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Article

The Mechanism of Artificial Intelligence--Enabled Strategic Decision-Making in Cultural Tourism Enterprises: A Perspective of Dynamic Activation of Cultural Resources

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Abstract: The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into cultural tourism enterprises marks a significant shift from operational automation to strategic decision-making. While prominent institutions like the Palace Museum and Dunhuang Academy in China have pioneered innovative AI applications, existing research largely treats AI merely as a tactical tool or assumes that cultural resources possess a fixed strategic value. This perspective overlooks how AI dynamically activates heritage assets through continuous audience interaction. To address this critical gap in the literature, this study employs a qualitative comparative case study methodology, rigorously analyzing empirical data from semi-structured interviews (n=12), internal strategy documents spanning from 2020 to 2024, and comprehensive audits of AI-driven platforms at both institutions. The findings reveal a recursive "Dynamic Activation Loop" comprising three distinct phases: sensing real-time audience signals, interpreting emergent cultural meanings via advanced machine learning algorithms, and strategically activating heritage elements through immersive exhibitions, intellectual property development, or interactive narrative design. The Palace Museum emphasizes the amplification of dominant historical narratives for broader commercial resonance, whereas Dunhuang prioritizes the discovery of marginalized voices to enhance educational depth, with both approaches governed by strict ethical review mechanisms. Theoretically, this study extends dynamic capabilities theory by conceptualizing cultural resources as inherently fluid and relationally constituted. Practically, it offers a robust, context-sensitive model for heritage organizations to effectively harness AI technologies while safeguarding cultural authenticity, social inclusivity, and curatorial integrity in an era of rapid digital transformation.

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1. Introduction

The digital transformation of cultural tourism enterprises has entered a new phase, marked not only by the digitization of collections but by the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into core strategic functions. In China, institutions such as the Palace Museum in Beijing and the Dunhuang Academy in Gansu Province have emerged as pioneers, deploying AI systems that go beyond operational automation to actively shape decision-making regarding exhibitions, audience engagement, intellectual property development, and even conservation priorities. These initiatives align with national policy directives, including the "14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development," which explicitly calls for the "intelligent upgrading of cultural heritage institutions" through big data, AI,

and immersive technologies [1]. Yet, while the technological adoption is visible, the underlying mechanism by which AI informs strategic choices, particularly in contexts where cultural authenticity, historical integrity, and commercial sustainability must coexist, remains poorly understood.

Existing scholarship offers limited insight into this mechanism. Much of the literature on AI in cultural heritage focuses on technical applications: image recognition for artifact restoration, natural language processing for cataloging, or recommendation algorithms for visitor personalization. These studies treat AI as an efficiency-enhancing tool operating at the tactical level [2]. Meanwhile, strategic management research tends to view cultural resources through the lens of the resource-based view (RBV), assuming their value is inherent and static, such as rarity or historical significance. This perspective fails to account for how digital technologies, especially AI, can dynamically activate these resources, transforming them from passive inventories into responsive inputs for strategic cognition. The gap is particularly acute in non-Western contexts, where institutional logics blend state stewardship, cultural preservation, and market-oriented innovation in complex ways that challenge conventional strategic frameworks.

This study addresses this gap by proposing and examining the concept of dynamic activation of cultural resources, a process through which AI continuously interprets audience interactions, predicts cultural resonance, and recomposes heritage narratives to inform enterprise-level decisions. We argue that in digitally advanced cultural tourism enterprises, strategic decision-making is no longer solely driven by expert intuition or historical precedent but is increasingly mediated by AI systems that render cultural meaning actionable in real time [3]. The innovation of this paper lies in bridging strategic management theory with digital heritage practice, offering a novel explanatory framework that captures the fluidity of cultural value in the algorithmic age.

To investigate this mechanism, we employ a qualitative comparative case study methodology, focusing on two emblematic institutions: The Palace Museum and the Dunhuang Academy [4]. Both have implemented sophisticated AI infrastructures since 2020, the Palace Museum through its "Smart Forbidden City" ecosystem and Dunhuang via its "Digital Dunhuang" platform, but operate under distinct geographic, institutional, and heritage conditions. Data collection includes semi-structured interviews with 12 senior staff (curators, digital strategists, and project leads), analysis of internal strategy documents, and audits of public-facing AI applications. This approach allows us to trace how raw cultural data is transformed into strategic insight across different organizational contexts.

The significance of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it extends dynamic capabilities theory by introducing cultural resource fluidity as a key mediating construct, challenging the assumption that heritage assets possess fixed strategic value. Practically, it provides cultural institutions with a grounded, ethically aware model for leveraging AI without compromising curatorial integrity. As global heritage organizations grapple with post-pandemic recovery and digital saturation, understanding how AI can serve not just as a tool but as a strategic sense-maker becomes essential. This paper thus contributes to a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of AI-enabled decision-making in one of the most symbolically rich sectors of the creative economy [5].

2. Literature Review

The academic discourse on strategic decision-making within cultural enterprises has increasingly acknowledged the dual imperatives of heritage conservation and market responsiveness [6]. Early conceptualizations framed museums and heritage institutions as non-commercial entities governed by curatorial authority and public service mandates. More recent scholarship recognizes their evolving role as hybrid organizations that must navigate complex institutional logics, including state policy, audience expectations, and revenue generation. However, even this updated perspective often treats digital technologies, particularly AI, as auxiliary tools for enhancing operational efficiency or visitor personalization, rather than as transformative agents reshaping strategic cognition

itself. This instrumental framing overlooks how AI reconfigures the very basis on which cultural value is identified, interpreted, and leveraged.

Within the domain of digital heritage, research has predominantly focused on AI's technical functionalities: image recognition for artifact classification, natural language processing for archival indexing, or generative models for virtual reconstruction. While these applications demonstrate clear utility in preservation and access, they are typically analyzed within bounded, expert-defined parameters. The underlying assumption is that AI operates downstream of curatorial judgment, executing tasks without altering the epistemological foundations of cultural interpretation [6]. Yet in practice, AI systems increasingly function upstream, identifying patterns in audience engagement that prompt institutions to reconsider which narratives, objects, or historical figures warrant emphasis. This shift from execution to agenda-setting represents a profound but underexamined transformation in institutional agency, one that current literature fails to theorize adequately.

Strategic management theories offer complementary but incomplete lenses. The resource-based view conceptualizes cultural assets as inherently valuable due to their rarity, historical depth, and inimitability. However, this model presumes cultural value is fixed and exogenously determined, neglecting how digital mediation can dynamically alter an artifact's relevance based on real-time social resonance. Dynamic capabilities theory addresses adaptability by emphasizing an organization's ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources in response to environmental change. Yet its application has largely centered on technological or market-based resources, with limited attention to the semiotic and affective dimensions of cultural capital [7]. Cultural resources do not derive strategic utility merely from possession but from their capacity to evoke meaning across diverse audiences, a process that is interpretive, context-dependent, and often contested. Existing frameworks struggle to accommodate this fluidity, treating culture as a static endowment rather than a relational and performative construct.

A critical limitation across these strands is the lack of interrogation into power, representation, and epistemic authority in AI-mediated cultural strategies. When algorithms prioritize certain themes, such as imperial aesthetics over everyday life in historical narratives, they do so base on training data that may reflect dominant cultural biases or commercial preferences. The resulting strategic decisions, though presented as data-driven, can inadvertently reinforce hegemonic interpretations while marginalizing alternative voices. Moreover, the opacity of many AI systems obscures the normative choices embedded in their design, creating an illusion of neutrality that shields institutions from accountability [8]. Current scholarship rarely engages with these ethical and political dimensions, instead adopting an uncritical stance that equates technological adoption with progress.

Collectively, these gaps reveal a theoretical blind spot: the absence of a framework that explains how static cultural inventories are dynamically activated into strategic inputs through continuous interaction between algorithmic systems and audience behavior. This study addresses that void by reconceptualizing cultural resources not as fixed assets but as fluid signifiers whose strategic value emerges through AI-mediated processes of sensing, interpreting, and recomposing meaning, particularly within the distinctive institutional contexts of digitally transforming heritage organizations [9].

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework: The Dynamic Activation Loop

This study advances a novel theoretical construct, the Dynamic Activation Loop, to explain how AI reconfigures strategic decision-making in cultural tourism enterprises by transforming static cultural resources into fluid, actionable inputs. Traditional strategic management theories, such as the resource-based view, treat cultural assets as inherently valuable due to their historical rarity and authenticity. However, this perspective assumes

cultural value is fixed and exogenously given, failing to account for how digital mediation can dynamically reshape relevance through audience interaction.

In contrast, dynamic capabilities theory offers a more adaptive lens, emphasizing an organization's capacity to sense environmental shifts, seize opportunities, and reconfigure resources. Yet its application has largely centered on technological or market-based assets, neglecting the semiotic nature of cultural heritage, where value emerges not from possession but from meaning-making [10]. AI intervenes precisely at this interpretive nexus. By processing behavioral, textual, and visual data generated through digital interfaces, AI systems detect patterns of cultural resonance that may remain invisible to conventional curatorial methods. These algorithmic insights do not merely support decisions; they actively reshape institutional priorities by highlighting which narratives, symbols, or historical figures are gaining traction among diverse audiences.

The Dynamic Activation Loop operationalizes this process through three recursive phases: Sensing: AI captures real-time signals from digital touchpoints, mobile apps, ticketing platforms, social media, and virtual tours, recording how users interact with cultural content (e.g., time spent on a specific mural, repeat views of an artifact, sentiment in comments). Interpreting: Machine learning models cluster these signals into cultural meaning categories (e.g., "spiritual tranquility," "imperial grandeur," "artisan identity"), often revealing emergent interests that challenge established exhibition paradigms [4]. Activating: Institutions strategically recompose heritage elements, selecting themes, designing experiences, or developing intellectual property, based on predicted audience resonance, thereby converting latent cultural potential into tangible strategic outputs.

Critically, this loop is not deterministic. Human curators retain ultimate authority, negotiating algorithmic suggestions within ethical boundaries of authenticity, inclusivity, and conservation. The framework thus positions AI not as a replacement for expertise but as a cognitive partner that expands the scope of strategic imagination in heritage contexts [7].

3.2. Research Design and Case Selection

To empirically investigate the Dynamic Activation Loop, we employ a qualitative comparative case study methodology. This approach is well-suited for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena where causal mechanisms are embedded in institutional practices. Two Chinese cultural institutions were selected based on three criteria: formal status as stewards of UNESCO World Heritage sites, documented deployment of enterprise-level AI systems since 2020, and contrasting operational environments that enable analytical variation while maintaining thematic coherence [11].

The Palace Museum in Beijing represents an urban, high-traffic institution leveraging its imperial legacy through digital branding and commercial partnerships. Its "Smart Forbidden City" initiative integrates AI across visitor services, content personalization, and IP development. In contrast, the Dunhuang Academy, located in remote Gansu Province, manages the fragile Mogao Caves, a site where physical access is restricted to prevent deterioration. Its "Digital Dunhuang" platform uses AI to enable global access while uncovering nuanced interpretations of Buddhist art [12]. These differences allow us to examine how institutional mission, geography, and heritage type shape the activation mechanism.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered between January 2023 and March 2024 through three complementary sources.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve professionals (six per institution), including heads of digital innovation, senior curators, and AI project managers. The interview protocols explored decision-making processes, data utilization practices, and perceived shifts in strategic focus following AI adoption [13].

Document analysis was performed on internal strategy documents, annual innovation reports, and public white papers (2020–2024) to trace institutional discourse surrounding AI and cultural value.

Platform audits were conducted on key AI-driven interfaces, such as the Palace Museum's mobile app and Dunhuang's web-based "AI Cave Explorer," to systematically review data collection points, algorithmic logic, and user feedback loops.

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, guided by the three-phase structure of the Dynamic Activation Loop [12]. To enhance validity, findings were triangulated across data sources, and preliminary interpretations were shared with two participants for member checking.

Table 1 below illustrates how the activation mechanism manifests differently across the two cases, reflecting their distinct institutional logics.

Table 1. A Comparative Analysis of the AI-Driven Dynamic Activation Mechanism in Two Cultural Heritage Institutions

Phase	Palace Museum	Dunhuang Academy
Sensing	Tracks in-app navigation paths, AR interaction duration, e-commerce clickstreams.	Monitors time spent on 3D cave models, keyword searches in digital archive, social shares of mural details.
Interpreting	Identifies correlations between Qing dynasty narratives and Gen Z engagement spikes.	Detects rising interest in female donor figures and cross-cultural Silk Road motifs.
Activating	Launches limited-edition IP collaborations (e.g., with fashion brands) based on trend forecasts.	Designs thematic online exhibitions (e.g., "Women of the Caves") and multilingual VR tours targeting diaspora audiences.

This comparative evidence confirms that while both institutions deploy similar AI infrastructures, their strategic activations diverge: the Palace Museum emphasizes amplification of existing cultural capital through commercial channels, whereas Dunhuang prioritizes the discovery of underrepresented narratives to deepen global understanding. Both, however, embed AI within governance frameworks that uphold heritage ethics, ensuring that dynamic activation serves cultural integrity rather than merely market efficiency [3].

4. The Mechanism of Artificial Intelligence--Enabled Strategic Decision-Making in Cultural Tourism Enterprises

4.1. Operationalizing Dynamic Activation: From Theory to Practice

The theoretical construct of the Dynamic Activation Loop, comprising sensing, interpreting, and activating phases, finds concrete expression in the strategic practices of digitally advanced cultural heritage institutions [14]. This chapter presents empirical findings from two Chinese cases: The Palace Museum and the Dunhuang Academy. Both are state-affiliated, heritage-centered organizations that have integrated enterprise-level AI systems not merely for operational efficiency but to inform high-level decisions about exhibitions, audience engagement, intellectual property (IP) development, and narrative curation. Their experiences reveal how static cultural resources, such as imperial artifacts or Buddhist murals, are continuously revalued through algorithmic mediation, thereby reshaping institutional strategy.

Crucially, AI does not operate in a vacuum. Its strategic influence is filtered through institutional missions, conservation ethics, and policy mandates. In both cases, AI functions as a strategic sense-maker: it translates raw behavioral data into culturally interpretable signals that prompt curatorial reconsideration. This process is neither fully automated nor purely intuitive; rather, it represents a hybrid mode of decision-making where algorithmic insight and human judgment co-evolve.

4.2. Case Evidence and Comparative Patterns

4.2.1. The Palace Museum: Amplification through Data-Driven Branding

At the Palace Museum, AI is integrated into the "Smart Forbidden City" ecosystem, encompassing mobile apps, e-commerce platforms, and augmented reality (AR) tour guides. The institution's strategic focus is on transforming its imperial legacy into a globally recognized cultural brand. AI facilitates this by identifying emerging audience preferences, particularly among younger demographics, and aligning content and product strategies accordingly.

For instance, sentiment analysis of social media posts highlighted a sustained interest in Qing dynasty court aesthetics, especially among users aged 18-25. This insight prompted the activation of previously underutilized archival materials related to imperial fashion and daily life, which were subsequently developed into limited-edition collaborations with domestic fashion brands and digital collectibles [15]. As shown in Table 2, the sensing phase captures detailed interaction data, while the activation phase results in commercial and experiential outputs.

Table 2. AI-Driven Strategic Actions at the Palace Museum (2022--2024)

Sensing Input	Interpretive Insight	Strategic Activation
High dwell time on AR "Imperial Wardrobe" module	Strong Gen Z interest in historical costume design	Launch of "Forbidden City x Streetwear" capsule collection
Spike in searches for "empress dowager"	Rising curiosity about female power in Qing court	Thematic online exhibition: "Women Behind the Dragon Throne"
Repeat purchases of digital souvenirs	Willingness to pay for personalized heritage items	AI-generated custom postcards based on user visit history

This pattern demonstrates amplification: leveraging dominant narratives through data-validated channels to maximize reach and revenue, while adhering to historical plausibility [16].

4.2.2. Dunhuang Academy: Discovery through Algorithmic Narrative Expansion

In contrast, the Dunhuang Academy employs AI primarily to overcome physical constraints, as the Mogao Caves are fragile and access-limited, and to democratize the interpretation of Buddhist art. Its "Digital Dunhuang" platform uses computer vision and natural language processing to enable deep exploration of mural iconography [17]. Here, AI serves less as a branding tool and more as a hermeneutic instrument, uncovering latent meanings in visual data.

Notably, clustering algorithms applied to user interactions identified disproportionate attention to peripheral figures in murals, such as female donors and Central Asian merchants, rather than central Buddhas. This challenged traditional scholarly emphasis and prompted curators to develop new interpretive frameworks. The result was a series of multilingual virtual exhibitions highlighting cross-cultural exchange along the Silk Road, targeting diaspora and academic audiences.

Figure 1 maps the flow of data through Dunhuang's activation loop, showing how user behavior (e.g., zooming on a specific mural detail) feeds into thematic clustering, which then informs content production.

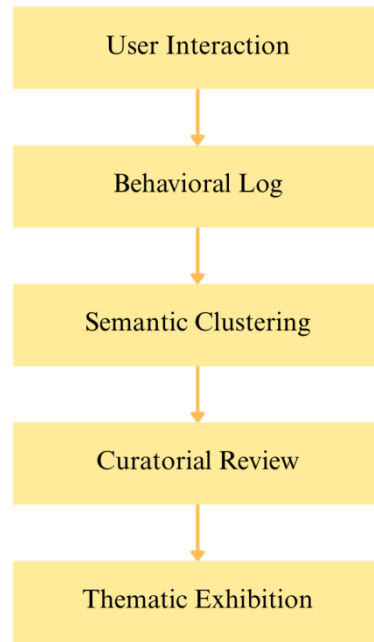


Figure 1. Data-to-Strategy Flow in Dunhuang Academy's AI System.

This reflects a logic of discovery: using AI to surface marginalized or overlooked cultural elements, thereby enriching public understanding and fulfilling the institution's educational mandate.

4.3. *Cross-Case Synthesis: Three Core Mechanisms*

Comparative analysis reveals three interrelated mechanisms through which AI enables strategic decision-making via dynamic activation.

4.3.1. Real-Time Cultural Resonance Detection

Both institutions utilize AI to transcend static audience segmentation. Rather than depending on demographic surveys, they identify current cultural resonances, such as imperial elegance or Silk Road cosmopolitanism, and adapt their programming in real time. This approach shifts their strategy from retrospective planning to proactive adaptation.

4.3.2. Narrative Recomposition

AI does not create new heritage but recomposes existing elements into novel configurations [18]. For example, linking mural motifs with contemporary design trends or connecting donor portraits with gender studies discourse demonstrates how cultural resources are remixed for strategic relevance without compromising authenticity.

4.3.3. Ethical Mediation of Algorithmic Output

Crucially, neither institution implements AI suggestions uncritically. A governance layer, comprising curators, conservators, and policy advisors, filters algorithmic insights through heritage ethics. If an AI proposes a sensationalized interpretation (e.g., "romantic secrets of the Forbidden City"), it is rejected for lacking scholarly basis. Thus, activation is bounded by institutional integrity.

Table 3 summarizes these mechanisms across dimensions of purpose, output, and constraint.

Table 3. Core Mechanisms of AI-Enabled Strategic Decision-Making

Mechanism	Palace Museum	Dunhuang Academy	Shared Constraint
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Resonance	Drives IP and	Guides virtual	Must align with
Detection	merchandising	exhibition themes	historical records
Narrative	Blends heritage	Highlights	Avoids
Recomposition	with pop culture	underrepresented	anachronism or
		roles	distortion
Ethical	Reviewed by Brand	Vetted by Academic	Compliance with
Mediation	Ethics Committee	Council	national heritage
			laws

4.4. *Implications for Cultural Tourism Enterprises*

The strategic mechanisms observed in institutions such as the Palace Museum and Dunhuang Academy are increasingly being adopted by broader cultural tourism enterprises, particularly large, state-backed conglomerates managing multiple heritage sites. These organizations now utilize AI not only for operational purposes but also to shape storytelling, visitor routes, and brand partnerships. For instance, some analyze aggregated data from apps and social media across sites to identify trends, such as a growing interest in traditional crafts, and adjust programming accordingly [9]. One group redesigned a historic town's walking path based on visitor sentiment, emphasizing artisan workshops over generic shops, thereby enhancing both authenticity and engagement. This shift reflects a transition from static preservation to dynamic cultural curation.

The true value of AI in this context lies not in automation but in activating meaning: transforming passive heritage into living narratives by linking audience behavior to cultural relevance. When algorithms reveal that certain motifs resonate with themes such as identity or sustainability, institutions can create targeted exhibitions or products. However, scaling this approach involves risks. Commercial pressures may prioritize viral appeal over depth, leading to superficial interpretations. Additionally, data often overrepresent digitally active urban users, potentially marginalizing rural or minority perspectives and reinforcing dominant historical narratives. Responsible implementation requires ethical safeguards, including diverse data inputs (such as offline feedback), bias audits, and structured collaboration among technologists, curators, and communities. Only through such measures can AI support heritage practices that are both innovative and inclusive.

In conclusion, AI-enabled decision-making in cultural tourism depends on dynamically activating cultural resources, continuously reinterpreting heritage through digital interaction while maintaining integrity and relevance [11].

5. **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the mechanism through which artificial intelligence enables strategic decision-making in cultural tourism enterprises by dynamically activating cultural resources. Moving beyond conventional views that treat heritage assets as static endowments or AI as a mere operational tool, this research proposes and empirically validates the Dynamic Activation Loop, a recursive process of sensing audience interactions, interpreting emergent cultural meanings, and strategically activating heritage elements in response. Through comparative case studies of the Palace Museum and the Dunhuang Academy, it is demonstrated how AI functions not as a replacement for curatorial expertise but as a cognitive partner that expands institutional capacity to detect real-time cultural resonance and recompose narratives with strategic intent.

The findings reveal two distinct yet complementary logics: the Palace Museum leverages AI to amplify established imperial narratives through data-driven branding and commercialization, while Dunhuang uses it to discover underrepresented voices, such as female donors and Silk Road traders, thereby deepening scholarly and public understanding. Despite these differences, both institutions embed algorithmic insights

within robust ethical governance structures, ensuring that strategic activations remain grounded in historical authenticity and conservation principles.

Importantly, this mechanism extends beyond elite museums to broader cultural tourism enterprises, including large-scale heritage management groups. As these organizations increasingly adopt AI to shape visitor experiences and long-term cultural programming, the risk of prioritizing popularity over profundity grows. Thus, responsible implementation demands inclusive data practices, bias mitigation, and continuous dialogue between technologists and cultural stewards.

Ultimately, AI's transformative potential in the cultural sector lies not in automation, but in its ability to render heritage meaningfully responsive to contemporary audiences. By reconceptualizing cultural resources as fluid, relational, and perpetually reinterpretable, this study offers a theoretically grounded and ethically aware framework for navigating the complexities of digital transformation, ensuring that the past remains not only preserved but vibrantly alive in the algorithmic age.

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