position.

Selective Innovation:

The logic of appropriation. Innovation is prioritized, with heritage treated as a resource to be selectively drawn upon rather than a constraint to be respected. Strategy includes conceptual appropriation of traditional elements and critical engagement with history.

Contemporary conceptual ceramics referencing political porcelain from the Mao era exemplify this approach.

Pure Innovation:

The logic of creativity. Heritage is at most an optional reference; the primary orientation is toward individual creativity and contemporary relevance. Strategy involves experimental forms and materials, and may include explicit rejection of traditional constraints. Avant-garde ceramic sculpture and digitally designed 3D-printed porcelains represent this pole. The PIS framework offers several analytical advantages. First, it avoids the binary opposition between preservation and innovation that characterizes much of the existing literature, recognizing that most actors and practices occupy intermediate positions on the spectrum. Second, it is dynamic: actors may move along the spectrum over time or occupy different positions in relation to different aspects of their practice. A designer might adopt a preservationist approach to glaze chemistry while being highly innovative in vessel form, for example. Third, the framework can be applied at multiple levels individual practitioner, workshop, institution, or policy regime facilitating comparative analysis across different heritage contexts. The PIS framework also highlights the importance of context in determining appropriate strategies. The optimal position on the spectrum for a particular design practice depends on factors including the specific technique or tradition in question, the practitioner's training and positioning, market demands, institutional support structures, and broader cultural policy frameworks. What works for a master painter of blue-and-white porcelain may be entirely inappropriate for a young designer working with digital fabrication technologies. The framework thus resists universal prescriptions in favor of contextually sensitive analysis.

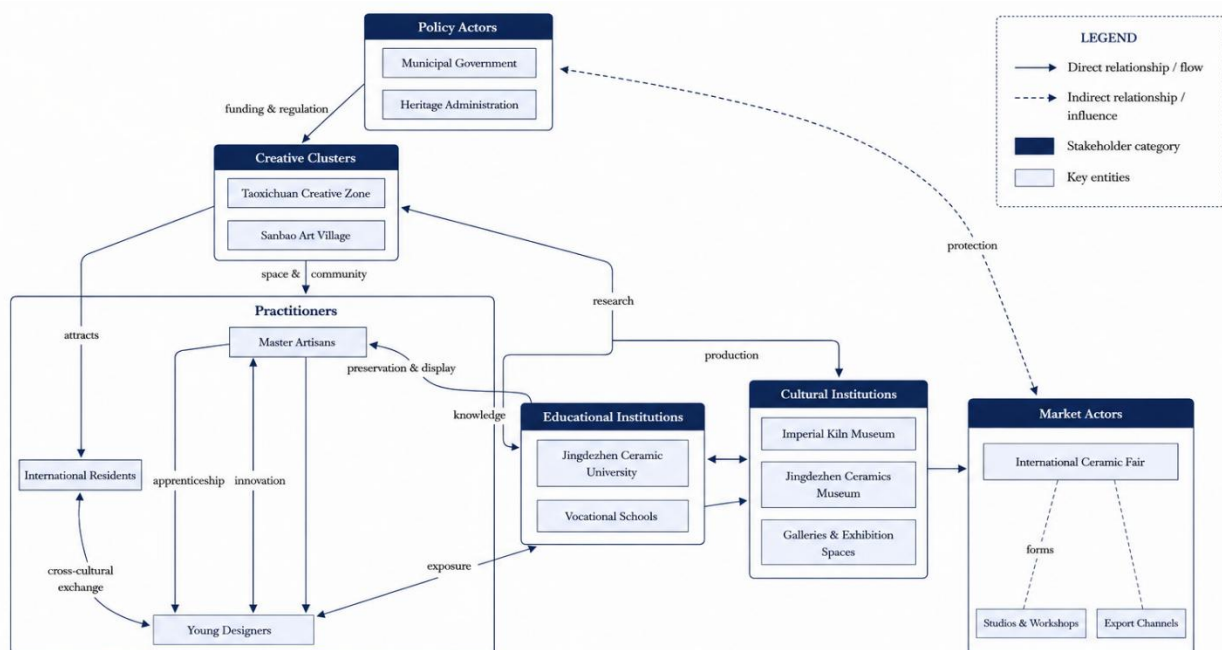


Figure 2. Jingdezhen's Creative Ecosystem Map: Key Actors and Knowledge Flows

Figure 2 maps the key actors and relationships in Jingdezhen's contemporary creative ecosystem. The diagram shows how educational institutions, creative clusters, cultural institutions, market actors, policy actors, and practitioners interact through multiple flows of knowledge, materials, capital, and legitimation. The ecosystem is characterized by dense interconnections: graduates from Jingdezhen Ceramic University populate studios in Taoxichuan; international artists arrive through Sanbao and produce work that is exhibited in local museums and sold at the International Ceramic Fair; master artisans train young designers through informal apprenticeship relationships while also benefiting from their exposure to contemporary design thinking. The resilience of this ecosystem lies in its diversity: no single actor or institution is indispensable, and the multiple pathways for knowledge exchange create redundancy that buffers against disruption.

3.3 Implications for Design Practice, Policy, and Education

For design practice, the review suggests that successful engagement with heritage requires what might be termed 'reflexive traditionalism' a critical awareness of one's relationship to tradition, combined with the technical competence to work with heritage materials and techniques and the creative confidence to transform them. Designers working in heritage contexts would benefit from deep engagement with the material culture and technical knowledge of the tradition they draw upon, not merely superficial stylistic references. The most compelling work emerging from Jingdezhen is produced by practitioners who have invested in understanding the 'grammar' of the tradition its material logics, technical constraints, and aesthetic principles before seeking to transform it (Huo & Jeong, 2024; Li & Huang, 2026). This suggests that design education in heritage contexts should prioritize technical mastery alongside creative experimentation, rather than treating them as separate or sequential phases of training. For heritage policy, the findings underscore the limitations of purely preservationist approaches that seek to fix heritage in static forms. While documentation and conservation remain important, effective policy must also create conditions for living heritage to evolve. This means supporting not only master craftspeople engaged in historical reproduction but also experimental designers, residency programs, educational initiatives, and market development that channels resources toward innovative work. The Chinese government's dual strategy of heritage protection and creative industry development whatever its limitations recognizes this need for balance in ways that purely preservationist regimes do not (Ke, 2017; Gong, 2018). Policymakers should consider the entire spectrum of preservation-innovation strategies and design interventions that support diverse positions rather than privileging one over others. For education, the review suggests the value of pedagogical models that integrate traditional apprenticeship with contemporary design education. Jingdezhen Ceramic University's efforts to combine technical training in traditional techniques with exposure to global contemporary design discourse represent a promising direction (Wu, 2016; Crabbe, 2009). Design education in heritage contexts should aim to produce practitioners who are both technically competent in traditional methods and critically engaged with contemporary design theory a challenging but essential combination. The most effective educational programs may be those that transcend the binary of 'traditional' versus 'contemporary' pedagogy, instead treating both as interconnected resources for creative practice.

For other heritage contexts, Jingdezhen offers several lessons. First, the concentration of expertise and resources in a single location creates agglomeration benefits that support innovation. Second, institutional diversity the presence of educational, cultural, commercial, and policy institutions working in complementary ways creates a resilient ecosystem. Third, openness to external influence, while controversial, has been historically generative rather than destructive for Jingdezhen's ceramic culture. Fourth, the coexistence of different positions on the preservation-innovation spectrum, from pure preservation to experimental innovation, creates a richer overall ecology than any single orientation could achieve. However, context matters enormously: what works for Jingdezhen may not transfer directly to other sites with different histories, institutional configurations, and market conditions.

3.4 Limitations of the Review

Several limitations of this review should be acknowledged. The reliance on English-language and Chinese-language published sources may underrepresent important contributions in other languages, particularly Japanese and Korean scholarship on East Asian ceramic heritage. The review's focus on published academic literature means that practitioner perspectives, grey literature, and online discourse are less represented than they might be in a more ethnographically oriented study. The rapid pace of change in Jingdezhen new studios, policies, and market developments emerge continuously means that any review is necessarily partial and temporally situated. Finally, the scarcity of quantitative empirical research in the existing literature limits the precision with which patterns can be identified and the robustness of the conclusions that can be drawn about causal relationships.

4. Conclusion

This review has systematically examined the scholarly literature on Jingdezhen's porcelain design innovation, synthesizing perspectives from design studies, heritage studies, art history, cultural policy, and anthropology. The analysis reveals that Jingdezhen's contemporary transformation cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of tradition versus modernity, preservation versus innovation. Instead, it involves complex negotiations across multiple dimensions: material and symbolic, local and global, commercial and cultural, individual and institutional. The central argument of this review is that Jingdezhen offers a compelling model for reimagining cultural heritage through contemporary design, but its success depends on balancing preservation with innovation in complex, context-specific ways. The Preservation-Innovation Spectrum framework proposed here provides a conceptual tool for analyzing these dynamics and for situating different actors and practices within a broader ecology of heritage-based design. The framework's recognition that preservation and innovation are not binary opposites but poles of a continuum offers a more nuanced analytical lens than the 'tradition versus modernity' framing that has dominated much of the literature. The review has identified several critical gaps in the existing scholarship. The underrepresentation of consumer perspectives, the limited attention to gender and labor dynamics, the nascent state of environmental sustainability research, and the absence of systematic comparative studies all represent significant opportunities for future research. Addressing these gaps will require interdisciplinary collaboration,

methodological pluralism, and sustained empirical engagement with Jingdezhen's diverse community of practitioners. Several directions for future research emerge from this review. Comparative studies with other ceramic heritage sites Arita (Japan), Delft (Netherlands), Faenza (Italy), and Stoke-on-Trent (UK) would test the generalizability of the PIS framework and identify context-specific factors that shape outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracking design innovation in Jingdezhen over time would provide insight into the dynamics of change in heritage contexts. Empirical research on consumer perceptions, market dynamics, and user engagement with contemporary Jingdezhen porcelain would address a significant gap in the predominantly production-focused literature. The intersection of digital innovation and environmental sustainability in ceramic design represents an urgent and underexplored area. Finally, the social and labor dynamics of Jingdezhen's creative economy including questions of class, gender, and access deserve the critical attention they have not yet received. As heritage sites worldwide grapple with the challenges of maintaining cultural continuity in the face of rapid economic, technological, and social change, the experience of Jingdezhen a city that has made porcelain for a thousand years and continues to reinvent what that means offers both inspiration and caution. The city's story suggests that living heritage is not preserved by freezing it in time but by enabling its transformation, and that the most vital design innovation emerges from practitioners who know tradition deeply enough to reimagine it. The ongoing reinvention of Jingdezhen's porcelain heritage reminds us that the relationship between past and future in design is not zero-sum: honoring tradition need not preclude innovation, and innovation need not erase tradition.

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