

# Research on Marketing Strategies of Private Museums from the Perspective of Cultural Consumption: A Case Study of the Guanfu Museum

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## Abstract

In the vast and diverse landscape of China's cultural heritage, private museums have emerged as key players in the preservation and promotion of artistic and historical artifacts. These exclusive institutions, adorned with a blend of tradition and modernity, have become captivating gateways to China's rich past. This article analyzes and researches the marketing strategies of private museums from the perspective of cultural consumption, taking the successful example of the Guanfu Museum as inspiration. Feasible marketing strategies are explored, providing recommendations for the development of private museums.

## Keywords

Guanfu Museum, marketing strategies, cultural consumption.

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of China's economy and the flourishing market of cultural relics collection and circulation, Ma Weidu established the Guanfu Classical Art Museum in 1996, which became the first officially registered private museum in China. Starting from 2011, policies encouraging private collections gradually emerged, bringing spring to the development of private museums. In 2016, during the executive meeting of the State Council, it was proposed to "encourage legal private collection of cultural relics and support the development of non-state-owned museums"[1]. In 2017, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage held a symposium on encouraging legal private collection of cultural relics, hoping to regulate the market for cultural relic appraisal, support the role of private cultural relics, and promote the healthy and prosperous development of cultural relic collection[2].

Private museums in China are becoming an important part of our cultural life. According to statistics from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, there are currently over 2,000 private museums with millions of cultural relics collected. During their rapid development, private museums have been facing the challenge of how to make the public accept ticket purchases, as museums are generally not considered profit-oriented, as well as the challenge of achieving profit.

## 2. Private Museums and the Cultural Consumption Market

Cultural consumption is the act of acquiring spiritual content through material means to satisfy one's spiritual needs. From a certain perspective, cultural consumption has the ability to transcend time and space, that is, to break through the limitations of time and space. Museums, with their historical artifacts, fulfill people's cultural consumption desires related to history and the quest for knowledge about ancestors and cultural origins. In the context of museums,

cultural consumption transcends temporal and spatial constraints, resulting in various purchasing behaviors such as buying tickets, cultural and creative souvenirs, gifts, guided tours, and tour guide services.

Private museums, despite targeting a large consumer market, lack the recognition and status compared to state-run museums and struggle to achieve sustainable profitability in the cultural consumption market. Private museums do not have financial support like their public counterparts and often rely on sponsorship from enterprises. However, the Guanfu Museum in Beijing stands out as the only private museum that has achieved profitability and sustainable developments relying solely on museum revenue.

From a supply perspective, museums today cover various fields, providing diverse choices that enrich the cultural consumption market. As contemporary museum education shifts towards "edutainment" and being people-centered[3], the traditional model of passive museum visits is evolving into experiential cultural consumption. Museums attract visitors through diverse exhibition designs, interactive experiences, virtual reality, and personalized tour experiences. From a demand perspective, the general public now seeks more interactive experiences and social functionality in cultural consumption.

### **3. Reasons for the Successful Operation of the Guanfu Museum**

Private museums face numerous challenges in achieving sustainable operations. Firstly, in many developed countries, museums are strategically located in prominent commercial areas, which enhances their influence and visitor numbers. However, private museums in China, including the Guanfu Museum, often lack such advantageous locations and are situated outside the central areas. Secondly, state-run museums have richer collections and offer free admission, while private museums require ticket purchases. For instance, the Guanfu Museum charges 100 RMB per ticket, which is not cheap. In this situation, it seems difficult for the Guanfu Museum to compete in the cultural consumption market other than attracting genuine museum enthusiasts and fans of Ma Weidu, the museum's founder.

Nevertheless, despite these disadvantages, the Guanfu Museum has implemented a set of effective marketing strategies.

#### **3.1. Experiential Consumption**

The traditional museum visit model has evolved into experiential cultural consumption. Museums use diverse exhibition designs and technologies such as virtual reality to create interactive experiences that attract visitors. Visitors are no longer passive observers; they actively participate and enjoy the tour experience. The Guanfu Museum borrows the concept of new-format bookstores to transform the museum experience. People can relax and immerse themselves in the museum environment, just as visitors to bookstores are not solely there to read, but to experience the atmosphere, appreciate the store's design, and capture moments for sharing on social media. In the context of museums, traditional window display of cultural relics can no longer meet the current demands of cultural consumers. The Guanfu Museum offers close encounters with selected cultural relics. Some large-sized antique furniture pieces are displayed without glass barriers, allowing visitors to come face-to-face with these relics. Additionally, the museum has introduced "flash mobs" featuring cultural relics, where teachers provide detailed explanations while visitors take turns observing the relics up close. The courses offered focus on the integration of traditional cultural education with contemporary values, enabling visitors to closely interact with the collected artifacts, gain inspiration and cultural influence, and enhance their artistic taste and aesthetic interests.

### 3.2. Socialization

Traditionally, museums play an important role in social education. They offer various educational activities and resources, imparting knowledge about history, culture, and science through exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and more. However, as cultural consumption needs have evolved, museums have become social gathering places. In addition to viewing exhibits, visitors can participate in various activities such as lectures, educational programs, performances, and more. The social attributes of museums provide visitors with more entertainment and communication opportunities. Ma Weidu often organizes book signing events at the museum, leveraging his personal reputation and influence to create themed activities for visitors to share and engage in. The museum's adoption of over 30 cats as its mascots also enhances its socialization attributes. Visitors take photos and share their experiences with the cats on social media. The exclusive cat habitats and activity rooms become prominent features within the museum. Visitors know that by following the adorable cats, they can obtain shareable content for social media. The highly anticipated "Guanfu Cat Banquet," where the cats line up to eat, has become a performance that attracts visitors to stop, take photos, share, and comment on social media. This simple yet beloved activity even draws crowds of over a hundred spectators at its peak.

### 3.3. Creating Intellectual Property and Personal IP

Ma Weidu's team has created the Guanfu Museum IP and developed cultural and creative products. To enhance the IP's influence, they have developed the Guanfu App, despite the high costs and technological requirements associated with app development. The team created three major sections within the app: art information, merchandise, and auctions. In each section, there is a strong focus on Ma Weidu's personal IP, which is characterized by educational and social sharing attributes. For example, the merchandise targets the general public, featuring affordable prices, fashionable designs, and practical functions. However, the product descriptions also include historical interpretations related to their design sources, often with personal adaptations and inscriptions by Ma Weidu. The auction section incorporates personalized commentary based on Ma Weidu's identity as a collector. The Guanfu Museum has established official accounts on various social media platforms, utilizing new media to reinforce the Guanfu IP and achieve social interaction. Whether through one-click sharing or comments, the Guanfu IP experiences widespread dissemination and reinforcement through guided discussions. The museum's video platform, led primarily by Ma Weidu, focuses on historical, cultural, and poetic narratives. The admiration of Ma Weidu and the desire for knowledge among his fans effectively drives traffic to the museum store.

### 3.4. Guanfu Cats as a Super IP

The true highlight that has turned the Guanfu Museum into a popular internet hot spot is the *Guanfu Cats*, which can be considered a *super IP*. Ma Weidu has adopted over 30 cats within the museum, referred to as *Guanfu Cats*, who play the role of mascots. Each cat has its own surname and name and receives dedicated care, freely roaming throughout the museum, becoming a unique attraction. As previously discussed, the social role of the cats has been established. But more is offered. Firstly, the museum's cultural and creative categories are separately divided into the Guanfu Cat series of cultural and creative products. Secondly, the Guanfu team has created nearly twenty anthropomorphic images of Guanfu cats and published related works and comics targeting young readers. 'Guanfu Cats School' and 'Guanfu Cats historical novel' are representative works among them. Dramatic story lines blend traditional culture and historical knowledge, combining education with entertainment. The book 'Guanfu Cat: Mysteries in Chinese Ancient Painting' published in 2021 unexpectedly replaced the characters in the painting with Guanfu Cat, which has a cute and novel cat shape and body. And these anthropomorphic images have been further strengthened within the museum, with the

construction of the Guanfu Cat 24 Solar Terms Pavilion on the second floor of the Guanfu Museum. Each distinct anthropomorphic cat wearing ancient clothing represents a solar term, and for the audience, while watching these cute cartoon images, knowledge about solar terms also penetrates deep into their hearts. When the tour was over and visitors walked out of the museum, the real face of Guanfu Cat, who was strolling around in the yard, appeared in front of visitors again. At this point, the entire museum experience came to a perfect end.

The IP also extend beyond the museum and museum-related products and books. A dedicated public account and video channel track the daily lives of the Guanfu Cats, delivering a narrative that engages visitors. The Guanfu Cats public account serves as a gathering platform, creating a community. Cat culture has become a subculture in contemporary China, with significant influence. The Guanfu Museum effectively utilizes *Guanfu Cat Culture* to promote experiential and social marketing, accelerating the museum's successful operation.

## **4. Marketing Strategy Recommendations for Contemporary Private Museums**

### **4.1. People-centered Two-way Interactive Communication**

Museums should break free from being closed and static environments and transform into places where visitors can interact, communicate, and share. They should innovate in terms of layout design, exhibition methods, and environment creation to meet the diverse needs of visitors[4]. Online and offline interactions can be combined by using new media platforms to announce upcoming events and host online activities such as giveaways and quizzes. Regular theme events like "flash mobs" can be organized to create high-quality interactive classrooms and experiences.

### **4.2. Clear Positioning and Focus on Differentiated Cultural Consumption Demands**

Private museums, unlike state-run museums, need to define their positioning and meet the specific needs of their target audience to achieve sustainable operations. Firstly, since private museums charge admission fees, they unintentionally filter out a group of casual tourists. For the second type of target audience, art collectors, museums can plan small-scale boutique areas to fulfill their cultural needs. Lastly, there are the experience-oriented visitors[5]. These individuals have strong demands for innovative exhibition designs, content richness, and unique presentation methods. They often expect deep interactions with the museum. Designing special themed exhibition areas and offering highly interactive courses and services can cater to their needs. Furthermore, it is essential to identify, develop, and lead the potential needs of these visitors through proactive planning.

### **4.3. Creating IP to Meet Social Needs**

The "Guanfu Cat" IP currently has 210,000 followers on the Douyin platform. Numerous visitors come to the museum due to their love for cats, and if the IP stays limited to cultural and creative consumption without integrating with the overall museum atmosphere, its influence will be limited. In the era of internet and social media, young people crave attention on these platforms. If they are attracted to an IP image, their desire to share and engage will fuel the rapid expansion of its influence. Cultural consumers not only possess the power to spread IP but also the power to spread culture itself. Fulfilling social needs will significantly contribute to creating a stable fan base, cultural identification, and economic benefits.

## 5. Conclusion

From the perspective of consumer demand, the general public now desires more interactive and socially engaging experiences in their cultural consumption. This shift has led to the rise of experiential cultural consumption, where museums aim to attract visitors through a variety of means.

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