

The Stylistic Genealogy of Yunnan's Tile Cats: Belief, Identity, and Cultural Adaptation

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Received: 15 July 2025, Revised: 10 August 2025, Accepted: 13 August 2025, Published: 20 August 2025

Abstract

This study conducts a genealogical analysis of the Yunnan Tile Cat, a distinctive form of Chinese folk art. Its stylistic history is dynamic rather than linear, shaped by interactions among local beliefs, ethnic identities, market forces, and artisan agency. Moving beyond traditional typologies, a genealogical method is applied to situate its evolution within interconnected systems of belief, identity, aesthetic commodification, and cultural adaptation. Based on extensive fieldwork and multi-source textual analysis, five stylistic nodes are identified: Primal/Expressive, Fierce/Exaggerated, Refined/Decorative, Regional Variants, and Modern Interpretations. These nodes coexist and overlap, showing how communities use material culture to express beliefs, affirm identities, and adapt to cultural and socio-economic change. The findings deepen scholarly understanding of folk art as a contested cultural field and offer practical guidance for heritage conservation and sustainable cultural tourism. The proposed genealogical framework provides designers and artisans with a tool to innovate while preserving cultural authenticity, ensuring the Tile Cat tradition remains a living, adaptive cultural symbol.

Keywords: Yunnan tile cat, Stylistic forms, Genealogy, Folk art, Cultural adaptation, Non-linear evolution, Cultural heritage preservation

Introduction

Significance of the tile cat

The Yunnan Tile Cat is a unique “tutelary beast” found on the rooftops of residences in China’s southwestern frontier. It is a material culture carrier based on the tiger archetype, endowed with the function of warding off evil and attracting fortune. It is not merely a spectacle within the system of architectural decoration but a cultural symbol infused with local beliefs and memories—a symbol laden with rich local beliefs, ethnic aesthetics, and cultural memory. Perched high on a roof ridge or above a gateway, its form can be either fierce and ferocious or simple and endearing, deeply integrated with a collective ethnic aesthetic consciousness and artistic techniques, resulting in diverse forms that vary by place, creator, and craft. The Tile Cat is thus a critical site for

ethnographic inquiry, offering tangible evidence of how local communities express faith, construct identity, and adapt to social change through material culture. A comprehensive study of its forms and functions can reveal the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in a region known for its cultural diversity.

Cultural and belief-based functions

Since the 1980s, scholarly interest in the Tile Cat has grown. Research widely acknowledges it as a product of multicultural fusion, a synthesis of exogenous and endogenous traditions (Yang 2012). As scholar Zhou Xing summarizes, the Tile Cat is a syncretic object that integrates Han traditions—such as Taiji Bagua, Taishan Shigandang, and Menshen (door god) worship—with the

totem worship, ancestor worship, and apotropaic beliefs of local ethnic minorities (Zhou, 2002). On the other hand, its spiritual core is embedded in the local context, closely linked to the long-standing tiger totem worship of ethnic groups like the Yi, Bai, and Naxi. This reflects a cultural logic of “embodying the tiger within the cat” (寓虎于猫, yù hǔ yú māo), a process of domesticating a powerful, wild symbol into a familiar, household guardian (Tao 2009). Scholars have detailed its multiple functions—protecting the home, correcting feng shui, and attracting wealth—noting that its placement is often associated with the need to “neutralize malevolent forces” (huà shà, 化煞) or specific shamanistic rituals. At the artistic level, scholars like Yang Zhaolin pioneered the typological classification of Tile Cats, revealing their stylistic diversity. Subsequent studies, such as Ma Jia’s research focusing on case studies in Heqing and Binchuan, have analyzed their dynamic evolution driven by artisan innovation and the market economy (Ma, 2022). Meanwhile, Wang Jia and others, from the perspective of cultural communication and consumer context, focus on the challenges faced by Tile Cats in their “semantic transformation” during the process of being converted into creative products for the tourism industry (Wang et al., 2021).

Research gap and contribution of this study

Most existing research has largely focused on typological descriptions or linear historical tracing, failing to fully explain the complex phenomena of coexistence, rupture, and overlap among various styles. This study introduces a Foucauldian genealogical framework (Foucault, 1977), integrated with complementary approaches such as Peirce’s semiotics (Peirce, 1931-1958) and the cultural biography of objects, in order to better capture the symbolic transformations of material culture.

This means the object of study is not the Tile Cat artifact itself, but the complex relational network that shapes its diverse styles—a network constituted by a plurality of value and power discourses, including religious authority, ethnic symbolic capital, state heritage discourse, market-driven aesthetic values, and tourism-oriented commodification. A plurality of value and power

discourses, including religious authority, ethnic symbolic capital, state heritage discourse, market-driven aesthetic values, and tourism-oriented commodification. This study treats the five core styles—Primal and Expressive, Fierce and Exaggerated, Refined and Decorative, Regional Variants, and Modern Interpretations—not as fixed categories, but as key “nodes” within this genealogical network, each representing a distinct configuration of power and meaning (Figure 1).

The central thesis of this study is that the stylistic genealogy of the Yunnan Tile Cat acts as a mirror, dynamically reflecting local beliefs, ethnic identities, and the cultural adaptation strategies adopted by communities in response to historical and social change. Through a genealogical analysis of these five stylistic nodes, this paper aims to move beyond traditional artifact classification to reveal how the emergence, evolution, and coexistence of different styles profoundly reflect cultural expression and identity construction in specific historical contexts, thus offering a new theoretical perspective for understanding the production mechanisms of folk art in China’s southwestern frontier.

Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to systematically construct a stylistic genealogy of the Yunnan Tile Cat by employing a genealogical analytical framework, thereby revealing the complex cultural dynamics that underpin its evolution. To achieve this central aim, the study sets forth the following specific objectives:

To Construct a Stylistic Genealogy: To move beyond traditional linear classifications by identifying and systematizing the five core stylistic nodes of the Yunnan Tile Cat: The Primal and Expressive Style, the Fierce and Exaggerated Style, the Refined and Decorative Style, Regional Variants, and Modern Interpretations. This will establish a dynamic, non-linear network of its stylistic genealogy.

To Investigate the Driving Mechanisms: To critically analyze and demonstrate the multiple power discourses that have driven the evolution of the Tile Cat’s style across different historical periods. These include

local shamanistic beliefs, ethnic tiger totemism, Han cultural aesthetics, market economies and tourism, as well as modern Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) policies.

To Interpret Cultural Adaptation: To illustrate that the diverse styles of the Tile Cat are not merely changes in artistic form, but are the material manifestations of cultural adaptation strategies and identity construction undertaken by local communities in response to cultural fusion, social change, and economic transformation.

To Provide a New Theoretical Perspective: Ultimately, through this case study, to propose and validate a genealogical framework as an analytical tool and a new theoretical perspective for understanding the mechanisms of folk art production, cultural adaptation, and identity reconstruction in the frontier regions of Southwest China.

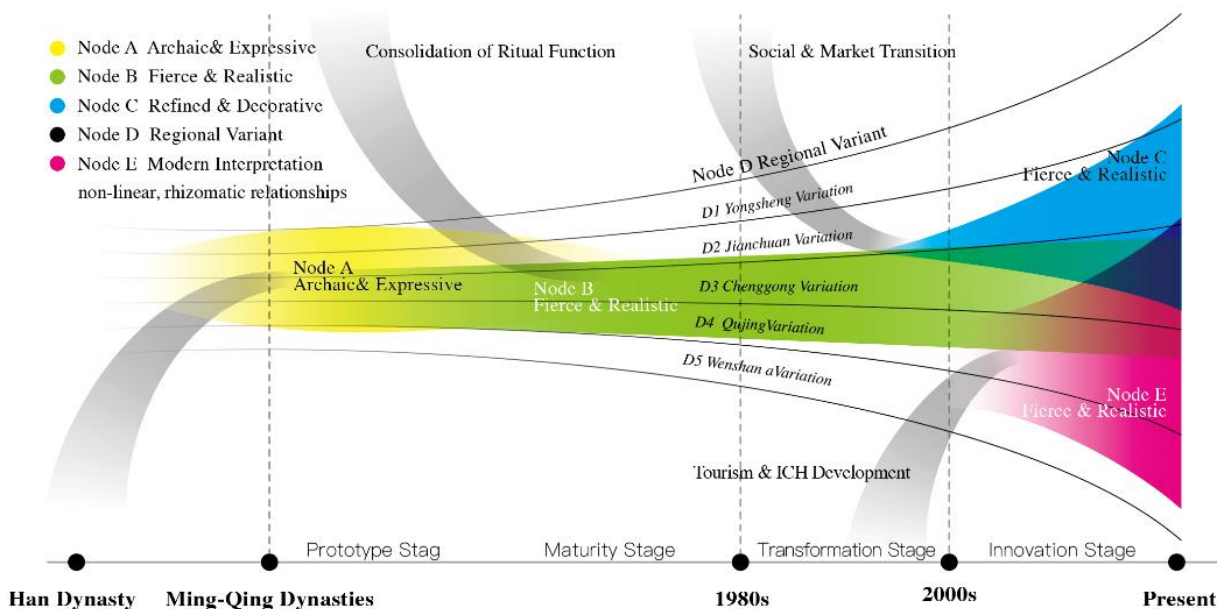


Figure 1 A genealogical map of the Yunnan tile cat's stylistic evolution

Source: Jun (2024)

Research methods

This study employs a multi-sited, in-depth ethnographic methodology, with fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2025 in the core distribution areas of Yunnan Tile Cats, including the northwest (Heqing, Jianchuan, Weishan, Xizhou, Yongsheng), central (Kunming, Chenggong, Jinning, Yuxi, Chuxiong), and eastern regions (Liaohu in Qujing, Yanshan). These locations were selected for their historical significance, the concentration of surviving Tile Cat artifacts, and the presence of representative artisans.

Artisans were selected using three main criteria. Heritage status — priority was given to officially recognized National, Provincial, or Municipal Intangible

Cultural Heritage (ICH) inheritors. Stylistic representativeness — inclusion of artisans maintaining distinctive regional traditions, such as Jianchuan black pottery and Xizhou refined decorative style. Innovation — inclusion of artisans incorporating modern interpretations or creative IP elements, such as cartoon-inspired Tile Cats in Kunming. Following these criteria, the study conducted in-depth interviews with 13 artisans, including Gao Jinfu (Nat.), Li Shouwu, Su Longxiang (Nat.), and others meeting the above standards. Two sites, Chuxiong and Yanshan, have no representative living inheritors; only old Tile Cat artifacts remain.

A total of 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with each artisan interviewed between one and

three times depending on thematic relevance. Interview data were thematically coded and integrated into the analysis of each stylistic node, with direct quotations used in the Results section to connect artisans' lived experiences to shifts in belief systems, identity politics, and market demand. The interviews explored artisans' training backgrounds, lineage and creative philosophies, their perceptions of style origins and changes, and their views on the role of belief systems, identity, tourism, and market forces in shaping stylistic evolution. Over 200

photographic records were collected, including field photography of Tile Cats in artisan workshops, residential rooftops, exhibitions, and local museums, as well as representative examples from all five genealogical style nodes: Primal/ Expressive, Fierce/ Exaggerated, Refined/ Decorative, Regional Variants, and Modern Interpretations. The photographic sample was purposive rather than convenience-based, ensuring broad stylistic and geographic coverage.

Table 1 Sampling framework of Yunnan tile cat artisans, styles, and photo sources

Region	Location	Artisan (Level)	Style Keywords	Photo Source
Northwest Yunnan	Heqing	Gao Jinfu (Nat.)	Primal/Expressive + Innovative	Artisan Workshop Residential Rooftop Exhibition Shop
	Jianchuan	Dong Yuechang (Nat.)	Traditional (Refined/Decorative)	
		Dong Zhiming (Prov.)	Traditional + Innovative	
		Li Shouwu	Black Pottery (Regional Variant)	
	Weishan	Wang Ziqiang (Prov.)	Innovative IP (Modern Interpretation)	Artisan Workshop Residential Rooftop Exhibition Shop
	Xizhou	Su Longxiang (Nat.)	Refined/Decorative	
	Yongsheng	Guan Yuxiang (Prov.)	Traditional (Regional Variant)	
Central Yunnan	Kunming	Zhang Cai (Prov.)	Traditional (Regional Variant)	Artisan Workshop Residential Rooftop Exhibition Shop Museum Collection
		Zhang Hang (Prov.)	Innovative IP (Modern Interpretation)	
	Chenggong	Li Wenchang (Mun.)	Painted (Refined/Decorative)	
	Jinning	Luo Haoyang (Mun.)	Regional Characteristic	
	Yuxi	Wang Ziqiang (Prov.)	Fusion Innovation (Modern Interpretation)	
	Chuxiong	N/A	Traditional (Regional Variant)	
Eastern Yunnan	Liaohu,	Cui Changbao (Prov.)	Traditional (Regional Variant)	Artisan Workshop Residential Rooftop
	Yanshan	N/A	Traditional (Regional Variant)	

Note: Nat. = National ICH Inheritor; Prov. = Provincial ICH Inheritor; Mun. = Municipal ICH Inheritor.

“N/A” indicates no representative inheritor; only old Tile Cat artifacts remain in the region.

The genealogical framework shaped both the sampling design and the fieldwork process. Site and artisan selection was arranged to cover each genealogical style node. Interview guides were structured to trace each style's “descent” (Herkunft) and “emergence”

(Entstehung), linking artisan narratives with historical shifts in belief systems, identity politics, market demand, and technical innovation. Photographic documentation was coded using both formal analysis, focusing on shape, motif, and material, and discourse analysis, examining

terminology, symbolic meanings, and narratives of change. This integrated approach ensures that the constructed genealogical network reflects both the material and discursive dimensions of the Yunnan Tile Cat tradition, providing a robust empirical foundation for subsequent analysis.

Result

This study identifies five core stylistic nodes that are interconnected and influence each other within a complex network. The following analysis first describes the formal and cultural representations of each node, with a deeper interpretation of the underlying cultural dynamics reserved for the “Discussion” section.

Node A — The primal and expressive style: The manifestation of ritual power

Background and Style: This style represents an ancient node in the Tile Cat’s genealogy, originating from the fusion of local tiger totem worship and pottery techniques introduced by Han migrants since the Ming Dynasty. An early form is the Shí Māo Māo (石猫猫, Stone Cat) of the Yi people in Chuxiong, a product of localized re-creation rooted in their “Luoluo” tiger totem worship. Its core characteristic is “function over form,” emphasizing the conveyance of a fierce or mystical “spirit” (shényùn, 神韵) rather than an accurate physical representation. The craftsmanship typically involves unglazed, solid-fired earthenware that retains the raw texture of the clay, a tactile roughness that enhances its primal, wild power. The forms are naive and abstract, full of expressive force. Its placement was not standardized, appearing on windowsills, doorways, and roofs, evoking an aesthetic of “the coarse and naive” and “the illusory and mysterious.”

Genealogical Interpretation: The “primal” nature of this node is not a sign of poor skill but a product of a specific “power-knowledge” configuration. Within the discursive system of shamanistic belief centered on religious figures like the Bimó (毕摩, Yi ritual specialists), the Tile Cat’s value was determined by its ritual function. “Expressionism,” therefore, was a deliberate strategy to demarcate the Tile Cat from ordinary objects, enhancing its mystique by obscuring concrete physical form to

establish its powerful status in the field of belief. (Figure 2 NodeA)

Node B — The fierce and exaggerated style: The “Emergence” of secular desire

Background and Style: During the Ming and Qing dynasties, a period when a massive influx of Han migrants made them the dominant cultural and economic force in Yunnan (You, 1994), the deep integration of their culture with local minorities led to the Tile Cat absorbing influences from Central Plains roof-ridge beast culture. Its placement became fixed on the roof ridge, and its form shifted from heavy solid bodies to lighter hollow ones. More critically, popular desires expanded from the singular goal of “warding off evil” to also “attracting wealth.” The core characteristic of this node is the pursuit of maximum visual deterrence through figurative and exaggerated means. Signature elements include a cavernous, blood-red mouth, glaring eyes, and bared fangs. The Heqing Tile Cat is a classic example, handcrafted from local clay and typically unglazed, resulting in a grayish-blue finish that accentuates the power of its form. Its body is sculpted to be robust and muscular. Such individualistic and vital forms, crafted by artisans, stand in stark contrast to the modular, serialized ridge beasts of official imperial architecture, embodying the uninhibited character of folk art. Behind these seemingly grotesque forms lies a rich cultural logic: its gaping maw is interpreted as “devouring demons and monsters, and gulping down wealth from all directions.” The hollow belly and a hole at the rear symbolize “the capacity to contain and accumulate wealth” and the idea that “only with inflow and outflow can wealth be ‘excreted’ into one’s own home.” (Figure 2 NodeB1)

Genealogical Interpretation: As artisan Gao Jinfu (Heqing, Nat.) explained in interview: “这种大口的瓦猫是为了吓退邪祟，也能把财气吞进来” (“This big-mouthed Tile Cat was made to scare off evil and swallow wealth”). He also noted that shaping the hollow belly and rear hole was intentional, symbolizing both containment and circulation of fortune. As artisan Gao Jinfu recalled in

interview, “这种大口的瓦猫是为了吓退邪祟，也能把财气吞进来” (“This big-mouthed Tile Cat was made to scare off evil and swallow wealth”) The accidental form of the “gaping maw” successfully merged the functions of deterrence (warding off evil) and consumption (attracting wealth), granting it immense vitality under new social demands.(Figure 2 NodeB2)

Node C — The refined and decorative style: The negotiation of aesthetic power

Background and Style: With the flourishing of tourism in key areas like Kunming and Dali, the Tile Cat was commodified as a valuable cultural handicraft, a market shift that spurred the emergence of specialized “Tile Cats artisans” who distinguished themselves from the general ranks of tile makers and farmers (Ma, 2012). To cater to the market, the style shifted towards a pursuit of craftsmanship and decorative appeal. The key features of this node are the widespread use of glazes and the

incorporation of auspicious motifs like the Bagua, Ruyi Sceptres, and coins. The craftsmanship became more delicate, with greater attention to detail and a pursuit of refinement. Tile Cats from areas like Kunming and Chenggong belong to this category, with forms that are either fierce or charmingly naive and glazes that are finely applied, clearly indicating a fusion of Han Daoist and Feng Shui concepts with Tile Cat beliefs. This stylistic evolution met the higher-level needs for quality of life and spiritual solace that arose with socioeconomic development.

Genealogical Interpretation: The “refinement” and “decoration” of this node profoundly reflect the infiltration and negotiation of a more dominant “aesthetic discourse” represented by Han culture. The Tile Cat was recoded here, transforming from a local, rustic belief-symbol into a “cultural commodity” conforming to a broader (Han- dominated) aesthetic norm and value system, thereby acquiring new capital for circulation and legitimacy. (Figure 2 Node B3)



Figure 2 Stylistic nodes of the Yunnan tile cat node A-B-C
Source: Jun (2024)

Node D — Regional variants: Multiple “Descents” and local knowledge

This type is not a unified style but a collective term for a series of Tile Cats that exhibit significant differences due to specific regional cultural ecologies, reflecting the unique sense of belonging and local knowledge that Yunnan’s various ethnic groups infused into their craft.

Case 1

Yongsheng Tile Cat (Lijiang): A product of cultural fusion under the Ming Dynasty’s “tumin shibian” (屯民实边, stationing people to consolidate the frontier) policy, it embodies the “tiger in the cat” concept. Its form is a hybrid of a cat-tiger and a qilin (a mythical beast). Artisans often carve the character “王” (wáng, king) on its forehead to directly declare its tiger identity. The essence of its

creation lies in being purely hand-molded without molds; artisans select fine tile clay, prepare it through repeated kneading, and then shape it entirely by hand, guided by skill and momentary inspiration (Li, 2013). (Figure 3 Node D1)

Case 2

Jianchuan Black Pottery Tile Cat (Bai people): Integrated with the local thousand-year-old black pottery tradition, its entire body is unglazed black, achieving a “simple and robust” aesthetic through a “sealed-kiln carbon-inlay” firing process. According to folklorist Zhang Hongyu, who studies the Tile Cats of the neighboring Heqing region, its traditional form is based on the tiger but selectively integrates features from the ox, dragon, and stone lion (Zhang, 2007). The design of four nostrils and four ear holes, symbolizing “eyes to see and ears to hear in all four directions,” is a vivid interpretation of its function as an all-seeing guardian. (Figure 3 Node D2)

Case 3

Kunming Chenggong Tile Cat (Han and Yi peoples): Considered the most “tiger-like” paradigm among Yunnan’s Tile Cats, it is often made from local yellow clay using a potter’s wheel to create its signature full-bodied, “round-headed” shape, sometimes with a lustrous glaze. With the “王” character on its forehead and a bagua plaque on its chest, it projects a unique aesthetic temperament that is both fierce and endearingly naive. (Figure 3 Node D3)

Case 4

Qujing Liaohu Tile Cat (Han people): As a historical crossroads of Han and local cultures, Qujing developed a unique pattern where Tile Cat belief and the Central Plains’ “Taishan Shigandang” belief coexisted without fully merging. Produced in the “thousand-year pottery town” of Liaohu, it is fired in ancient dragon kilns. Often depicted holding a “Taishan Shigandang” plaque or a bagua plaque, it directly incorporates Daoist ritual objects. It features a robust, primal form, valuing the rustic feel of

hand-sculpting and the natural “fire marks” (huǒhén, 窑变) from the kiln, making each piece unique. (Figure 3 Node D4)

Case 5

Wenshan Tile Cat (Zhuang and Miao peoples): Exhibits distinct regional features, such as a “vase-shaped tail” (symbolizing peace) and a “smiling tiger” visage, reflecting the Zhuang and Miao peoples’ reverence for harmony. Its jar-like body shape derives from local daily-use pottery, fusing utilitarian form with totemic belief. Usually glazed, its compact and exaggerated form is both divine and playful. (Figure 3 Node D5)

Genealogical Interpretation: From a genealogical perspective, “Regional Variants” are a collection of dispersed, heterogeneous “descents” (Herkunft). This proves that the Tile Cat’s genealogy did not radiate from a single center but was constituted by a network of countless local “power-knowledge” nodes. Each variant is the unique result of the encounter and negotiation between a universal symbol and the specific powers of a locality—its materials, myths, aesthetics, and techniques. Therefore, these variants are not minor branches of a main trunk but are the very substance of the genealogy, eloquently demonstrating how a cultural symbol is actively “re-authored” by local communities, thereby resisting a singular, centralized narrative.

Node E — Modern Interpretations: The Re-production of a Symbol by New Power Actors

This node marks a fundamental turning point where the Tile Cat is “liberated” from its native context of rural belief, and its function as a “cultural symbol” is amplified as never before. It is a process of deep excavation, translation, and re-creation of its symbolic attributes under the dual forces of the state’s “productive conservation” policy for heritage and the market’s “aesthetic commodification,” presenting at least three paths of practice.

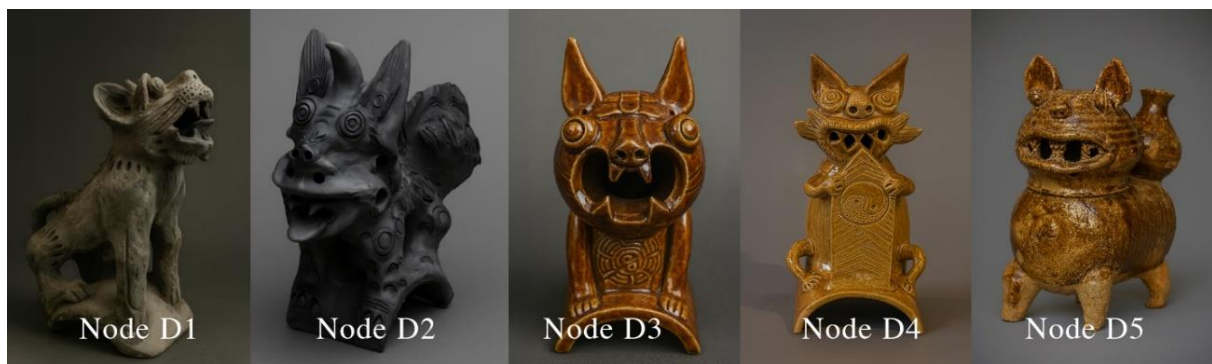


Figure 3 Stylistic nodes of the Yunnan tile cat node D

Source: Jun (2024)



Figure 4 Stylistic nodes of the Yunnan tile cat node E

Source: Jun (2024)

Path 1: Artisanal Artistic Innovation

This path is centered on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) inheritors and veteran artisans, following the logic of ‘craft-based aesthetic refinement’. Its innovation is primarily manifested on two levels: first is ‘cross-craft’ integration, where, for example, Dong Zhiming of Jianchuan integrates woodcarving techniques into his ceramic sculpting (Figure 4 Node E1- 1) , while Su Longxiang of Xizhou draws inspiration from tie-dye to creatively inform the Tile Cat’s glaze palette (Figure 4 Node E1-2). Second is a dialogue with contemporary artistic concepts; the works of some new- generation artisans, like those of Zhang Hang, reference the aesthetics of anime (Figure 4 Node E1-3), while the creations of Wang Ziqiang go a step further, transforming the Tile Cat

into a medium of artistic expression that carries personal concepts, signifying an awakening of the artisan’s subjectivity. (Figure 4 Node E1-4)

Path 2: Creative product development

This path is led by professional designers, and its core is the deconstruction and cross- disciplinary translation of the Tile Cat’s visual symbols. Taking the papercraft Tile Cat (Figure 4, E5) as an example, it replaces traditional clay with lightweight paper, translating the 3D guardian into a pattern that users can assemble by hand. The core value of this model shifts from the static ‘finished object’ to the dynamic ‘experiential process,’ turning consumers from passive buyers into

active co-creators and precisely attracting young tourists who seek interactive experiences. (Figure 5 Node E2-1)

Path 3: IP and narrative extension

The actors are corporations or institutions with brand strategy thinking. Their logic is “narrative construction, emotional connection.” Here, the Tile Cat is shaped into a personified IP with a unique character and story. The “K4 Tile Cat” of the Kunming Metro is a prime example, where the Tile Cat is designed as a cute “city guardian pet,” transforming a traditional folk symbol into an effective medium for enhancing the city’s brand affinity.

Genealogical Interpretation: The “descent” of this node is no longer a singular rural belief but multiple, dispersed power actors: the market, state policies, and designer discourse. The Tile Cat is “liberated” from its original knowledge system and captured and reshaped by new discursive powers like “IP,” “creative product,” and “ICH.” While this process ensures the Tile Cat’s contemporary vitality, it also introduces a new tension: how to maintain its original spiritual gravitas and sense of awe amidst the “cuteness” and “symbolization” trends of consumer culture, preventing it from becoming an over-consumed, empty signifier.



Figure 5 Stylistic nodes of the Yunnan tile cat nodes E2

Source: Jun (2025)



Figure 6 Stylistic nodes of the Yunnan tile cat nodes E3

Source: Jun (2024)

Discussion

The Interweaving of Style, Belief, and Identity: A Field of Cultural Production

Viewed through the lens of Bourdieu’s “field” theory (Bourdieu, 1993), the production and circulation of

the Tile Cat can be seen as a dynamic field of cultural production. Different actors (Bimó, artisans, merchants, designers) compete for the symbolic capital that defines the Tile Cat’s value. This involves a key conversion of symbolic capital: which, in Bourdieu’s terms, reflects an

ongoing struggle within a cultural field where symbolic, economic, and cultural capital are continuously contested. Older forms may be revived or re-contextualized through new discursive power, a process better understood when Foucauldian genealogy is combined with semiotic analysis to trace shifts in symbolic meaning. The coexistence and succession of these styles are the result of these dynamic struggles and negotiations between different power discourses in specific historical periods. This competition for symbolic capital reframes the Tile Cat not merely as an artifact, but as a site where cultural, economic, and political forces intersect, offering new insights into the operation of folk art as a field in Bourdieu's sense.

The Evolutionary Trajectory: The Social Life of an Object and Cultural Adaptation

Following Appadurai's theory of "the social life of things," the Tile Cat's life history is far from static (Appadurai, 1986). It clearly exhibits a complex trajectory from a ritual object, to a commodity, and finally, to a contemporary cultural symbol/IP. However, this evolution also carries the risk of diluting its original cultural meaning. This risk is most acute when the Tile Cat is removed from its material foundations—the specific local clay, the tempering of the kiln's fire, the artisan's embodied skill—and reproduced en masse in generic materials, potentially becoming a hollowed-out signifier detached from its cultural soul. This highlights a central challenge in heritage preservation: how to encourage adaptation and innovation while safeguarding the deep-seated cultural meanings that give an object its unique power and significance.

Table 2 A condensed typology of the stylistic genealogy of Yunnan tile cat

Style Type	Form & Craft	Aesthetics	Core Connotations	Cultural Drivers
A. Archaic & Expressive	Primitive & abstract, simple lines; Local earthenware, unglazed, hand-molded	Rugged, mysterious, vital	Warding off evil, revering nature	Dominated by ritual efficacy; Bimo shamanistic culture
B. Fierce & Exaggerated	Exaggerated form (gaping mouth), dynamic; Sculptural, unglazed	Powerful, intimidating, expressionistic	Adds "attracting wealth" to warding off evil	Rise of secular popular desire for wealth
C. Exquisite & Decorative	Delicate & detailed, auspicious patterns; Glazed & painted	Elegant, brightly colored, fused	Balances aesthetics with auspicious meaning	Intervention of Han cultural discourse; Production for cultural capital
D. Regional Variant	Highly localized (e.g., Jianchuan black pottery, Wenshan vase-tail)	Localized, style varies by place	Adaptation & fluidity of the cultural motif	Re-creation & resistance by "local knowledge"
E. Modern Interpretation	Deconstructed, simplified, cartoonized; Cross-material, industrial/digital design	Modern, fashionable, stylized	Semantic transformation of a traditional symbol	Consumer culture, tourism market, "ICH" policies

Suggestion

Future research directions

Future research could undertake deeper ethnographic studies of regional styles, such as exploring the cultural logic behind the "extremely simple and coarse" appearance of the Shilin Yi Tile Cat. Broader

cross-regional and cross-ethnic comparative studies could investigate its mechanisms of transmission and variation. Archaeological findings could provide more direct evidence for tracing its early forms. Finally, systematic genealogical studies of major artisan families and their

craft inheritance are crucial for supporting the living transmission of ICH.

Conservation and sustainable development

Greater support should be provided to traditional artisans through grants, workshops, and official recognition. Responsible cultural tourism centered on the Tile Cat, such as developing “Tile Cat villages,” can provide economic benefits, but must guard against over-commercialization that would damage cultural authenticity. A comprehensive digital archive and database of Tile Cat-related materials should be established to support research and public education.

Reflections on contemporary design transformation

The contemporary transformation of the Tile Cat requires a careful balance between respecting cultural authenticity and meeting modern aesthetic demands. Deep collaboration between designers and traditional artisans is an effective path to creating products that have both cultural depth and market value. Its applications can be boldly expanded into home décor, fashion, and digital products, and it can even be endowed with new functions based on its form, such as a Tile Cat-shaped acoustic amplifier for smartphones.

Conclusion

By constructing a stylistic genealogy of the Yunnan Tile Cat, this study has verified that its evolution is not linear but is the complex product of interwoven forces including local belief, ethnic identity, and cultural adaptation strategies. The five stylistic nodes—from the Primal and Expressive, to the Fierce and Exaggerated, the Refined and Decorative, the Regional Variants, and the Modern Interpretations—together constitute the rich and dynamic artistic landscape of the Tile Cat. This genealogical approach has allowed us to move beyond a static classification and to appreciate the Tile Cat as a living tradition, constantly in a state of becoming.

The study’s central thesis—that the Tile Cat’s stylistic genealogy acts as a mirror, dynamically reflecting local beliefs, ethnic identities, and community adaptation

strategies—has been fully substantiated. The enduring vitality of the Tile Cat stems from its deep roots as a cultural symbol and its dynamic capacity for adaptation. It is not merely a static art object but an active cultural vehicle, continuously participating in the life practices and meaning-making of local people. From ancient totemism and complex feng shui concepts to modern cultural consumption and identity expression, the Tile Cat has always been able to carry and reflect the spiritual needs of different eras and communities.

In the face of globalization and modernization, the Yunnan Tile Cat continues to exhibit its unique cultural value and artistic charm. Whether as a guardian on a rural rooftop or a creative product on an urban desk, it continues its cultural lineage in diverse ways. Therefore, the study of its stylistic genealogy is not just a classification of a folk art form, but a profound understanding of a living cultural heritage. It offers valuable insights for recognizing and protecting China’s rich and diverse ethnic and folk cultures. Its story is a vivid chapter of the interweaving of tradition and modernity, the symbiosis of belief and aesthetics, and the dialogue between the local and the universal. Its enduring power as a cultural symbol will undoubtedly continue to manifest in the future of cultural inheritance and innovation.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this research was made possible by previous scholarly works and a clear research framework. I am grateful for the research of scholars such as Qian Fang, Yang Zhaolin, Ma Jia, and Tao Shuxia, whose work provided rich materials and profound insights. Special thanks are extended to the artisans who were interviewed during fieldwork: Gao Jinfu and Gao Jinyan of Heqing; Zhang Cai of Kunming; Cui Changbao and Cui Zhouping of Qujing; Su Longxiang and Su Panxingwei of Dali; and Li Shouwu, Dong Yuechang, and Dong Zhiming of Jianchuan. Their wisdom and skills are the most precious assets of this research. I also express my gratitude for the numerous online resources and field photographs consulted during the research process.

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