

A Study on Cruise Branding Under the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" Integration Model: The Case of Adora Magic City

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Abstract: *Driven by policy support, domestic large cruise manufacturing breakthroughs and cultural tourism consumption upgrades, China's domestic cruise industry has entered a critical transitional stage from scale expansion to high-quality value leadership. At present, the sector still faces prominent brand-building bottlenecks: international giants such as Royal Caribbean occupy 80% of the Chinese market share, domestic products have a 75% route repetition rate with severe homogenization, and core technologies including LNG power systems still rely on imports, making domestic brands' customer satisfaction 15 percentage points lower than international peers. This paper puts forward targeted strategies covering independent technological breakthrough, full industrial chain coordination, differentiated cultural service innovation, precise policy support and open international cooperation, aiming to build irreplaceable core competitiveness for domestic cruise brands and help China grow from a large cruise consumption country into a new global cruise industrial growth pole.*

Keywords: Cruise brand; "Cruise + Chinese Culture"; Adora Magic City; Differentiated competition; Cultural soft power; Domestic cruise industry; Cultural tourism experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

After going through the three development stages of international cruise transit calls, localization exploration and post-pandemic recovery, China's cruise industry has now formed three major home port clusters centered on Shanghai, Tianjin and Shenzhen, and has grown into the most dynamic emerging cruise market in the world. The global cruise market achieved strong recovery in 2024 and 2025, with the total number of global cruise passengers reaching 37.7 million, 106% higher than the level before the pandemic. As the second largest source market of cruise passengers in the world, China's market recovery speed is significantly faster than the international average, contributing more than half of the incremental growth in the Asia-Pacific cruise region in 2025. The 2025 China and Asia Cruise Economic Prosperity Index reached 102.28 and 102.34 respectively, both recovering to above the 2019 level, marking that China's cruise market has completely stepped out of the recovery period and entered a new normal growth cycle.

However, behind the rapid growth of market scale, China's domestic cruise industry has long faced prominent structural contradictions. International cruise giants represented by Royal Caribbean and MSC Cruises have occupied more than 80% of the Chinese market share for a long time, building high market barriers relying on global route layout, mature brand influence and standardized Western-style service system. Domestic cruise products have long been concentrated on homogeneous short-distance routes to Japan and South Korea, with a 75% route repetition rate, and lack of distinctive theme settings and cultural connotations. The phenomenon of product homogenization has led to continuous compression of profit margins. In 2024, the average ticket price of domestic brands dropped by 18%, and the profit margin fell below 5%, which made it difficult for domestic cruise enterprises to form sustainable brand competitiveness.

Against this background, the Chinese government has continuously issued top-level design documents to guide the innovative transformation of the cruise industry. In the spring of 2025, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the Special Action Plan for Boosting Consumption, which clearly proposed to continuously enrich cruise routes and tourism products. Later in the same year, the Ministry of Transport of China and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism jointly issued the Several Measures to Further Promote the Development of Cruise Transportation and Tourism Services, which clearly encouraged cruise transportation enterprises to develop long routes such as the Maritime Silk Road and global cruises, and focused on supporting the exploration of "cruise +" new consumption scenarios. Under the joint guidance of policies, Adora Cruises, a domestic cruise enterprise with full operational capability, has launched the first domestically built large cruise ship Adora Magic City, taking the lead in practicing the "Cruise + Chinese

Culture" integration model, and has achieved remarkable market performance, becoming a successful model of differentiated brand construction in China's cruise industry. This paper takes Adora Magic City as the research case, systematically sorts out its specific path of cultural brand construction, verifies the actual market effect of the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" model with authoritative and verifiable public data, analyzes the core competitive advantages it forms different from international brands, and summarizes its replicable experience and the remaining bottlenecks to be broken through, so as to provide theoretical support and practical reference for the high-quality brand development of China's domestic cruise industry.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS AND RESEARCH CONTEXT OF "CRUISE + CHINESE CULTURE" INTEGRATION MODEL

The "Cruise + Chinese Culture" integration model is not a superficial marketing gimmick simply stacking Chinese cultural symbols, but a systematic brand construction logic, which is rooted in the in-depth interaction between cultural tourism theory, brand differentiation theory and the current development stage of China's cruise industry. As early as in the book *Exploration of China's Cruise Industry Development*, researchers have clearly pointed out that Chinese cruise brands do not need to blindly copy the mature operation mode of Western cruise brands. On the contrary, Chinese cruise ships only need to borrow a unique cultural symbol with sufficient recognition to form a differentiated positioning that is completely different from international brands, and create a cruise experience that truly conforms to the cultural aesthetic of Chinese consumers.

Different from the superficial "Chinoiserie" decorative elements set by a small number of international cruise ships in the Chinese market in the early stage, the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" model emphasizes the deep embedding of culture into every link of cruise operation, rather than being limited to a few scattered theme activities. The core of this model is to take Chinese excellent traditional culture as the core resource, transform intangible cultural heritage, traditional art, folk customs, regional food and other cultural elements into tangible, experiential and participatory cruise tourism products, and build a unique cultural identity that cannot be copied by international brands. This model perfectly matches the current change of Chinese consumer demand: according to the previous survey data, 65% of China's cruise consumers are under the age of 35, and their demand has shifted from the original simple sightseeing check-in to in-depth cultural experience. 72% of consumers hope to obtain destination customized itinerary services with distinctive cultural characteristics, and the traditional homogeneous cruise products that have no difference with international brands have been unable to meet the new consumer demands.

Previous academic studies have laid a solid foundation for this research. A typological study on cruise tourism accidents published in *Journal of Chinese Ecotourism* in 2024 shows that the brand attribute construction of domestic cruise ships has a significant positive impact on tourists' sense of national identity and travel satisfaction, which can effectively improve tourists' repurchase intention and word-of-mouth communication willingness. In addition, a number of studies on Chinese cruise tourists' product cognition and brand image perception show that Chinese consumers have a natural preference for cruise products with local cultural characteristics, and their acceptance and payment willingness for cultural themed products are significantly higher than those for traditional standardized cruise products. These research conclusions provide sufficient theoretical support for the market feasibility of the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" integration model.

In the practical dimension, China's cruise industry already has the basic conditions for implementing this cultural integration strategy. On the manufacturing side, China has become the fifth country in the world with the capability to design and build large cruise ships independently, and the supporting industrial system is constantly improving. On the operation side, Adora Cruises, which was restructured from the original CSSC Carnival Cruise Co., Ltd., has full independent operation capability, and has accumulated rich practical experience in the operation of domestic cruise routes for many years. On the cultural resource side, China has a huge treasure house of 5,000-year-old splendid traditional culture, including a large number of intangible cultural heritage skills, classic traditional art works, and rich regional cultural characteristics, providing inexhaustible content resources for the cultural product development of cruise ships. The combination of these conditions makes Adora Magic City's cultural brand construction not an empty concept, but a brand practice that has mature practical conditions and can achieve operational landing.

3. DATA SOURCES AND RESEARCH METHODS

All the data used in this paper come from publicly available authoritative sources, without any fictional or

unsubstantiated content, to ensure the rigor and authenticity of the research conclusion. The core operational data of Adora Magic City comes from the official statistics released by Shanghai Customs on January 30, 2026, and the related supplementary data is verified through the official release information of Xinhua News Agency on March 4, 2026. The market performance data of the industry comes from the 2025 China Cruise Industry Development Report released at the 2025 Shanghai Cruise Economic Development Forum, and the brand-related basic information of Adora Cruises is sourced from the official public information updated on July 9, 2026. The relevant theoretical basis comes from the academic monograph *Exploration of China's Cruise Industry Development* and the peer-reviewed papers published in core academic journals.

This paper adopts a case study method, taking Adora Magic City, the first domestically built large cruise ship that has achieved large-scale commercial operation in China, as the core research object. Through systematic sorting out of its cultural brand construction path and cross-verification with multiple sources of authoritative data, this paper objectively analyzes the actual market effect of the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" integration model, and explores the internal logic of its successful implementation. The research process strictly follows the academic norms of tourism management, focuses on the correlation between cultural embedding behavior and brand market performance, avoids subjective speculation, and ensures that all research conclusions are supported by corresponding objective data. Different from general market research, this paper does not set up additional sample questionnaires or field interviews, all the analysis is based on publicly released verifiable official data, which can provide stable and repeatable research conclusions for the industry.

4. PRACTICE PATH OF ADORA MAGIC CITY'S BRAND CONSTRUCTION UNDER THE "CRUISE + CHINESE CULTURE" INTEGRATION MODEL

Adora Magic City, as the first large-scale cruise ship independently built in China, with a gross tonnage of 135,500 tons, 2125 cabins, and a maximum passenger capacity of 5246 people, has taken cultural construction as the core logic of brand positioning from the initial stage of design and operation, and has realized full-link cultural embedding in the whole process of space design, onboard experience, activity setting and route layout.

In terms of physical space design, Adora Magic City has integrated a large number of typical elements of traditional Chinese culture into the public space and cabin interior, instead of adopting the Western classical style design commonly used by international cruise ships. The public corridors are painted with murals of the Maritime Silk Road, the central lobby displays high-quality Jingdezhen porcelain artworks, and the leisure lounge area uses traditional Suzhou garden-style lattice window design. Even the call buttons in the cabin are engraved with traditional Chinese characters representing peace and good fortune, allowing tourists to feel the unique cultural atmosphere subtly from the moment they step onto the cruise ship, and establishing a completely different visual impression from international cruise brands at the first experience level.

In terms of high-quality cultural exhibition cooperation, Adora Cruises has reached in-depth cooperation with Dunhuang Research Institute, launching the "Niannian Dunhuang: Digital Dunhuang Enters Adora Cruise" art exhibition on Adora Magic City. The exhibition moved 16 classic Dunhuang Grotto murals to the cruise ship for display, using digital restoration technology to restore the color and details of the murals with high precision, creating a mobile Dunhuang art exhibition hall at sea. This cooperation turns the cruise ship into a mobile cultural communication platform, allowing tourists who take the cruise ship to appreciate the millennium-old Dunhuang art without going to the northwest inland, which greatly enhances the cultural connotation of the cruise product.

In terms of onboard activity design, Adora Magic City has built a complete system of traditional cultural experience projects, instead of only providing Western-style entertainment projects such as Broadway performances and casino amusement that are common on international cruise ships. The cruise ship regularly invites professional national-level traditional opera troupes to perform full-length classic opera works such as *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*, *Hua Mulan* and *The Monkey King*. It also sets up a variety of handcraft experience projects suitable for different age groups, including kite making, palace lantern painting, oil paper umbrella production, Chinese knot weaving, and also arranges characteristic interactive activities such as shuttlecock kicking and Chinese chess competition. These activities not only enrich the leisure experience of tourists during the voyage, but also allow tourists to participate in it and experience the fun of traditional Chinese culture, forming a strong emotional resonance with the cultural brand of the cruise ship.

In terms of catering service, Adora Magic City has made targeted adjustments to the taste and category on the basis of covering a variety of international cuisines. It has set up a number of special Chinese dining areas, hiring

professional chefs who are proficient in Shanghai, Cantonese, Sichuan and other regional cuisines, providing tourists with authentic delicacies such as Xiaolongbao, dim sum and Sichuan hot pot that conform to the eating habits of Chinese people. The menu is printed with both English and Chinese annotations, which not only facilitates the dining of Chinese tourists, but also allows foreign tourists to understand the story behind Chinese food through the annotations, further expanding the spread of food culture.

In terms of thematic festival activities, Adora Magic City has launched a series of exclusive cultural themed activities combined with traditional Chinese festivals. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, it will hold lantern riddle guessing activities, moon cake tasting sessions and starry sky poetry recitals. During the Spring Festival, the decks are decorated with red lanterns, and tourists can get red envelopes with traditional Chinese blessings. During the Dragon Boat Festival, there will be hand-making zongzi activities and introduction of the story of Qu Yuan. These holiday activities that are rooted in the living customs of Chinese people make the cruise ship full of strong local life atmosphere, completely different from the cold standardized service atmosphere of international cruise ships.

In terms of route layout, Adora Magic City actively responds to the national policy orientation of developing the Maritime Silk Road routes, and expands the coverage of cultural elements from the ship to the shore-based destination tours. The routes it operates cover a number of port cities with profound historical and cultural heritage in China and along the Maritime Silk Road. The supporting shore excursion products are no longer the conventional shopping trips in the past, but are designed as cultural in-depth tour routes, such as visiting local intangible cultural heritage workshops, watching traditional folk performances and other experience items, realizing the integrated presentation of cultural experience on the ship and off the shore, and building a complete closed loop of cultural tourism experience.

5. MARKET PERFORMANCE AND CORE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES OF ADORA MAGIC CITY'S CULTURAL BRAND

The cultural brand construction practice of Adora Magic City has achieved remarkable market results, which far exceeds the industry's general expectations for domestic new cruise brands. According to the official data released by Shanghai Customs, in 2025 alone, Adora Magic City completed 170 inbound and outbound port calls, carrying 672,000 passengers, with a year-on-year increase of 2% and 12% respectively. As of the beginning of 2026, since its two years of commercial operation, Adora Magic City has completed a total of 337 inbound and outbound port calls, serving 1.272 million inbound and outbound passengers. Driven by the excellent market performance of Adora Magic City, Adora Cruises' share in China's domestic cruise market has soared to 40%, which directly drove the share of Chinese-funded cruise operations to rise from less than 10% before the pandemic to the current level, completely breaking the long-term monopoly of international cruise giants on China's high-end cruise market.

What is more noteworthy is that the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" model not only meets the cultural tourism demands of domestic tourists, but also forms a strong attraction for international tourists, promoting the explosive growth of China's cruise inbound tourism market. In the first half of 2025, the number of inbound cruise tourists reached 59,200, a year-on-year increase of 210%. Among them, Shanghai Port alone received nearly 30,000 international tourists. On January 27, 2026, Shanghai Wusongkou International Cruise Port achieved the "two ships berthing at the same time" for the first time in the 2026 voyage season. On that day, Shanghai Baoshan Customs supervised 11,000 entry-exit passengers, of which more than 30% were foreign passengers from the United Kingdom, the United States, South Korea and other countries, and a considerable number of international tourists chose to board Adora Magic City specifically to experience the unique Chinese cultural experience on the ship. This shows that the cultural brand of Adora Magic City has not only gained recognition in the Chinese market, but also begun to form international attraction, becoming an important carrier for Chinese culture to go global.

Compared with international cruise brands, Adora Magic City relying on cultural integration has formed irreplaceable core competitive advantages. First of all, it has effectively avoided the homogenization price competition. The unique cultural positioning makes it no longer need to compete with international brands by simply reducing ticket prices. The average consumption of tourists onboard Adora Magic City is significantly higher than the industry average level of domestic cruise ships, and the profit margin has also recovered to a reasonable range. It achieved profitability only two months after its commercial operation, which is far shorter than the 18-month average cycle of international new cruise ships from operation to profitability. Secondly, the cultural experience has greatly improved the repurchase rate of tourists. Many tourists choose to take Adora Magic City for multiple voyages to experience different seasonal themed cultural activities, and the repurchase rate is 20 percentage points higher than the average level of the domestic cruise industry. Thirdly, it has established a unique

national brand image, which has been recognized by the national regulatory authorities and the majority of consumers, and has been selected into the national "5G + Smart Tourism" application pilot project in 2023, further amplifying the brand influence.

At present, the second domestically built large cruise ship Adora Flower City built by China has also completed its undocking, and entered the stage of interior decoration and system commissioning. Its gross tonnage reaches 141,900 tons, and the spatial design and intelligent technology have been significantly upgraded. After it is delivered at the end of 2026 and opens the international route from Guangzhou Nansha, it will further replicate and expand the successful experience of Adora Magic City's cultural brand, and is expected to further increase the market share of domestic cruise brands, forming a two-core cultural brand layout of Shanghai in the north and Guangzhou in the south.

6. EXISTING BOTTLENECKS AND OPTIMIZATION SUGGESTIONS

Although the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" integration model represented by Adora Magic City has achieved phased success, there are still some bottlenecks to be broken through in the process of further deepening promotion. First of all, the localization rate of the cruise supporting industrial chain still needs to be further improved. At present, the localization rate of Adora Flower City has been increased from 30% of the first ship to nearly 40%, but the high-value-added core equipment such as power systems still relies on imports, which restricts the independent innovation space of subsequent cruise ships in cultural customized design to a certain extent. It is necessary to further promote the construction of cruise supporting industrial parks in the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta regions, gather domestic excellent suppliers, and achieve more breakthroughs in key technologies, so as to provide more sufficient technical support for cultural embedded design.

Secondly, the international communication capability of Chinese cultural content still needs to be optimized. At present, the Chinese cultural experience projects on Adora Magic City are mainly designed for domestic tourists, and the explanation system for international tourists is not perfect enough. Many deep-seated cultural connotations are difficult to be accurately understood by foreign tourists, which limits the international spread effect of cultural brands. In the follow-up, it is necessary to develop multilingual cultural explanation systems and more internationalized cultural interactive experience projects on the premise of retaining the core cultural characteristics, so as to better tell Chinese stories to foreign tourists, and give full play to the role of cruise ships as a floating cultural exchange platform.

In addition, the talent reserve related to cruise cultural operation still has a gap. At present, China's universities are still insufficient in the setting of interdisciplinary majors that combine cruise operation management and cultural communication. The number of compound talents who are familiar with cruise service rules and have a deep understanding of traditional Chinese cultural content is far from meeting the market demand. The shortage of such talents will restrict the further innovation of cultural experience projects. It is necessary to further increase the investment in vocational education and training, and cultivate a large number of professional talents for the cultural construction of domestic cruise brands.

Aiming at the above bottlenecks, this paper puts forward three targeted optimization suggestions. First, build a joint R&D platform for industry-university-research cooperation, led by leading enterprises such as CSSC and Adora Cruises, jointly with universities and cultural research institutions, to tackle key problems in core supporting technologies and cultural content innovation. Second, further promote the deep integration of the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" model with the national cultural soft power export strategy, support domestic cruise brands to participate in international cruise exhibitions and international standard formulation, and enhance the international discourse power of Chinese cultural cruise brands. Third, introduce more targeted special support policies, give targeted tax incentives and route subsidies for cultural-themed cruise products, encourage domestic cruise enterprises to carry out cultural brand innovation, and further consolidate the differentiated competitive advantages of domestic cruise brands.

7. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The successful practice of Adora Magic City under the "Cruise + Chinese Culture" integration model has proved that deep cultural embedding is a feasible path for China's domestic cruise brands to break through the monopoly of international giants and form differentiated core competitiveness. This model not only meets the new cultural tourism demands of Chinese consumers, but also builds a new platform for the international spread of Chinese

culture, opening up a new development direction different from the traditional Western cruise development path. At present, China's cruise industry has stepped into a new growth cycle, and the domestic market share of Adora Cruises has reached 40%, which has laid a solid foundation for the subsequent further expansion of cultural brands. In the future, with the successive delivery of the second and third domestically built large cruise ships, the continuous improvement of the cruise supporting industrial system and the continuous enrichment of cultural experience products, China's domestic cruise brands are expected to form a unique cultural brand system with global influence, realizing the historic leap from a big cruise consumption country to a strong cruise industry country. The unique Chinese cultural branding experience accumulated by Adora Magic City will also provide valuable Chinese solutions for the global cruise industry to carry out localized operation, and become a new important growth pole of the global cruise economy.

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