

Reinterpreting Jingdezhen Porcelain Aesthetics in Contemporary Design: Findings from a Qualitative Multi-Source Study.

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Abstract: Jingdezhen porcelain constitutes a major system of Chinese material culture in which vessel form, decorative symbolism, colour, glaze, craftsmanship, and philosophical meaning are closely integrated. Contemporary design has expanded the visibility of this heritage, but it has also encouraged superficial copying that preserves recognizable imagery while weakening cultural meaning. This article reports the principal findings of a qualitative case study examining how traditional Jingdezhen porcelain aesthetics are interpreted and transformed across contemporary design. The final analytical corpus comprised 65 archival sources, 15 traditional porcelain works, 15 contemporary cases, 30 completed visual-analysis protocols, and semi-structured interviews with 13 designers, ceramic artists, and cultural experts. Visual, semiotic, thematic, comparative, and cross-source analyses were combined. Five interconnected dimensions defined the traditional aesthetic system: formal harmony, symbolic motifs, colour traditions, material refinement, and cultural meaning. Six recurring reinterpretation strategies were identified: abstraction, simplification, recontextualisation, hybridisation, material and technical adaptation, and the deliberate balancing of tradition with innovation. Across product design, contemporary ceramic art, interior and decorative design, and experimental digital practice, abstraction and simplification were the most pervasive strategies, while recontextualisation and hybridisation extended porcelain aesthetics into new functions, media, and spatial settings. The findings show that successful fusion depends less on reproducing external historical forms than on translating their internal aesthetic logic and symbolic function. An integrated framework is proposed in which design semiotics mediates between heritage sources, transformation strategies, contemporary applications, and evaluation through aesthetic integration, cultural continuity, and contemporary relevance.

Keywords: Jingdezhen porcelain; porcelain aesthetics; contemporary design; design semiotics; cultural transformation; heritage-based design; qualitative case study.

1. Introduction

Jingdezhen has occupied a central place in the development of Chinese porcelain for more than a millennium. Its historical importance derives not only from the scale and technical sophistication of production, but also from the ability of porcelain to embody cultural values through form, material, imagery, and use. Refined vessel proportions, cobalt blue-and-white decoration, famille rose enamels, translucent porcelain bodies, symbolic plants and animals, and disciplined artisanal processes collectively established an aesthetic language that travelled widely through trade and intercultural exchange (Gerritsen, 2011, 2020;

Huang, 2008). Jingdezhen porcelain is therefore better understood as a material-cultural system than as a collection of decorative objects. It preserves historical memory, tacit craft knowledge, philosophical ideas, and visual codes that remain significant to Chinese cultural identity (Clunas, 1997a, 2004; Fu & Fu, 2021). The contemporary position of this heritage is marked by a productive tension. Global design markets, digital media, cultural tourism, and renewed interest in craft have created new opportunities for Jingdezhen-inspired work. Designers can now apply porcelain aesthetics to product design, fashion, interiors, installations, graphic communication, and digital environments. New technologies, including computer-aided design, additive manufacturing, interactive media, and artificial intelligence, have widened the range of possible formal and material experiments. At the same time, mass production and accelerated visual consumption encourage the reduction of heritage to immediately recognizable motifs. A dragon, lotus, cloud pattern, or blue-and-white palette can be attached to a contemporary product without meaningful engagement with its historical or symbolic context. Such stylistic borrowing may increase market visibility while weakening cultural communication. This tension is especially important because Jingdezhen porcelain is an intangible as well as a tangible heritage. Finished objects can be collected and conserved, but the knowledge required to prepare clay, control glaze, judge proportions, load kilns, interpret motifs, and balance technical risk with artistic intention depends on continuing practice. Cultural heritage is sustained through transmission, interpretation, and use rather than physical preservation alone (Labadi, 2013; Sennett, 2008). When traditional apprenticeship systems decline or become separated from modern production, the loss includes not only manual skill but also aesthetic judgement, symbolic literacy, and a craft-based understanding of material. Existing scholarship has documented Jingdezhen's global history, technical achievements, and cultural significance, while contemporary design research has examined hybridity, heritage revival, and new creative industries (Akpang, 2013; Bhabha, 1994; Guest, 2019; Xie, 2023). Yet a gap remains between historical interpretation and design application. Studies often describe traditional forms and motifs, or discuss individual contemporary artists, without offering a systematic explanation of how aesthetic meaning is transformed across different design disciplines. Conversely, contemporary projects may claim cultural inspiration without clarifying which traditional principles have been retained, modified, displaced, or replaced. The study from which this article is derived addressed this gap through a qualitative, multi-source analysis of traditional Jingdezhen porcelain and selected contemporary design cases. Design semiotics provided the principal interpretive lens. It treats forms, colours, materials, and motifs as signs whose meaning is produced through cultural context and use rather than through visual appearance alone (Krippendorff & Butter, 2008). Cultural transformation theory complemented this perspective by explaining how meanings change when heritage elements move between historical periods, media, functions, and audiences. Together, these perspectives enable reinterpretation to be evaluated as a process of semiotic translation rather than direct reproduction. The article focuses primarily on the empirical findings and asks three questions. First, what formal, decorative, chromatic, material, and cultural characteristics define traditional Jingdezhen porcelain aesthetics? Second, through which strategies are those characteristics reinterpreted within contemporary design? Third, how

do the strategies operate across product design, contemporary ceramic art, interior and decorative design, and experimental design? The article also considers the conditions under which transformation preserves cultural identity while achieving contemporary relevance. The main argument is that meaningful fusion is not achieved by maximizing either historical similarity or visual novelty. Successful reinterpretation depends on identifying the cultural and aesthetic logic of the source tradition, translating that logic through an appropriate combination of abstraction, simplification, recontextualisation, hybridisation, and material adaptation, and evaluating the outcome according to aesthetic integration, cultural continuity, and relevance to present-day users. This position treats tradition and innovation as interdependent. Tradition without reinterpretation risks becoming detached from contemporary life, while innovation without cultural knowledge risks becoming visually attractive but semantically empty.

2. Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Jingdezhen porcelain as an integrated aesthetic system

The historical development of Jingdezhen generated a distinctive relationship among material, technique, form, and symbolism. Its porcelain bodies became associated with whiteness, translucency, strength, and delicacy, while glazing and firing systems supported a wide range of surface effects. These technical qualities were not merely functional. They shaped the visual and tactile identity of the objects and influenced the forms that artisans could produce. The thin body, smooth glaze, refined contour, and balanced silhouette became signs of both craftsmanship and cultural refinement. Decoration similarly operated as a language rather than an added surface. Dragons communicated authority and power; phoenixes conveyed harmony, renewal, and virtue; lotus flowers referred to purity and enlightenment; peonies signified honour and prosperity; bamboo suggested integrity and resilience; clouds linked the earthly and celestial realms. These meanings were historically reinforced through philosophy, religion, court culture, folklore, and social use (Fu & Fu, 2021; Huang, 2008). Colour traditions, including blue-and-white, famille rose, celadon, monochrome white, and wucai, also carried technological and cultural associations. The resulting aesthetic system integrated Confucian order, Daoist harmony with nature, and Buddhist symbolism with highly controlled material practice. This integration explains why surface copying is inadequate. A motif removed from its compositional, philosophical, and functional setting may remain recognizable while losing much of its communicative force. Heritage-inspired design must therefore distinguish between visible attributes and the cultural relations that make those attributes meaningful. This distinction is central to the present findings because the analyzed contemporary cases differed substantially in the depth with which they engaged the source tradition.

2.2 Design semiotics

Design semiotics examines how objects communicate through form, material, colour, image, interaction, and context. In the present study, the observable feature functions as the signifier, while the cultural concept, value, or association constitutes the signified. A lotus can be identified as a floral form, but its cultural meaning depends on shared interpretive traditions. Similarly, a curved vase silhouette may signify refinement, historical continuity,

or Jingdezhen identity when it is connected with recognizable proportions and material qualities. Semiotic analysis is particularly useful for evaluating transformation because signs can retain communicative functions even when their visual form changes. A dragon may be reduced to a flowing line, a vase profile may become a lighting fixture, and the blue-and-white relationship may move from porcelain to textile or architectural surfaces. The question is not whether the new object looks identical to its historical source, but whether the transformed sign still communicates a credible cultural relationship. Krippendorff and Butter (2008) emphasize that design concerns meaning as well as form; this perspective allows reinterpretation to be analysed as the renewal of cultural communication.

2.3 Cultural transformation and hybridity

Cultural transformation theory recognizes that heritage is continuously interpreted under new historical and social conditions. Bhabha's (1994) account of cultural hybridity and later studies of hybrid aesthetics show that new forms often emerge through negotiation rather than pure continuity or complete rupture (Akpan, 2013). Jingdezhen itself has a long history of adaptation. Export porcelain incorporated foreign heraldry, Islamic ornament, Christian imagery, and changing consumer preferences while retaining local technical systems. Contemporary transformation therefore extends an existing history of cultural responsiveness rather than introducing change into an otherwise static tradition. Transformation may involve abstraction, functional adaptation, material substitution, fragmentation, or recontextualisation. These processes can either strengthen or weaken heritage. They strengthen it when the designer understands the source system and translates its principles into a coherent new context. They weaken it when elements are selected only for commercial recognition or visual novelty. The findings therefore evaluate authenticity as a relationship among source knowledge, design intention, cultural communication, and contemporary function, not as exact visual resemblance.

2.4 Tradition, innovation, and sustainable cultural practice

Design innovation is often presented as a break with the past, while heritage preservation is associated with continuity. The literature increasingly rejects this binary. Manzini (2015a, 2015b) treats design as a social process capable of mobilizing existing knowledge toward new futures, while Fuad-Luke (2012, 2013) connects design innovation with cultural and environmental sustainability. From this perspective, traditional knowledge is not an obstacle to innovation; it is a resource whose continued value depends on responsible transformation. For Jingdezhen, sustainable practice includes the survival of artisanal knowledge, the economic viability of craft communities, the capacity of younger designers to interpret cultural signs, and the adaptation of porcelain aesthetics to contemporary modes of production and consumption. New technology may support documentation, precision, experimentation, and wider communication, but technology alone does not ensure cultural relevance. The central issue is whether innovation remains guided by the historical, material, and symbolic intelligence of the tradition.

3. Methodology

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative case-study design because the research questions concerned meaning, transformation, and context rather than causal measurement. The final corpus reported in the findings chapter combined archival research, visual analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Sixty-five archival sources were reviewed to establish historical, aesthetic, and cultural context. Fifteen representative traditional porcelain works from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods were analysed as the reference corpus, while 15 contemporary cases were selected from product design, ceramic art, interior and decorative design, and experimental contemporary practice. Thirty standardized visual-analysis protocols were completed, one for each traditional and contemporary work. Thirteen expert interviews were conducted with six professional designers, four ceramic artists, and three cultural experts, including curators, scholars, and heritage professionals. Purposeful sampling was used to select works and participants with direct relevance to Jingdezhen porcelain and contemporary reinterpretation. Traditional works were examined for overall form, proportion, decorative motifs, colour, material qualities, technique, and cultural symbolism. Contemporary cases were examined through the same dimensions and additionally coded for transformation strategies, including abstraction, simplification, fragmentation, recontextualisation, material substitution, hybridisation, and functional adaptation. Interview data were analysed thematically following the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Visual and formal analysis identified recurring characteristics and transformations, while semiotic analysis interpreted the cultural meanings associated with signs and materials. Comparative case analysis examined similarities and disciplinary differences across the four categories. Archival evidence supplied historical context, visual analysis demonstrated observable transformation, and interviews clarified professional intention and cultural interpretation. The three sources were continuously compared rather than treated as independent streams. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation, standardized protocols, an audit trail, researcher reflexivity, and peer review of developing interpretations. Qualitative frequencies were used descriptively to show recurrence within the selected corpus; they should not be interpreted as population estimates or inferential statistics. The objective was analytical depth and theoretical transferability rather than statistical generalisation. The final organization of findings followed the three research questions, culminating in a framework that links traditional aesthetics, semiotic interpretation, transformation strategies, contemporary application, and evaluation.

4. Findings

4.1 Data corpus and cross-source convergence

The dataset provided a balanced foundation for examining both continuity and transformation. Archival sources established the history and cultural meanings of Jingdezhen porcelain; the 15 traditional works supplied a visual baseline; the 15 contemporary cases demonstrated current application; and the interviews contextualised design decisions and tested emerging interpretations. The 30 completed protocols ensured that the same analytical dimensions were applied to each work.

Table 1. Final qualitative data corpus

Source	Number	Analytical contribution
Archival sources reviewed	65	Historical, technical, aesthetic, and cultural context
Traditional porcelain works	15	Reference corpus from Yuan, Ming, and Qing traditions
Contemporary cases	15	Evidence of reinterpretation across four design fields
Expert interviews	13	Professional interpretation and validation
Visual-analysis protocols	30	Standardized analysis of each traditional and contemporary work

The contemporary cases were distributed across four fields: four product designs, four contemporary ceramic artworks, three interior and decorative design cases, and four experimental design cases. This distribution was important because reinterpretation is shaped by disciplinary purpose. Product design must accommodate usability and market expectations; ceramic art permits conceptual and expressive departures; interior design transforms porcelain aesthetics into spatial experience; and experimental practice tests digital and material possibilities. The cross-disciplinary sample therefore enabled the study to identify strategies that were common across fields while distinguishing their specific manifestations. Triangulation produced a consistently high level of convergence. Archival evidence, visual analysis, and interviews agreed on the principal characteristics of the traditional aesthetic system, the existence of recurring reinterpretation strategies, and the importance of balancing cultural identity with contemporary innovation. Interviews did not merely repeat the visual findings; they explained why designers selected particular transformations and how specialists judged cultural authenticity. This convergence supports the credibility of the results while also revealing that reinterpretation is best understood through the interaction of historical evidence, visible design decisions, and professional interpretation.

4.2 Research Question One: The traditional aesthetic system

Five themes defined the traditional Jingdezhen porcelain aesthetic system: formal characteristics, decorative motifs, colour traditions, material qualities, and symbolic-cultural meanings. These dimensions were analytically separable but functioned together in the objects. Form organized visual balance, motifs communicated cultural narratives, colour expressed technical and historical identity, material quality embodied craftsmanship, and symbolism linked the artefact with broader values.

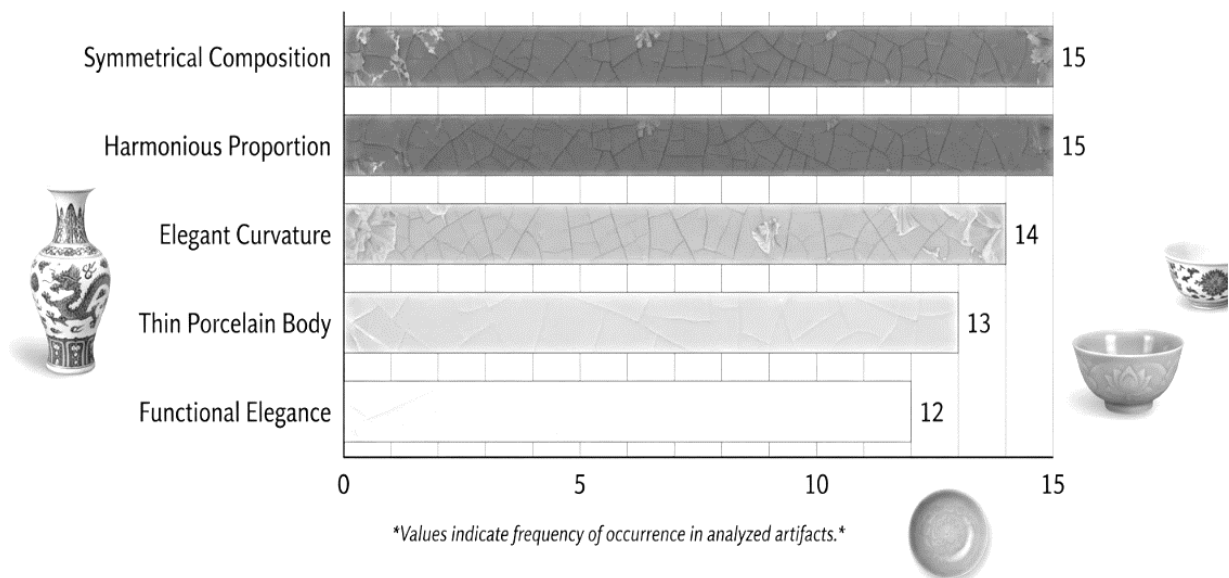
4.2.1 Formal characteristics

Symmetrical composition and harmonious proportion occurred in all 15 traditional works, making them the most consistent formal characteristics. Elegant curved profiles appeared in 14 works, thin porcelain bodies in 13, and functional elegance in 12. The recurrence of symmetry and proportion indicates that formal balance was not incidental; it was a core principle connecting visual order with technical control. Curvature produced graceful transitions between neck, shoulder, body, and foot, while the thin body demonstrated precise clay preparation and firing.

Table 2. Formal characteristics identified in traditional Jingdezhen porcelain

Formal characteristic	Description	Frequency*
Symmetrical composition	Balanced visual structure	15
Harmonious proportions	Balanced relationship between height and width	15
Elegant curved profiles	Smooth transitions and refined contours	14
Thin porcelain body	Fine craftsmanship and technical precision	13
Functional elegance	Integration of utility and aesthetics	12

**Illustrative qualitative frequency within the 15 analysed traditional works.*

**Figure 1.** Dominant formal characteristics of traditional Jingdezhen porcelain.

One museum participant stated that the beauty of Jingdezhen porcelain lies “not only in its decoration but also in the perfect balance of its form” (Participant 4). This observation was supported by the corpus: even undecorated or minimally decorated works communicated refinement through silhouette, proportion, and surface. Functional elegance was slightly less frequent but remained significant. Bowls, jars, vases, plates, and ritual forms integrated utility with aesthetic discipline rather than treating them as separate requirements. The result establishes a formal baseline for evaluating contemporary work. A modern design can abandon literal vessel replication while preserving proportional harmony, controlled curvature, or the relationship between functionality and refinement. Conversely, a design that uses historical motifs but ignores the formal logic of the source may achieve superficial recognition without deeper aesthetic continuity.

4.2.2 Decorative motifs, colour, material, and cultural meaning

Decorative analysis identified a recurring symbolic vocabulary. Lotus was the most frequent motif in the tabulated corpus, appearing in 14 works, followed by dragon in 12, peony in 11, phoenix in 10, bamboo in nine, and clouds in eight. The hierarchy of motifs

demonstrates the importance of both religious and socio-political symbolism. Lotus imagery connected porcelain to purity, spiritual development, and resilience; the dragon communicated authority, strength, and cosmological order; the peony signified prosperity and honour; and the phoenix conveyed harmony, renewal, and virtue. Bamboo and cloud patterns contributed integrity, auspiciousness, movement, and connection between natural and celestial realms.

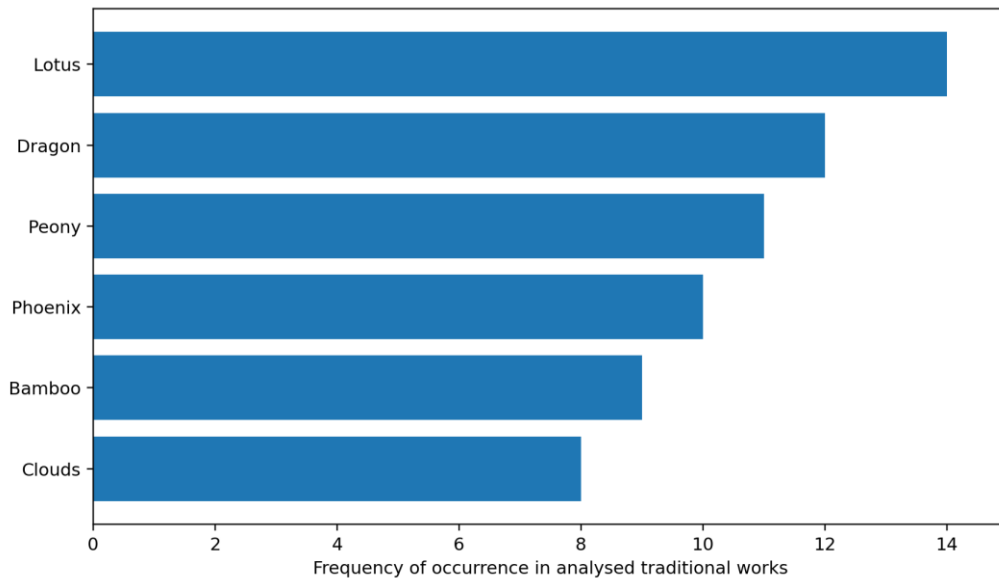


Figure 2. Major decorative motifs identified in the traditional-work corpus.

The motifs were usually embedded in compositional systems rather than displayed as isolated icons. Floral and mythological elements interacted with borders, negative space, brushwork, and vessel structure. Their cultural function therefore depended on arrangement as well as recognition. Interview participants emphasized that simplification can preserve symbolic identity when the designer understands this relationship. As Participant 9 noted, contemporary designers may simplify motifs while their meanings remain recognizable. Five principal colour traditions were identified: blue-and-white, famille rose, celadon, monochrome white, and wucai. Blue-and-white was the dominant and most internationally recognizable system. The relationship between cobalt decoration and the white porcelain body created strong contrast while supporting detailed brushwork and compositional clarity. Famille rose reflected the expansion of overglaze enamel technology and enabled complex naturalistic scenes. Celadon emphasized soft green translucency and associations with calmness and natural harmony. Monochrome white foregrounded the purity, translucency, and finish of the porcelain body, while wucai supported more vivid multi-colour compositions. Colour was not applied simply to maximize visual richness. The analysis showed deliberate restraint and compositional function. Blue-and-white objects often used unpainted porcelain as active negative space, while monochrome works shifted attention to material quality and form. Contemporary reinterpretation can therefore draw on colour relationships and cultural associations without copying complete historical palettes. The principal material characteristics were fine kaolin clay, high translucency, smooth glaze, high-temperature durability, and technical precision. Fine clay created the whiteness and controlled body required for refined

form. Smooth glaze protected decoration and produced the tactile and visual continuity associated with Jingdezhen craftsmanship. Translucency communicated delicacy and technical mastery, while high-temperature firing supported strength. Participants repeatedly argued that material is part of the cultural language. Participant 11 observed that it is impossible to understand Jingdezhen aesthetics without understanding the material because the material shapes the visual language. This finding is important for contemporary work using glass, resin, metal, digital fabrication, or mixed media. Material substitution can communicate aspects of porcelain through smoothness, translucency, delicacy, or light, but it must account for the loss or alteration of associations attached to fired porcelain and handmade skill. Across all sources, Jingdezhen porcelain was understood as cultural identity, historical continuity, philosophical expression, national heritage, and artistic excellence. Cultural identity and continuity were especially prominent. The works linked contemporary viewers with dynastic histories, regional expertise, global exchange, and collective narratives of Chinese civilisation. Their meaning did not reside in any single motif or technique but in the cumulative relationship among material, form, symbolism, and craft.

Table 3. Core dimensions of the traditional Jingdezhen aesthetic system

Dimension	Principal findings	Cultural significance
Decorative motifs	Lotus (14), dragon (12), peony (11), phoenix (10), bamboo (9), clouds (8)	Purity, authority, prosperity, harmony, resilience, auspiciousness
Colour traditions	Blue-and-white, famille rose, celadon, monochrome white, wucai	Historical identity, technological development, restraint, natural harmony
Material qualities	Fine kaolin clay, translucency, smooth glaze, high-temperature durability, technical precision	Craft mastery, refinement, delicacy, embodied knowledge
Cultural meanings	Cultural identity, historical continuity, philosophical expression, national heritage, artistic excellence	Connection among porcelain, Chinese civilisation, memory, and identity

Participant 2 summarized this result by stating that every porcelain object carries history and that designers inherit a cultural narrative as well as a form. The answer to Research Question One is therefore not a list of isolated aesthetic features. Traditional Jingdezhen porcelain is an integrated semiotic and material system. Its recognizable identity emerges from the coordination of formal balance, symbolic imagery, controlled colour, refined material, embodied knowledge, and cultural memory.

4.3 Research Question Two: Reinterpretation strategies

The analysis identified six principal strategies: abstraction, simplification, recontextualisation, hybridisation, material and technical adaptation, and balancing tradition with innovation. The strategies frequently overlapped. A single project might simplify a motif, move it to a new context, combine porcelain with metal, and alter its

symbolic emphasis. Reinterpretation was therefore not a single technique but a coordinated transformation of signs, materials, functions, and contexts.

Table 4. Reinterpretation strategies identified in contemporary design

Strategy	Operational meaning	Examples from the analysed cases
Abstraction	Reduction to essential visual or symbolic characteristics	Geometric lotus petals; flowing dragon lines; minimal vase silhouettes
Simplification	Reduction of ornament and compositional density	Single motif; restrained brushwork; open space; clean surfaces
Recontextualisation	Transfer into a new function, scale, medium, or environment	Vase to lighting; porcelain pattern to textiles, packaging, or interiors
Hybridisation	Combination with new design languages, cultures, technologies, or materials	Minimalist fusion; digital graphics; mixed materials; cross-cultural forms
Material and technical adaptation	Use of alternative materials and manufacturing methods	Glass, resin, recycled ceramics, digital printing, 3D fabrication
Tradition–innovation balance	Retention of cultural identity while meeting contemporary needs	Modern function, technology, and audience integrated with historical meaning

4.3.1 Abstraction and simplification

Abstraction was the most pervasive strategy. Designers reduced traditional motifs and vessel forms to essential lines, geometries, rhythms, and proportional relations. Lotus petals became geometric units; dragons became flowing curves; vase profiles became minimal cylinders or silhouettes; cloud motifs became repeated waves; and bamboo became linear structure. The process retained recognizability while avoiding literal historical reproduction. The findings indicate that abstraction can preserve meaning when it identifies the visual principle carrying the cultural association. A designer may remove descriptive detail while maintaining movement, balance, or symbolic structure. Participant 3 explained that designers rarely copy historical porcelain directly; they “extract the visual essence and express it through contemporary forms.” Participant 8 added that abstraction can communicate tradition to younger audiences while retaining symbolic identity. Abstraction becomes culturally weak when it reduces the source to a generic geometry with no remaining relation to history or meaning. The distinction lies in whether the transformation is informed by cultural understanding. Semiotic analysis showed that successful abstractions altered the signifier but maintained a credible relation to the signified. Simplification focused on reducing decorative density rather than changing the basic visual language. Dense floral programmes became a single motif, multiple borders became one continuous line, elaborate painting became restrained brushwork, and crowded compositions opened into balanced negative space. This strategy corresponded with contemporary preferences for clarity, minimalism, and functional surfaces. Simplification was particularly prominent in product design, where complex ornament can conflict with usability, scalable production, and modern lifestyle expectations. Yet the most successful examples did not simply remove decoration. They selected motifs or formal details capable of carrying cultural identity with fewer elements. Participant 6 noted that modern audiences

often appreciate subtle cultural references more than highly decorated historical reproductions.

4.3.2 Recontextualisation and hybridisation

Recontextualisation transferred porcelain aesthetics into new functions, scales, and media. Ceramic vase forms informed interior decoration and lighting; porcelain painting became graphic identity; blue-and-white pattern moved into textiles; floral motifs appeared in packaging; and traditional vessels became contemporary sculpture. Interior design was a particularly important field because it allowed porcelain aesthetics to shape complete environments rather than remain attached to individual objects. The shift of context changed how signs were experienced. A porcelain-inspired wall or lighting installation operates spatially and may be encountered through movement, light, and atmosphere. Recontextualisation therefore involves more than placing a historical motif on a new surface; it changes the relationship among object, user, and environment. Participant 10 described the process as relocating the aesthetic so that cultural meaning survives beyond the original object. Hybridisation combined traditional porcelain aesthetics with contemporary design languages, international influences, digital methods, and mixed materials. The major forms included minimalist fusion, digital integration, mixed-material combinations, cross-cultural design, and experimental forms. Traditional motifs appeared with laser engraving or digital graphics; porcelain was combined with wood, metal, glass, resin, textiles, or concrete; and Chinese symbolic systems interacted with global design languages. The findings do not support an opposition between cultural purity and hybridity. Jingdezhen's history already contains intercultural exchange and adaptation. The issue is whether the hybrid relationship remains coherent and culturally legible. Projects were more successful when the traditional component influenced structure, meaning, and experience rather than acting as a detachable decorative layer. Participant 12 argued that hybridisation allows traditions to evolve instead of remaining fixed in history.

4.3.3 Material and technical adaptation

Material adaptation extended the visual and conceptual qualities of porcelain through glass, resin, mixed materials, recycled ceramics, digital printing, and three-dimensional fabrication. Digital manufacturing was especially important because it enabled complex geometries, precision, repeatability, and rapid experimentation. Mixed materials created contrasts in texture, structure, weight, and transparency, while glass translated porcelain's delicacy and translucency into lighting and spatial applications. Resin supported lightweight forms and detailed prototypes; recycled ceramic introduced a sustainability dimension. The findings caution against equating cultural authenticity with a single material. Participant 5 stated that innovation comes from understanding the spirit of porcelain rather than copying the material itself. Nevertheless, material change alters meaning. The use of resin or digital printing cannot communicate artisanal labour in the same way as hand-thrown and hand-painted porcelain. Successful adaptation either acknowledges that difference or creates a new relationship between advanced production and craft expertise.

4.3.4 Balancing tradition and innovation

The sixth strategy is not a separate visual technique but an evaluative principle governing all transformations. Participants consistently rejected two extremes: exact historical replication that lacks contemporary relevance, and unrestricted novelty that loses cultural identity. The most successful outcomes combined a strong traditional foundation with meaningful innovation.

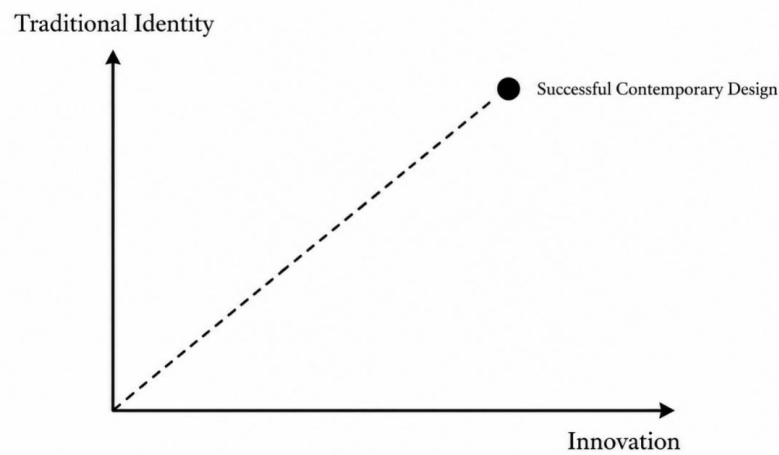


Figure 3. Relationship between traditional identity and innovation.

Participant 1 expressed the balance directly: “Innovation without tradition loses identity, while tradition without innovation loses relevance.” The results support a positive rather than competitive relationship between the two dimensions. Traditional identity provides the source knowledge, symbols, proportions, material intelligence, and cultural narrative. Innovation enables this knowledge to respond to current functions, technologies, audiences, and environmental concerns. The answer to Research Question Two is therefore a model of informed transformation: designers preserve essential aesthetic and symbolic relationships while changing visual complexity, medium, function, and context.

4.4 Research Question Three: Transformation across contemporary design fields

The 15 contemporary cases demonstrated that the six strategies operate differently according to disciplinary purpose. Four cases represented product design, four contemporary ceramic art, three interior and decorative design, and four experimental contemporary design. The nearly balanced distribution reduced dependence on a single medium and revealed both shared and field-specific patterns.

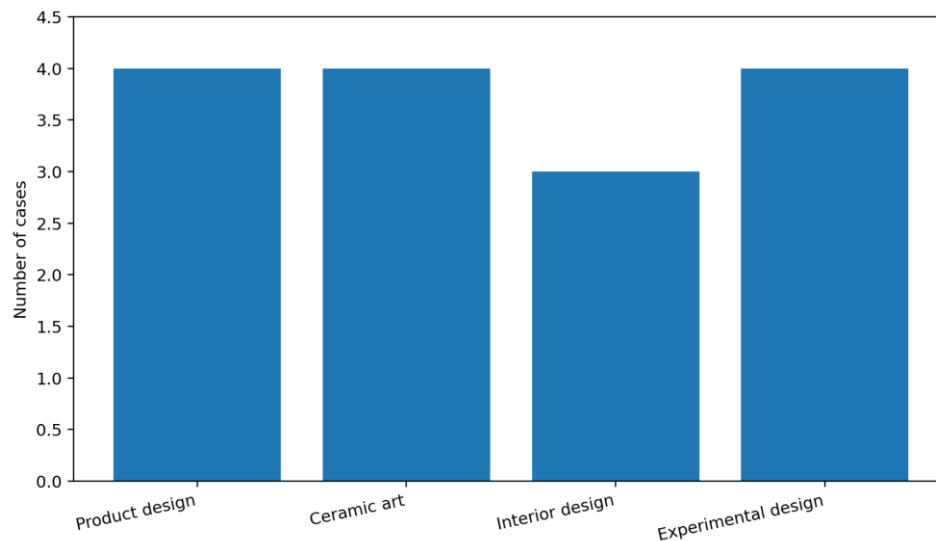


Figure 4. Distribution of selected contemporary cases.

Table 5. Contemporary case categories and dominant transformations

Category	Cases	Key transformations	Primary design outcome
Product design	4	Simplification, abstraction, ergonomic adaptation, material innovation	Culturally identifiable functional products
Contemporary ceramic art	4	Conceptual transformation, fragmentation, symbolic reinterpretation	Critical narratives of memory, identity, and transition
Interior and decorative design	3	Surface pattern, lighting, ceramic installation, spatial storytelling	Immersive cultural environments
Experimental design	4	Digital fabrication, AI-assisted design, interaction, parametric and mixed-reality methods	Technology-enabled cultural experiences

4.4.1 Product design

Product design prioritized usability, ergonomic adjustment, production feasibility, and market relevance. Blue-and-white decoration was often converted into minimal linear graphics; traditional vessel proportions informed contemporary ergonomic forms; floral motifs became geometric patterns; glossy porcelain surfaces were replaced or complemented by matte finishes; and symbolic imagery was integrated into brand or product identity. Simplification was the dominant transformation, followed by abstraction, functional adaptation, material innovation, and minimal ornamentation. These cases demonstrated that heritage can shape ordinary contemporary objects without requiring them to resemble museum artefacts. The strongest designs preserved proportional elegance and cultural reference while meeting present-day functional needs. Participant 5 explained that the object must work in contemporary life while still reminding users of Jingdezhen's cultural heritage. The product cases also exposed the risk of commercial superficiality. When a recognizable blue-and-white pattern was applied without relation to form or function, heritage operated as branding rather than design knowledge. More integrated

cases allowed cultural principles to influence the object's structure, interaction, and material experience.

4.4.2 Contemporary ceramic art

Ceramic art retained the material heritage of porcelain but expanded its conceptual role. Artists transformed symmetry into asymmetry, complete vessels into fragmented structures, historical motifs into contemporary symbolism, functional objects into conceptual works, and established craftsmanship into experimental expression. Conceptual transformation was most prominent, followed by symbolic reinterpretation, fragmentation, material experimentation, and narrative expression. Fragmentation was especially important. Broken, incomplete, or reconstructed vessel forms became metaphors for memory, historical disruption, cultural transition, or identity. The physical condition of the ceramic object thus carried meaning rather than representing damage alone. Artists also combined porcelain with alternative materials and experimental firing to explore social and environmental concerns. Participant 8 described traditional porcelain as a language rather than simply a material. This captures the difference between product and ceramic-art cases. Product design tended to translate heritage into useful contemporary objects; ceramic artists used porcelain to question, narrate, and reinterpret the idea of heritage itself. Both preserved continuity, but they did so through different relationships to function and meaning.

4.4.3 Interior and decorative design

Interior and decorative design transformed porcelain aesthetics into spatial experience. Blue-and-white colour relationships appeared in architectural finishes; patterns were enlarged for walls and surfaces; ceramic textures became panels; vessel forms informed lighting; and symbolism became spatial storytelling. Surface pattern was the most frequent application, followed by lighting design, ceramic installation, decorative panels, and spatial narrative. These cases demonstrated the value of scale and immersion. A motif experienced across a wall, partition, or illuminated installation is not simply enlarged decoration. It shapes movement, atmosphere, and user perception. Translucency became especially effective in lighting, where porcelain-inspired delicacy and light transmission created functional and symbolic relationships. Spatial storytelling, although less frequent, provided the deepest cultural engagement by connecting sequence, material, and narrative. The results suggest that interiors can move heritage beyond object display. Instead of placing porcelain in a contemporary room as an isolated artefact, designers can use its formal, chromatic, and material principles to organize the environment itself. This approach is consistent with heritage-inspired interior strategies that combine identity preservation with contemporary spatial function (Rashdan & Ashour, 2024).

4.4.4 Experimental and digital design

Experimental cases integrated heritage with digital fabrication, parametric modelling, artificial intelligence, interactive installation, mixed reality, and smart materials. Digital fabrication was the most common practice, followed by AI-assisted design, interactive installation, parametric design, and mixed reality. These methods expanded precision,

complexity, and user interaction. The findings indicate that technology did not automatically weaken traditional meaning. Digital models could reproduce proportional systems or generate new geometries from historical forms. Interactive projection and sensors transformed static porcelain references into responsive cultural experiences. Mixed-reality applications extended museum and educational engagement beyond physical display. Participant 12 summarized the pattern: technology changes the medium, but successful projects continue to communicate Jingdezhen's cultural spirit. Technology nevertheless introduced a clear requirement for cultural judgement. Generative systems can produce endless motif variations, but quantity and novelty do not establish authenticity. Human interpretation remains necessary to select, contextualize, and evaluate outputs. The results therefore position AI and digital fabrication as collaborative tools within a culturally informed process, not substitutes for design knowledge or craft expertise.

4.4.5 Cross-case comparison

All six strategies appeared across product design, ceramic art, interior design, and experimental design. Abstraction and simplification were the most widely and frequently used because they allowed the tradition to enter contemporary visual languages without direct imitation. Hybridisation and recontextualisation extended the heritage across materials and settings. Material adaptation expanded technical and functional possibilities. Symbolic transformation was less frequent but crucial when designers sought to address contemporary identity, memory, sustainability, or social change.

Table 6. Cross-case comparison of reinterpretation strategies

Strategy	Product	Ceramic art	Interior design	Experimental design
Abstraction	✓	✓	✓	✓
Simplification	✓	✓	✓	✓
Recontextualisation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hybridisation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Material adaptation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Symbolic transformation	✓	✓	✓	✓

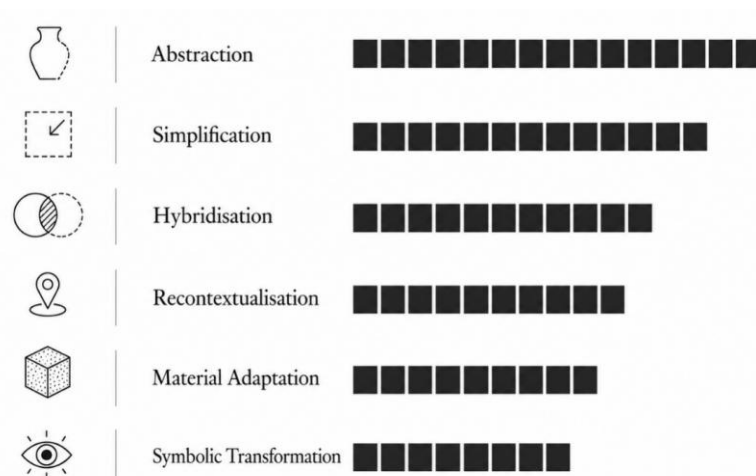


Figure 5. Integrated reinterpretation strategies across contemporary design.

The consistency across categories indicates that the strategies are not medium-specific. Their relative importance, however, varies. Product design emphasizes simplification and function; ceramic art emphasizes conceptual transformation and fragmentation; interiors emphasize recontextualisation and spatial application; and experimental practice emphasizes digital and technical adaptation. Successful projects combine multiple strategies rather than relying on one. The cross-case result answers Research Question Three by showing that reinterpretation is a multidimensional process acting simultaneously on form, ornament, material, function, symbolism, scale, and context. The same heritage source can support a household object, conceptual artwork, architectural environment, or interactive installation, provided the transformation maintains a meaningful relationship with Jingdezhen's aesthetic and cultural system.

4.5 Cross-source synthesis and emerging analytical framework

The findings for all three questions converged across archival research, visual analysis, and expert interviews. For Research Question One, archives established historical principles, visual analysis confirmed recurring formal and decorative characteristics, and experts interpreted their cultural significance. For Research Question Two, archives documented changing practices, visual analysis identified six transformation strategies, and interviewees explained professional design decisions. For Research Question Three, historical sources supplied the reference baseline, cases demonstrated actual transformations, and interviews validated the interpretation of outcomes.

Table 7. Cross-source triangulation of the principal findings

Research question	Archival contribution	Visual-analysis contribution	Interview contribution	Convergence
RQ1: Traditional aesthetics	Historical development and meanings	Recurring form, motif, colour, and material features	Cultural interpretation and validation	High
RQ2: Reinterpretation strategies	Evolution of design adaptation	Six recurring transformation strategies	Professional explanations of design decisions	High
RQ3: Contemporary applications	Historical reference baseline	Observable transformation across four fields	Interpretive validation of outcomes	High

This convergence led to an emerging analytical framework. The framework begins with traditional Jingdezhen porcelain aesthetics, organized through form, motifs, colour, material, and symbolism. Design semiotics then functions as the interpretive mechanism that identifies how observable elements communicate cultural meaning. The next component comprises the transformation strategies: abstraction, simplification, recontextualisation, hybridisation, material and technical adaptation, and balance between tradition and innovation. These strategies generate contemporary artworks and design practices in multiple fields. The outcomes are evaluated through three criteria: aesthetic integration, cultural continuity, and contemporary relevance. When the criteria are achieved together, reinterpretation supports sustained cultural identity and design innovation.

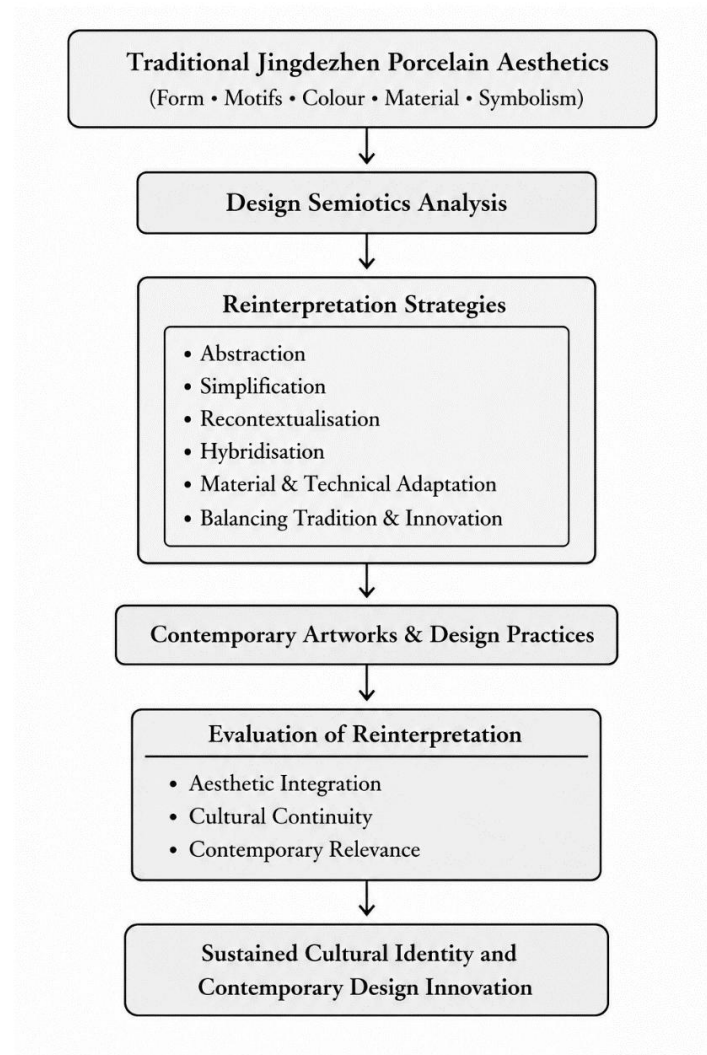


Figure 6. Emerging analytical framework for the reinterpretation of Jingdezhen porcelain aesthetics.

The framework makes an important distinction between input and evaluation. A design may include traditional signs at the input stage but fail at the evaluation stage if the signs are incoherent, culturally detached, or functionally irrelevant. Conversely, a work may look very different from historical porcelain yet demonstrate strong continuity by preserving proportional principles, material sensitivity, symbolic relationships, or craft values. The framework therefore provides a structured method for evaluating depth of reinterpretation rather than measuring similarity. Aesthetic integration asks whether the traditional and contemporary elements form a coherent design rather than a collage of unrelated references. Cultural continuity asks whether the work maintains an intelligible relationship with Jingdezhen's history, symbolism, material practice, or identity. Contemporary relevance asks whether the transformation responds convincingly to present-day function, audience, technology, or social context. The criteria are interdependent: cultural continuity without relevance may produce replication, relevance without continuity may produce generic design, and visual integration without either may produce attractive but shallow styling.

5. Discussion

5.1 Jingdezhen porcelain as a semiotic and material system

The first major contribution of the findings is the demonstration that Jingdezhen aesthetics cannot be reduced to blue-and-white decoration or a set of famous motifs. The traditional corpus showed a coordinated system in which proportion, curvature, body thickness, glaze, colour, imagery, and cultural meaning reinforced one another. This supports material-culture approaches that treat objects as evidence of social values and historical relations rather than as autonomous works of style (Clunas, 2004). It also extends semiotic analysis beyond graphic symbolism. Material translucency, smoothness, craftsmanship, and functional balance acted as signs alongside dragons, lotus flowers, and clouds. This wider definition has practical consequences. A design may achieve cultural continuity without using a recognizable motif if it translates Jingdezhen's material sensitivity or proportional harmony. Conversely, a product covered with traditional imagery may remain culturally weak if the imagery is disconnected from structure, use, and narrative. The findings therefore shift the unit of analysis from the isolated motif to the aesthetic system.

5.2 Reinterpretation as semiotic translation

The six strategies describe reinterpretation as a sequence of design judgements. Abstraction and simplification alter the visible sign; recontextualisation changes its setting and use; hybridisation changes its relationship with other cultural and material systems; technical adaptation changes the means of production; and the balance between identity and innovation governs the final coherence. This sequence is best understood as semiotic translation. Meaning is neither mechanically preserved nor automatically lost. It is renegotiated through decisions about what to retain, remove, emphasize, and connect. The dominance of abstraction and simplification is understandable in contemporary design, where visual clarity, minimal form, and functional efficiency are influential. The findings, however, show that reduction does not necessarily imply cultural dilution. Abstraction can intensify meaning by identifying the essential relation that makes a sign recognizable. The success of the strategy depends on cultural literacy. Designers who understand the historical associations of a form can reduce detail while retaining conceptual integrity; designers who lack that understanding may produce generic shapes that only claim a cultural source.

5.3 Authenticity as continuity through change

The results challenge an object-centred definition of authenticity based on historical sameness. Jingdezhen porcelain has always developed through technical innovation, changing patronage, export markets, and intercultural exchange (Gerritsen, 2011, 2020). Contemporary transformation is therefore compatible with historical continuity when it sustains the tradition's capacity to communicate and generate practice. This does not mean that all change is equally authentic. The framework identifies three tests. First, the transformation should be aesthetically integrated. Second, it should preserve or critically reinterpret a meaningful cultural relation. Third, it should perform a credible contemporary role. These criteria create a middle position between rigid conservation and unrestricted commercialization. They also explain why some hybrid designs are culturally persuasive while others appear as surface branding.

5.4 Disciplinary differences and shared principles

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that the same heritage system supports different contemporary objectives. Product design translates heritage into usability and market context. Ceramic art uses fragmentation and conceptual transformation to question memory and identity. Interior design converts object aesthetics into spatial atmosphere and narrative. Experimental design uses digital tools to create interaction and new material possibilities. Despite these differences, the shared strategies suggest a transferable heritage-design method. Designers in any field can begin by identifying the source aesthetic system, interpret its signs, select appropriate transformations, and evaluate the outcome through continuity and relevance. The method may therefore be applicable beyond porcelain to textiles, metalwork, architecture, lacquer, or other craft traditions, although each heritage system would require its own cultural knowledge and evaluation criteria.

5.5 Technology, craftsmanship, and the future of heritage

Digital fabrication, AI-assisted design, and mixed reality expand the ways in which porcelain aesthetics can be generated and experienced. The experimental cases show that digital tools can support complex form, documentation, audience participation, and educational access. They can also connect heritage with younger users whose design experience is increasingly mediated through screens and interactive environments. However, the findings do not support technological substitution for craftsmanship. Tacit knowledge remains central because materials and processes require sensory judgement developed through practice (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Sennett, 2008). A productive future lies in hybrid workflows that combine digital modelling and fabrication with artisanal glazing, firing, finishing, and cultural interpretation. This approach allows technology to extend the creative possibilities of heritage without erasing the knowledge communities that sustain it. The study also highlights the institutional dimension of reinterpretation. Museums, design schools, creative-industry parks, and residency programmes can mediate between artisans, designers, historians, and technologists (Cui & Coomans de Brachène, 2023; Xie, 2023). Without such collaboration, heritage risks splitting into two disconnected systems: traditional workshops with limited access to contemporary markets, and modern designers with limited understanding of craft. The analytical framework offers a common language for bridging these groups.

6. Implications and Recommendations

For contemporary designers, the first recommendation is to begin with cultural research rather than image collection. Designers should examine form, material, motif, philosophy, production, and historical use before selecting visual references. Mood boards of blue-and-white patterns are insufficient when they are not connected to the cultural and technical system from which the patterns emerged. Second, reinterpretation should be explicit about strategy. A project should clarify whether it is abstracting a motif, simplifying ornament, changing context, combining materials, adapting technology, or transforming symbolism. Naming the strategy encourages critical evaluation and prevents accidental pastiche. The proposed framework can be used during concept development as well as after completion. Third, artisans and cultural specialists should participate in the design process. Collaboration provides access to tacit material knowledge and enables cultural meanings to

be checked before commercialization. Designers contribute new functions, technologies, and markets, while artisans contribute craft judgement and historical continuity. Co-design also improves the ethical distribution of recognition and value. Fourth, art and design education should integrate semiotic literacy with studio practice. Students need to learn how visual elements communicate culturally, how meanings change across contexts, and how to document design decisions. Courses can combine museum study, archival research, workshop apprenticeship, visual analysis, digital experimentation, and reflective evaluation. Heritage should not be confined to history modules; it should inform product, spatial, graphic, and computational design. Fifth, museums and cultural institutions should move beyond object display toward interpretation and experimentation. Digital archives, interactive exhibitions, designer residencies, and collaborative laboratories can present porcelain as a living system. Institutions can use the framework to evaluate whether contemporary projects provide aesthetic integration, cultural continuity, and meaningful public relevance. Finally, policy and creative-industry support should balance economic development with cultural depth. Heritage branding and tourism may create income, but repeated use of standardized motifs can produce homogenized design. Funding and recognition should therefore prioritize projects that involve craft communities, document knowledge, support training, and demonstrate substantive reinterpretation rather than visual imitation. Sustainable design should include cultural sustainability alongside environmental and commercial objectives (Faraone, 2022; Fuad-Luke, 2013).

7. Limitations and Future Research

The study used a qualitative case design and a purposively selected corpus. The frequencies describe recurrence within 15 traditional and 15 contemporary works and cannot be generalized statistically to all Jingdezhen production or contemporary design. The selected cases emphasized works with visible engagement in porcelain heritage, which may underrepresent failed, commercially routine, or culturally weak projects. The interview sample of 13 specialists provided depth but did not represent all stakeholder groups. Future studies should include consumers, apprentices, industrial manufacturers, policy actors, and local community members. Comparative research could examine differences between Jingdezhen-based and external designers, Chinese and international audiences, or handcrafted and industrial production. The study analysed existing works and expert interpretation rather than creating and testing new prototypes. Practice-based research could apply the framework through iterative design, artisan collaboration, and user evaluation. Longitudinal work could examine whether transformed designs contribute to sustained craft employment, cultural learning, or intergenerational transmission. Quantitative or mixed-method studies may test how audiences recognize cultural meaning at different levels of abstraction and how perceptions vary across cultural backgrounds. Further research should also examine AI-assisted heritage design, intellectual property, authorship, and ethical use of cultural data. As generative tools become capable of producing unlimited porcelain-inspired imagery, the need for cultural attribution, expert validation, and transparent design processes will increase.

8. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Jingdezhen porcelain remains a living design resource because its heritage resides in an integrated system of form, motif, colour, material, craft, and cultural meaning. The findings identified six strategies through which this system is translated into contemporary practice: abstraction, simplification, recontextualisation, hybridisation, material and technical adaptation, and the balancing of tradition with innovation. Across product design, ceramic art, interiors, and experimental digital practice, successful projects did not depend on copying historical objects. They extracted and transformed the aesthetic logic and symbolic functions of the tradition. Abstraction and simplification enabled visual renewal; recontextualisation expanded function and scale; hybridisation connected materials and cultures; and digital adaptation widened production and interaction. Yet each strategy required cultural knowledge and critical evaluation. The proposed analytical framework links heritage sources to semiotic interpretation, transformation strategy, contemporary application, and evaluation through aesthetic integration, cultural continuity, and contemporary relevance. It offers a method for distinguishing meaningful reinterpretation from decorative borrowing. More broadly, the findings affirm that preservation and innovation are not opposing goals. Jingdezhen's cultural identity can be sustained precisely through informed transformation that keeps its knowledge, values, and aesthetic intelligence active within contemporary life.

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