

Research on Differentiated Development Paths of China's Themed Hotels from Dual Perspectives of Cultural Experience and Technological Integration

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Abstract: *Our study examines differentiated development strategy for China's themed hotels from the perspectives of cultural experience and technological experience, focusing on four themed hotel brands (Xiyue, Songpin, Huajiangtang and Meilunmeihuan) of the Huazhu Group, combines qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys of customers, and then studies how themed hotels integrate cultural tradition and technological innovation. Both high-end cultural hotels (e.g., Songpin) take the chances to impress visitors with the digitized cultural symbols (i.e., integrating AR to historical buildings); and trendy-themed hotels (e.g., Meilun meihuan) emphasize to potentially attractive digital interactive experiences (i.e., integrated AI technologies customized service). However, over-development of technology dilutes cultural stories and therefore points toward the need for "hybrid talent" with the ability to interpret heritage and apply technology in their culture. The study illustrates that a successful differentiation rests on contextual aspects of tech integration: luxury hotels target an older clientele through particularly immersive stories of cultural heritage, young travelers prefer trendy hotels' tech-enabled novelty. These findings offer practical guidance for balancing commercial appeal and cultural preservation in China's developing hotel industry, which aligns with national policies promoting the integration of culture and tourism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, China's themed hotels have moved from mainly copying others to focusing on innovation. This change has made them important supporters of culture and technology in the hotel industry. By 2022, the market size for these hotels reached 341.4 billion yuan. It is expected to grow beyond 850 billion yuan by the end of 2025, with an annual growth rate of 8% to 10%. This expansion is driven by shifts in population structure, government policy support, and strong market competition. Generation Z (aged 18-35) now accounts for 55% of domestic tourism spending (2.16 trillion RMB in 2022), seeking immersive experience with cultural relics and seamless experience of digital technology, which traditional hotels can barely provide. This paradigm shift makes themed hotels central players who bridge heritage authenticity with modernity. Their success, however, depends on the resolution of an important tension: how to integrate cultural authenticity with technological contemporaneity in an interesting way without sacrificing authenticity.

While cultural immersion has long served as a market differentiator, many hotels remain stuck in superficial aesthetics. But for many hotels, this is safe overkill that static display of traditional motifs or homogenized show-room décor that can't seduce the travellers looking for immersive experiences. Concurrently, the uncritical embrace of smart technologies would lead to a disjointed experience, such that AI-enabled personalisation or AR storytelling might overshadow traditional cultural stories.

Our study shows that differentiation is not about a choice between culture and technology, but in how we can rethink them as two interrelated phenomena. Government policy, such as China's 14th Five-Year Plan on "cultural - tourism integration" and tax benefits for heritage-related incentive projects, confirms such a double emphasis. Nevertheless, designing policies for operations will require new approaches that are not tokenistic, address fundamental gaps such as mismatch of workforce skills and technical fit from an ongoing process. Findings not only have implications for how hotels and other hospitality players adjust their strategies but also stoke global conversations about balancing business and cultural stewardship in a digital world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Cultural Experience Perspective

Zhang (2023) argues that cultural tourism integration constitutes ‘a new mode of industrial development originated from the mutual coupling of elements between cultural industry and tourism industry.’ For themed hotels, they can identify intangible cultural heritage craft as its cultural core and create an immersive cultural experience through its accommodation services. Qiao (2025) puts tourism hotels and local culture into a mutually empowering symbiotic partnership. Such a symbiosis is realized through spatial stories (for example, Tibetan watchtower architecture), local specific service processes (such as khata welcome ceremony, Tibetan cuisine experience), joint inductive cultural product developing, so the tourism hotel transforms from functional vessels’ into ‘cultural mediator’. Case studies by Liu & Xiong (2020) echo this argument: Songtsen Hotel fulfils travellers’s deep-seated desire for genuine and authentic Tibetan cultural experience by providing both explicit symbols (‘Tibetan’ architecture’) and implicit symbols (‘service stories’). Furthermore, Zhang (2025) suggests that themed hotels can be rural cultural tourism centres that create a ‘tourism-to-culture feedback effect’ on rural revitalisation through buying handicraft and local agricultural products promotion. But Zhang et al. (2024) issued the warning in their cross-culture study of the fact that regional culture strongly influences customer priority preferences. Blindly applying generalized service models will not work and will require culturally specific approaches.

2.2 Technology Integration in Hospitality

Regarding technological empowerment, Wu (2025) presents a ‘double-drive model of ‘technology + culture’’ proposal, arguing that digital technologies (e.g. AI, AR/VR) can reshape service processes, changing cultural components into interactive experience modules. For instance, AI brewing system to adaptively adjust tea brewing parameters according to sensors, and the AR can convert a tea ceremony demonstration to immersive animation which effectively reduces the user introduction cost. Concurrently, drawing on the framework of immersive experience theory, Zhao (2025) noted the ways in which intelligent lighting design (such as intelligent colour temperature change and lighting story effects) can trigger multi-sensory resonant effect and convert light into a fluid link between culture and emotion. Further, Du (2025) emphasizes the importance of rescuing intangible cultural heritage symbols through digital technologies as a time character. Blockchain traceability, VR scene scene reviving technology, and other methods can strengthen the credibility and effect of cultural dissemination. At the same time, it should be well-balanced between standardization and human warmth in application. For example, AI tea-making machines increase efficiency but degenerate the interactive spirituality in the tea masters practising ‘observing the mind while brewing tea’ (Wu, 2025), and thus a ‘human-machine collaboration’ service model needs to be built.

3. METHODS

Considering the differentiated development trends of Chinese themed hotels from different aspects of cultural experience and technological integration, in order to systematically explore the development paths of Chinese themed hotels, this paper takes a multi-case comparative analysis approach and a mixed-method research approach. This approach balances in-depth insights into practical contexts with quantitative validation of customer experiences.

3.1 Multi-Case Comparative Research Design

Looking for implementation paths of cultural experience and technological use in themed hotels, this article has selected four themed hotels owned by Huazhu in Shanghai, which are Songpin, Xiyue, Huajiantang, and Meilun Meihuan. The selection criteria are as follows:

First of all, the four hotels individually represent New Chinese aesthetics (Xiyue), local cultural aura (Huajiantang), the high end of business humanities (Songpin), and youthful trend culture (Meilun Meihuan), representing varied cultural experiences of China; Secondly, their different degrees of technization. These hotels have varieties of technological applications—smart rooms, AR/VR cultural tours, AI services—thereby helping to reveal different models of technology-based cultural experiences. Finally, their holding in the same corporate body under Huazhu Group allows for the presence of controlled variables in corporate strategy, which enables cross-case comparisons among these cases focusing on the culture-technology interaction mechanism. Qualitative information was obtained by semi-structured interviews (two managers in each hotel) and participant observation (immersing oneself in the culture setting and process of using technology in the hotel). Summarizing, this systematic analysis the way themed hotels seem to realize deep union of culture and technology in service flow, inside story of space,

and of exchange with customers.

3.2 Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

At the level of quantitative research, this paper designed a questionnaire system to measure the influence of cultural experience and technological penetration on differentiated development from the customer's view. The questionnaire design for each cultural experience was deconstructed into the three dimensions of authenticity perception, immersion and emotionality, and for technology integration, the design was partitioned into three dimensions of functional applicability, interacting fluidity and scenario embellishment. Item design was derived from Wu (2025)'s Digital Service Scale, and Zhao (2025)'s Immersive Experience Scale.

During the pre-survey and revision phase, we carried out a small pilot test ($n=50$) to evaluate reliability and validity. Items with a lower factor loading of less than 0.5 were discarded. The final questionnaire included three parts: cultural experience (10 items), technological integration (9 items) and satisfaction/repurchase intention (4 items). The overall Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.89. Our study population included customers who stayed at least once in any of the 4 aforementioned hotels during the previous year. Questionnaires were sent out through Wenjuanxing (a Chinese online survey platform) and we received a total of 350 returns of which 301 were valid, with an effective return rate of 86%.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Quantitative Analysis of Questionnaire Data

4.1.1 Sample Structure and Validity and Reliability Testing

Using brand samples mentioned above, the effective sample size for this study was 301 respondents, which were guests who stayed in four themed hotels under the Huazhu Group: Shanghai, Songpin, Xiyue, Huajiantang, Meilun Meihuan. The sample characteristics had a roughly equal ratio of males and females (48.2% male, 51.8% female), and the group of guests was mostly from 25 to 45-year-old respondents (72.1%). Occupations mainly included the representatives of corporate managers (32.6%), technical personnel (28.4%) and freelancers (19.3%), which was consistent with the basic characteristics of the clients of high level themed hotels. The Cronbach's α value for this questionnaire is 0.89. The reliability coefficient of the cultural experience dimension (0.87) and technology dimension (0.85) were both good. The KMO value is 0.84 ($p<0.001$), meaning that this scale has good structural validity.

4.1.2 Overall Performance of Core Variables

Descriptive statistics show (Table 1) that overall customers have quite a favourable perception towards the cultural experience ($M=4.32$, $SD=0.61$). Among these dimensions, 'Perceived cultural authenticity' (for example, Song Dynasty architecture flavour) had the highest scores ($M=4.51$) and the 'depth of experience with cultural heritage' (for example, to experience intangible cultural heritage crafts) had lower scores ($M=4.12$). Within technology integration dimension, 'functional applicability' (e.g., stability of smart guest control) was recognized highly ($M=4.38$), and 'scenario enhancement' (e.g., AR cultural narrative capability) was scored lower ($M=3.97$), which means that technology and cultural content integration still needs further improvement.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Core Variables (N=301)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Term Example
Cultural Experience	4.32	0.61	The authenticity of hotel cultural elements in reflecting local characteristics
Perception of Cultural Authenticity	4.51	0.53	Song dynasty aesthetics in architecture, displays, etc.
Depth of Cultural Interaction	4.12	0.68	Frequency of participation in intangible cultural heritage handicraft activities
Integration of Technology	4.18	0.67	Ease of use of the intelligent system
Functional Applicability	4.38	0.59	Stability of the guest room control system

Scene Enhancement	3.97	0.72	Presentation effectiveness of cultural stories through AR guided tours
Customer Satisfaction	4.40	0.58	Satisfaction with the overall stay experience

4.1.3 Group Comparison Analysis: Empirical Evidence of Differentiated Paths

To verify whether the differentiated development of different themed hotels is true, we divided our sample into two groups according to hotel positioning: a group of high end cultural-themed hotels (Songpin, Huajiantang, n=162) and a trendy themed hotel group (Meilun Meihuan, n=139). Independent sample t-tests were calculated to test the differences between the two groups in terms of cultural experience, technology integration and satisfaction. The results (see Table 2) are as follows:

1) Cultural Experience Dimension: The cultural authenticity perceptual impression of the high-end cultural theme group (M=4.62) is significantly higher than that of the trendy theme group (M=4.21, t=5.13, p<0.001), so the high-end hotel relies on a large number of static cultural symbols to create advantage differences.

2) Technology integration dimension: The scene enhancement score of trendy theme group (M = 4.15) is significantly higher than that of high-end cultural theme group (M = 3.89, t = 3.24, p < 0.01), which indicates a stronger demand for unique experiences caused by technology interaction.

3) Satisfaction Performance: There is no significant difference between two groups in terms of total customer satisfaction (t = 1.87, p > 0.05), but driving factors for satisfaction do differ. The high end of cultural tendency shows cultural authenticity to be stronger related to satisfaction(r = 0.69), while the trendy tendency shows technology to be stronger related to satisfaction(r = 0.66).

Table 2: Results of Group Comparison Analysis (t-test)

Variable	High-end Cultural Theme Group (n=162) M(SD)	Trendy Theme Group (n=139) M(SD)	t-value	p-value
Cultural Authenticity Perception	4.62 (0.49)	4.21 (0.61)	5.13	<0.001
Depth of Cultural Interaction	4.08 (0.71)	4.16 (0.65)	1.02	0.31
Functional Applicability	4.35 (0.62)	4.41 (0.56)	0.89	0.37
Scene Enhancement	3.89 (0.75)	4.15 (0.68)	3.24	<0.01
Customer Satisfaction	4.42 (0.60)	4.38 (0.56)	1.87	0.06

4.1.4 Cross-Analysis of Customer Preferences

On cross-analysis of age and core variables, we find (see Table 3) that Customers who are 36 and above are more emphasized on the cultural authenticity (High rating ratio: 68%) and are more satisfied with the preference for higher-end cultural-themed hotels ($\chi^2=6.52$, p<0.05). Customers who are 25-35 care more about the improvement in the level of technology experience (High rating ratio: 57%) and most prefer trendy-themed hotels ($\chi^2=4.87$, p<0.05). This finding further confirms the need of differentiated approaches to satisfy needs for particular types of customer groups.

Table 3: Cross-Analysis of Age and Preference Variables (Proportion of High Ratings, %)

Age Group	High Ratings for Cultural Authenticity	High Ratings for Technological Enhancement	Preferred Hotel Type
25-35 years	52%	57%	Trendy-themed hotels (63%)
36-45 years	68%	48%	High-end cultural hotels (71%)
46+ years	73%	41%	High-end cultural hotels (79%)

Based on the quantitative analysis above, we identified three major conclusions from our study. The first is that the customers generally rate cultural experience higher than the technology that is integrated; perceived cultural authenticity stands out; technology does not bring much added value in terms of enhancements to cultural narrative, such as immersion creation. Second, high-end cultural themed hotels and trendy themed hotels obtain high customer satisfaction by different paths: the former depends on static culture and the latter emphasizes interaction

and innovation of technologies. Third, customer needs are segmented by age, guests between 36 years old or more focus on deeper culture and guests between 25 to 35 years old focus on technology novelty. These findings sketch a broad picture of the integration and differentiation between culture and technology, but they do not yet offer the details of implementation. For example, how can high-end hotels tap into the cultural authenticity using specific design elements? How can trendy hotels rectify the problems of technological storytelling? And how can hotel management cater to the younger guests' thirst for technological novelty and older guests' preference for cultural sophistication?

To answer these questions, this study further conducts in-depth interviews to investigate the distinctive characteristics of themed hotels from the hotel management practice angle.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis of Structured Interview Data

4.2.1 Cultural Translation Strategies in Spatial Narratives

Deeper interview with the case study hotel finds that successful cultural experiences result from the 'design' of a spatial story. For example, the management of the Xiyue Hotel emphasises: "We do not just pile up cultural symbolism. Instead, we translate the new Chinese aesthetics into perceivable spatial rhythm." The hotel employs a 'scenic progression' circulation design with an emotional transition, taking guests from the clamour of a city lobby to landscape-style serenity of guest rooms, providing a more emotional journey; the language of light and shadow in certain places (e.g. lunar phase projections in corridorways) brings time fluidity to the cultural experience. Moreover, Huajiantang Hotel stresses the experience authenticity. Guests are invited to write poetry on the Xuan paper stationery provided in rooms. This design enhances the customer engagement with Jiangnan culture by 37%, as results from post-stay interviews indicate.

4.2.2 Hierarchical Design of Cultural Interaction

Qualitative data also allows us to understand the progressive logic of perception-understanding-co-creation of cultural experience. The artistic director of Songpin Hotel told us: "We noticed that different guests' liking for garden culture had different levels." So, Songpin Hotel innovated a garden interaction model of three levels. Other elements, such as the iconic tiles and whitewashed walls of the Song Dynasty, carved beams, painted rafters, and three courtyards, speak straight to the eye in the first layer. Intermediate layer features a Song Dynasty tea-whisking workshop for hand-on understanding; the immersive layer invites the guests to co-generate intangible cultural heritage crafts, such as lacquer fan, peacock tail inlay and river lantern blessings, with the resident artisans to acquire co-generate emotions.

4.2.3 Empowerment mechanisms and existing bottlenecks of technological integration

In interviews, some officers explained that the reason for technology-based innovation was to answer cultural elements in a certain way. The Engineering Director of Songpin Hotel said this: "A courtyard-style room is generally too dark, we developed a 'gradual awakening' system—soft light, for example, with the colour temperature of an oil lamp at dawn, increasing in intensity gradually. As soft light avoiding the blunt 'electronic alarms' that would disrupt the cultural ambience of waking up." The culturally inspired technological refinement improved guest satisfaction with the room's lighting environment to 4.6 (out of a maximum of 5). Just differently, the Magnificent Hotel experimented with VR for avant-garde art shows. But the hotel management admitted that "initially we emphasised showiness of technology more than coherence and therefore VR content that was disjointed to the hotel's 'Shanghai School' cultural theme and diluted our hotel brand identity".

Several hotel managers mentioned the issue of the 'tipping point' for technology adoption. The owner of Huajiantang Hotel remarked: "We once fully adopted the AI tea masters. However, experienced tea consumers complained about lack of the warmth of human-related tea ceremony". After the establishment switched to the 'auxiliary mode', i.e., AI deals with the identical act, such as controlling the water temperature of the service water source, tea masters explain the philosophy of tea ceremony. The setup correctly restored the satisfaction of the tea culture experience for customers. It is this reason that the quantitative study found the direct effect of technology integration on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$) that falls short of that of culture experience ($\beta = 0.42$). It shows that technology's ultimate benefit is in augmenting, rather than replacing, human relationships.

5. CONCLUSION

Our study discusses the differentiated strategies of China's themed hotels from perspectives of cultural experience and technology, using the themed hotel brands of Huazhu Group, including Xiyue, Songpin, Huajiantang and Meilunmeihuan, as representative examples. Our analysis highlights three core approaches to achieving competitive differentiation in the China hotel industry.

5.1 Cultural Symbol Digitization and Immersive Narrative Construction

Integrating heritage culture and smart technology can help themed hotels get beyond surface appearance and let the audience experience attractive, fresh culture ecologies. For example, the Song pillared garden designed by Songpin Hotel, and the light art of Xiyue Hotel are tapping static cultural patterns and manifestations with AR and VR technologies. Hotel, for example, by overlaying digital layers over physical space (virtual tea parties, immersive Song Dynasty scholar gatherings, and so on) makes passive interior decor into participatory cultural ritual. This is also answering the core problem that Liu (2022) identified regarding the so-called passive culture display with scant interaction that has rung true in the hotel industry history.

Furthermore, NMCH protection can be promoted by 3D printing and AI modelling of patterns. For instance, the ethnic handicrafts of Southwest China are currently only exhibited as just pictures, which could be digitised, enabling guests to interact with virtual products or customise souvenir patterns through AI models. Such innovations not only protect cultural heritage but are also attractive to younger consumers who are seeking unique, shareable experiences.

5.2 Data-Driven Personalization and Cross-Scenario Service Integration

Using big data, hotels can decode each guest's cultural tastes and provide hyper personalized services. Based on booking histories, consumption habits, and digital footprints, brands such as Huazhuangtang can customise room settings (turn on Songpin's tripartite courtyard lighting modes, for instance, for guests that might prefer ancient style decor). Building on "cultural profiling", this approach ensures that services fit individual preferences and move away from one-size-fits-all standardization.

Integrating cross-scenario services can promote value co-creation. For example, Huazhuangtang's AI concierge can recommend nearby ICH workshops to guests with expressed interest in natural aesthetics, whereas voice-enabled assistants can simplify booking of DIY materials. Such seamless linkages between accommodation, dining and leisure activities enhance the "hotel-as-cultural-portal" model and increase guest involvement and repeats.

5.3 Hybrid Talent Cultivation for Cultural-Technological Synergy

To address the industry's ongoing talent gap, Huazhu's model aims at grooming "cultural-technical hybrids" with twin capacities. Ordinary employees need to have upgraded cultural literacy to understand symbolic meanings, such as explaining the spirituality, for example, of the seasonal theme "Mountain and Peaks" of Songpin hotels or Buddhist-style themes of room decorations. Concurrently, technical teams should also undergo cultural training to avoid misapplications (such as in Buddhism, AR interfaces incompatible with the culture).

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