



ISSN 2985-0541 (Print) / ISSN 2539-5513 (Online)

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

Available online at <https://jcsh.rsu.ac.th>



From Deity to IP: The Generation, Reconstruction, and Cultural Resilience of Tile-cat Cultural Symbols in Yunnan, China

Lu Jun*, and Veerawat Sirivesmas

Design Arts (International Program), Silpakorn University, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

*Corresponding author; E-mail: lucas@ymu.edu.cn

Received 23 July 2025/ Revised 22 September 2025/ Accepted 1 October 2025/ Publish Online 28 January 2026

Abstract

This study examines the Tile-cat, a unique folk cultural symbol from Yunnan, China, tracing its evolution from a traditional “deity beast” to a contemporary “cultural IP” amidst societal change. It addresses a gap in systematic diachronic analyses of Tile-cat’s functional and value transformation. Using cultural semiotics, identity construction, and consumer culture theories, and employing multi-site fieldwork, surveys, interviews, and archival analysis, the research maps Tile-cat’s journey from sacred symbol to secular aesthetic object, then cultural commodity, and finally IP. Findings reveal Tile-cat’s significant cultural resilience, maintaining its core “guardian” and “auspicious” genes. Through meaning, aesthetic, and functional negotiation, Tile-cat adapted its form and dissemination. Quantitative analysis confirms cultural authenticity impacts symbolic identity value and purchase intention, elucidating value reproduction in commodification. This study contributes a five-stage framework of heritage-to-IP evolution, a tested full-mediation mechanism (authenticity → identity value → purchase intention), and a concise comparative lens for generalizability.

Keywords: *cultural symbol; tile-cat; identity construction; cultural resilience; cultural IP; creative transformation*

1. Introduction

Global heritage revitalization is crucial. Traditional cultural symbols face modernization, altering their form, function, and meaning. Understanding these adaptive processes is vital for cultural resilience and identity construction. This study focuses on Tile-cat, a unique Yunnanese roof ornament. Resembling a cat but embodying tiger power, Tile-cat traditionally guarded homes, signifying protection. Modern changes shifted Tile-cat from eaves to art/tourism/public spaces. This raises core questions: how does Tile-cat reflect local identity reshaping, and what adaptation strategies does it employ against modernity? Understanding these adaptive processes is not only vital for the cultural resilience of Tile-cat itself, but also offers a valuable paradigm for countless other traditional cultural symbols worldwide facing similar pressures of modernization and marketization.

Tile-cat cultural roots are embedded in folk belief, ritual, and multiculturalism. Its core functions are “evil-dispelling, peace-keeping, and fortune-attracting” (Tao, 2009). Origins trace to Central Plains legends (e.g., “cat expelling demons” (Yang, 2000). In Yunnan, this belief intertwines with fengshui, making Tile-cat a vital “warding off malevolent forces” tool, involving a “consecration” ritual for divinity (Zhang, 2008).

Tile-cat’s hybridity is prominent. It’s a tiger incarnation, continuing local tiger worship, reinforced by “王” (king) characters and ethnic tiger totem legends (Yang, 2002; Zhang, 2008; Tao, 2009). It fuses indigenous beliefs with Han symbols, showing Yunnan roof-ridge art as Han-influenced (Tao, 2011). Elements like Bagua diagrams, copper bells, “Taishan Shigandang” exemplify this “hybrid state.” Despite comprehensive studies, systematic analysis on Tile-cat’s dynamic functional/meaning transformation across historical stages is lacking.

Tile-cat's visual form directly exhibits its cultural hybridity. Its artistic forms are diverse (Tao, 2011), with "diversity within commonality." Most are exaggerated, grotesque, majestic, aiming for visual deterrence. This function is expressed diversely across regions due to varied ethnic aesthetics (Zhang, 2008).

Ma (2022) challenged the singular "tiger-type" origin, suggesting early forms resembled "Aoyu" or "Xiezhi," with tiger symbolism accumulating later, revealing dynamic evolution. Craftsmanship explains stylistic differences: hollow-molded Heqing Tile-cat allow complex forms; solid-carved Binchuan Tile-cat are rustic. Regional aesthetics solidified: Dali Heqing known for giant mouths, Kunming for plumpness, others integrate copper bells/plaques. Artisans' "memory" and personal emotions infuse work, explaining subtle variations (Xiang & Chen, 2019). Despite descriptions of aesthetics/craft, deeper exploration is needed on how forms interact with local identity and engage aesthetic negotiation for market demands.

Contemporary Tile-cat evolution entered "symbolic reconstruction," driven by ICH protection and creative economy. Research outlines its trajectory from local ritual object to tourist handicraft, cultural product, and ultimately, systematically operated cultural IP.

Tile-cat's marketization began in the 1990s. Tourism growth provided its shift "from rooftop" to "market," transforming it from "gift" to "commodity" (Ma, 2012). Artisans (e.g., Gao Jinfu) innovated for market demand. 21st century, "cultural creativity" led to conscious product design. Scholars proposed simplified, cartoonish redesigns (Liu & Yan, 2017); others integrated Tile-cat with daily items (e.g., bookmarks, Bluetooth speakers), imbuing secular meanings (Wang et al., 2021).

Recently, Tile-cat moved to branding and IP operation. Zeng (2012) predicted Tile-cat as a new Yunnan cultural tourism IP, now reality. Tile-cat developed into serialized products, with museums, experience centers, registered trademarks, achieving industrial scale. This marks its transcendence to a modern cultural IP. Sun (2021)'s "living heritage" concept highlights this: market innovation and creative reconstruction allow Tile-cat to find new survival space and vitality.

In sum, existing research provides a solid foundation. However, studies lack systematic, diachronic views of Tile-cat's full evolution. In-depth analysis is needed on how meaning transforms with social change, and how actors negotiate culture/identity. This study, with fieldwork and interdisciplinary theories, bridges historical/contemporary divides, viewing Tile-cat as a fluid system evolving through "ritualization-secularization-commodification-IP-ization." Our core contribution is to analyze this evolution, revealing Tile-cat's cultural resilience and adaptation to modernity, deepening understanding of symbolic change.

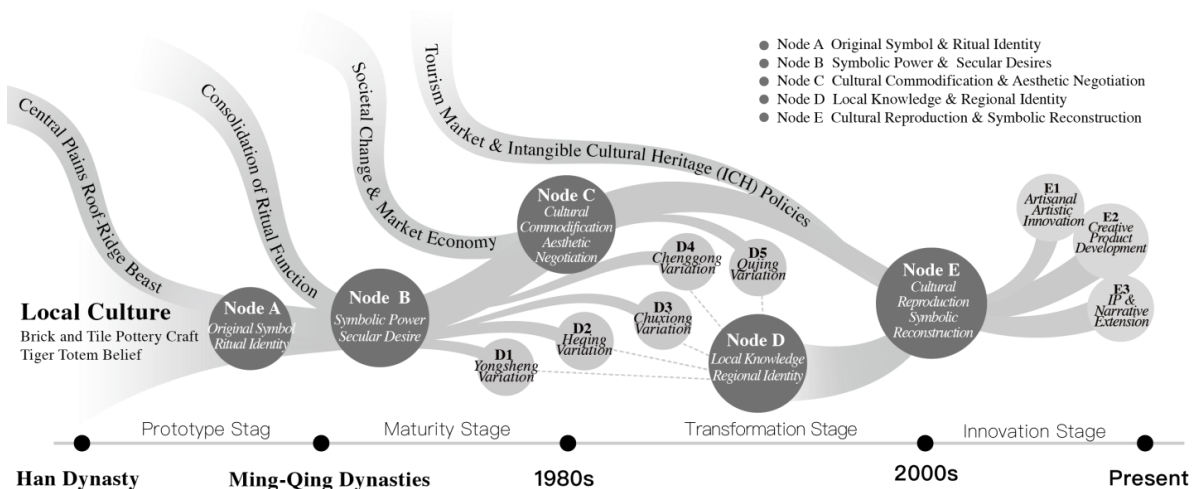


Figure 1 Tile-cat Cultural Symbol: Evolutionary Timeline and Driving Forces
Source: Researcher, 2025

2. Objectives

To achieve this, the research is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To map the evolutionary trajectory of the Tile-cat cultural symbol through five distinct stages, tracing its journey from a sacred ritual object to a contemporary cultural IP.
2. To analyze the processes of symbolic reconstruction and aesthetic negotiation that the Tile-cat has undergone in response to societal and market changes.
3. To test the full-mediation mechanism linking cultural authenticity to consumer purchase intention through the intermediary of symbolic identity value.
4. To identify the key adaptation strategies that have contributed to the cultural resilience of the Tile-cat, allowing it to function as a form of living heritage.

3. Materials and Methods

This study maps Tile-cat's evolution, explores symbolic reconstruction, clarifies its identity link, and identifies adaptation strategies. We built an integrated theoretical framework, viewing Tile-cat as a symbol reconstructed in a "production-circulation-consumption" loop. Cultural semiotics decodes Tile-cat changes; identity construction explores its role in community identity; consumer culture theory analyzes aesthetic negotiation and value reproduction. These tools analyze Tile-cat's "evolution" and "expression." Methods:

3.1 Fieldwork on the Production End

This subsection documents production-side fieldwork across core Tile-cat regions.

Core data were collected during 2024-2025 through multi-site fieldwork in Yunnan's primary Tile-cat regions (e.g., Heqing, Kunming), resulting in an image database of over 2000 Tile-cat types. We conducted semi-structured interviews (1-2 hours each) with three key groups of informants:

Traditional Artisans (n = 8): Including key inheritors like Gao Jinfu. Interviews focused on craftsmanship, historical narratives, belief systems, and contemporary challenges.

Young Designers (n = 5): Discussions centered on product design, market adaptation, aesthetic negotiation, and cross-sector collaborations.

Cultural Tourism Professionals (n = 6): Including museum directors. The focus was on industrial operation, branding, marketing strategies, and ICH activation.

3.2 Audience Research on the Consumption End

To understand Tile-cat's contemporary reception, preferences, and motivations, we conducted online/offline consumer surveys.

Quantitative Survey: Conducted offline (Dali, Lijiang) and online (via shop links). Measured cultural authenticity, symbolic identity value, and purchase intention (402 valid questionnaires). Semantic differential items assessed styling preference (e.g., "Q-version cute" vs. "original fierce"). SPSS 28 was used for descriptive statistics. Cronbach's α and KMO/Bartlett tests confirmed reliability and validity ($\alpha \geq 0.80$; KMO = 0.89, $p < .001$). AMOS 24 was applied for SEM: "Cultural Authenticity \rightarrow Symbolic Identity Value \rightarrow Purchase Intention" showed full mediation (good model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.31$, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.057).

Qualitative In-depth Interviews: Thirty diverse consumers discussing emotional motives, identity imagination, and the impact of "cutification"

Focus Group Discussions: Three "Gen Z" groups (6-8 participants each), capturing aesthetic preferences, consumption motives, and "Guochao" understanding in a media analysis context

3.3 Media Text and Historical Document Analysis

To trace public discourse and historical evolution, we analyzed media texts and historical documents.

Media Text Analysis: covered 2022–2025 Douyin and Xiaohongshu posts (~220 items) and government ICH WeChat articles. NVivo 15 was used for open-coding (2 assistants), summarizing 7 themes (e.g., “Guochao,” “mascot”). Cohen’s κ verified consistency ($\kappa = 0.82$), exceeding the ≥ 0.80 guideline for substantial agreement.

Historical Archives and Oral History Collection: Yunnan Library/Archives: 12 volumes (112 entries) of 1875–1980 roof-ridge beast related documents. Kunming/Heqing: 6 oral history interviews (12.5 hours) with inheritors/knowledgeable individuals aged 70+, supplementing written data. These data were used to chart a timeline divided into five key evolution nodes: “Original Symbol and Ritual Identity (Pre-20th C),” “Symbolic Power and Secular Desires (Mid-to-Late 20th C),” “Cultural Commodification and Aesthetic Negotiation (Early 21st C),” “Local Knowledge and Regional Identity (2010s),” and “Cultural Reproduction and Symbolic Reconstruction (2020s-Present)”. This provided the historical basis for Results Section 4.1–4.5.

Academic Literature Review: Systematic review of existing academic papers, local gazetteers, and government documents to build the Tile-cat’s historical evolution

The various research dimensions, corresponding theoretical frameworks, data sources, and core questions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of Symbolic Cycle from Production to Consumption

Research Dimension	Theoretical Correspondence	Data Source	Core Question
Symbol Production	“Market–Symbolic Negotiation” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005)	Artisans, Designers, Government/Enterprise Materials	How are traditional symbols reinterpreted in design, pricing, and exhibition?
Consumer Experience	“Consumer Identity Project” + “Market Culture Field”	Tourist/Local Resident Questionnaires + Interviews	Emotional motivations and identity imagination in purchasing <i>Tile-cat</i> ? Does “cutification” dilute/empower tradition?
Symbol Circulation	“Media-Ideology”	E-commerce Pages, Short Videos, Government Public Accounts	How do media encode “Yunnan Mascot” and “Guochao” narratives?

Source: Authors’ analysis

3.4 Sampling & Recruitment

We used theoretical sampling across three informant groups: traditional artisans/inheritors, young designers, and cultural-tourism practitioners. Inclusion criteria required direct involvement with Tile-cat making, design translation, or commercialization. Recruitment combined on-site approach and snowball referrals. Saturation was reached when no new codes emerged after the last two interviews per group.

The consumer survey ($n = 402$) employed quota controls (age, gender, residence) and mixed on-site/online collection. Participation was voluntary with informed consent, and all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and ethical standards.

3.5 Instruments

We combined a semi-structured interview guide (ritual meanings, design translation, authenticity perceptions) with a Likert-scale survey. Constructs included authenticity, identity value, and purchase intention, adapted from prior scales and contextualized to the Tile-cat. Example item for authenticity: “This Tile-cat preserves the genuine cultural spirit.” Reverse-coded items were included. Items were expert-reviewed and piloted; where applicable, a back-translation procedure was employed.

3.6 Procedure

The study proceeded in four steps: (1) multi-site fieldwork and artifact imaging; (2) semi-structured

interviews with artisans/inheritors, young designers, and cultural-tourism practitioners; (3) a consumer survey plus two focus groups; and (4) analysis (coding, scale checks, and structural modeling). Triangulation across archives, media texts, and interviews enhanced credibility.

3.7 Data Analysis

In brief, internal consistency and sampling adequacy were acceptable; the structural model showed good fit, and the hypothesized full mediation was supported. For α /KMO/Bartlett/CFA, model-fit (χ^2 /df, CFI, RMSEA), and standardized paths with bootstrap confidence intervals, see Section 4, Table 2 and Figure 5.



Figure 2 Node A Example
Source: Researcher, 2024



Figure 3 Node B Example
Source: Researcher, 2024



Figure 4 Node C Example
Source: Researcher, 2024

4. Results

Tile-cat's evolution shows dynamic shifts in function, meaning, and form. Findings are detailed in five nodes.

4.1 Node A: Original Symbol and Ritual Identity

Tile-cat was a sacred guardian, imbued with power through “consecration” rituals (Zhang, 2008). This primitive sorcery practice connected humans to deities. Its origins blend local tiger worship (e.g., Bai “big cat”) with Han roof-ridge beast traditions (Yang, 2002; Tao, 2011), reflecting Yunnan’s multiculturalism. A representative example from this period is shown in Figure 2. In daily life, Tile-cat served as a family guardian against misfortune, fostering community faith. Its distinct styling (e.g., gaping mouth, “王” character, Bagua) reinforced its evil-dispelling identity, creating a “cat-tiger hybrid” (fierce yet approachable) that solidified its unique folk status. In this stable, pre-modern context, Tile-cat’s sacred identity and symbolic meaning were unquestioned.

4.2 Node B: Symbolic Power and Secular Desires

Modernization shifted Tile-cat’s symbolic power from sacred to secular. Post-mid-20th century, traditional housing decline marginalized Tile-cat’s protective role. However, it was revitalized by new secular desires. Late 1980s exhibitions sparked a “collecting craze,” redefining Tile-cat as valuable “folk handicraft art” and part of “Yunnan impression.” It transitioned from rural utility to urban collectible, expanding interpretation authority beyond folk practitioners. Figure 3 depicts a representative Tile-cat from this period of symbolic power shift and aesthetic redefinition.

Secularization broadened Tile-cat’s meaning beyond “evil-dispelling.” People appreciated its aesthetic/cultural value, imbuing it with new symbols (e.g., wealth attraction). The collecting trend saw Tile-cat as

pure folk art, reflecting nostalgia. It became an “aesthetic power,” attracting modern attention and resonating with urban cultural elites, serving as cultural capital. The shift also saw the Tile-cat incorporate material desires, becoming a “fortune-attracting” symbol (e.g., artisan Gao Jinfu’s designs with “swallowing gold, spitting silver” motifs).

This secularization wasn’t without tension. Believers worried about commercialization eroding sacredness (e.g., villagers lamenting that Tile-cat were sold as toys). New audiences often overlooked traditional religious meaning, leading to “meaning drift.” Its power base shifted from faith to market trends. Yet Yunnan maintained respect for its core meaning, emphasizing tiger totem origin and traditional functions, ensuring continuity. Node B marks the Tile-cat’s shift “from altar to mundane,” its power source moving to aesthetics and material desires, adapting successfully but facing the challenge of balancing sacredness and commercial allure.

4.3 Node C: Cultural Commodification and Aesthetic Negotiation

21st-century tourism propelled the Tile-cat’s cultural commodification into souvenirs. “Aesthetic negotiation” balancing tradition with modern appeal became key. Designers aimed for cultural recognition while meeting consumer tastes.

A prominent example of this aesthetic negotiation is the ‘wild mushroom Tile-cat’ designed by Xiong Yuanyuan, which integrates iconic Yunnan elements. Its vibrant colors and playful shapes appeal to youth, while retaining cat-tiger traits. Xiong Yuanyuan’s “wild mushroom Tile-cat” (e.g., mushroom cap, painted fangs) gained popularity, shifting the Tile-cat from rooftop to fashion. Other artisans (e.g., Wang Ziqiang) made the Tile-cat cuter and more approachable, often using celadon glaze or vibrant colors. Their designs balanced tradition (e.g., Gesang flowers) with modern aesthetics, achieving “familiar yet novel” forms. This aesthetic success made the Tile-cat widely accepted. Figure 4 provides a representative illustration of a Tile-cat from this stage, embodying the refined and commodified aesthetic achieved through negotiation.

Quantitative analysis (SPSS 28, 402 questionnaires) revealed 78.4% of respondents preferred “Q-version cute” Tile-cat, compared with only 6.9% who preferred “fierce” ones (Table 2). Despite “cutification,” 64.7% still perceived the “tiger spirit.” SEM (AMOS 24) confirmed “Cultural Authenticity → Symbolic Identity Value → Purchase Intention” full mediation ($\beta = 0.62^{***}$ and $\beta = 0.58^{***}$, $p < .001$), supporting the argument that authenticity drives purchase intention via identity.

Table 2 Descriptives, Reliability, and SEM Results

Category	Variable / Indicator	Statistic Value / Coefficient
Desc Stats	Pref for “cute”	78.4%
	“Tiger spirit”	64.7%
	Price (CNY)	96 ± 55
Rel/Val	Cronbach’s α —Authenticity	0.87
	Cronbach’s α —Identity Value	0.84
	Cronbach’s α —Purchase Intention	0.90
	KMO	0.89
	Bartlett’s Sphericity Test	$\chi^2(120) = 2056.7$, $p < .001$
SEM Paths	Cultural Auth → Identity Value	$\beta = 0.62^{***}$
	Identity Value → Purchase Intention	$\beta = 0.58^{***}$
	Cultural Auth → Purchase Intention	— (Full Mediation)
Model Fit	χ^2/df	2.31
	CFI	0.95
	RMSEA	0.057

Source: Asterisks denote path/coefficient significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; n.s. = not significant. Cronbach’s $\alpha \geq 0.80$ indicates good internal consistency. KMO ≥ 0.80 and Bartlett’s Test $p < .001$ confirm suitability for factor analysis. SEM fit thresholds ($\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI ≥ 0.90 , RMSEA ≤ 0.08) indicate acceptable model fit; this study’s model ($\chi^2/df = 2.31$, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.057) met these criteria.

Source: Authors’ analysis

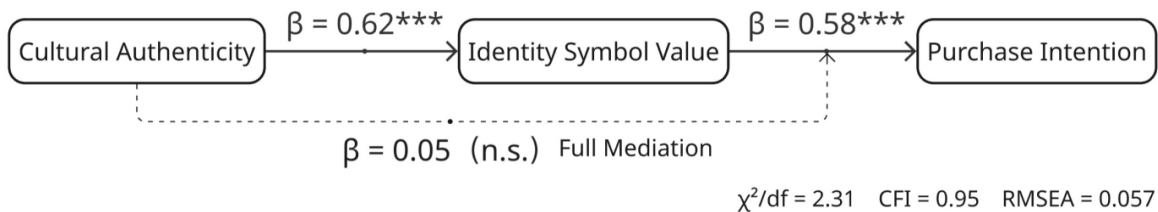


Figure 5 SEM Mediation Model Path Diagram
Source: Authors' analysis

Designers expanded Tile-cat functionality, integrating it into daily life (e.g., Tile-cat coffee cups, diffusers, doorstops). Tourism products (magnets, keychains) proliferated. Sales at Tile-cat Museum surged from hundreds in 2023 to over 20,000 by mid-2025 (interview note with museum director, 2025), with product types increasing from 20 to 160+. This trend reflects market recognition and successful aesthetic negotiation.

Challenges exist in Tile-cat aesthetic negotiation. Some conservatives fear “de-traditionalization” or vulgarization. This highlights the dual nature of aesthetic negotiation, needing careful balance. Most designers maintain “Tile-cat flavor” (e.g., Wang Ziqiang retains the “tiger spirit” despite cuter forms). Storytelling about the Tile-cat enhances cultural content. Overall, Node C shows the Tile-cat’s adaptation in a market economy, balancing tradition and modernity. This commodification broadened the Tile-cat’s social value, making it an accessible cultural emissary without dissolving its meaning. Maintaining this balance is an ongoing task. (Figure 5)

These quantitative findings offer a nuanced perspective on the theoretical debate surrounding cultural authenticity. While a significant majority of consumers (78.4%) preferred the modernized “Q-version cute” style, the SEM model confirms that perceived “Cultural Authenticity” remains the primary driver of “Symbolic Identity Value” ($\beta = 0.62***$), which in turn predicts “Purchase Intention” ($\beta = 0.58***$). This suggests that for contemporary consumers, authenticity is not tied to a rigid adherence to the original “fierce” aesthetic. Instead, it appears to be a negotiated concept, constructed through the preservation and recognition of core symbolic “genes” such as the underlying “guardian” narrative and key visual motifs even as the external form undergoes significant aesthetic transformation. This finding indicates that creative adaptation, rather than diluting authenticity, can reinforce it by making the symbol accessible and relevant to a new generation.

4.4 Node D: Local Knowledge and Regional Identity

The Tile-cat’s endurance stems from rich local knowledge (crafting secrets, transmission) and deep regional identity. It helps strengthen regional cultural confidence and reshapes identity.

Regional Tile-cat forms (Kunming’s simple clay figures, Yuxi’s mysterious “shaman-like,” Chuxiong Yi’s strong tiger traits, Dali Bai’s abstractness) showcase diverse local knowledge, adapting to materials, techniques, and aesthetics. Crafting requires unique regional expertise (e.g., Heqing’s clay mixing, Jianchuan’s wheel-throwing). Oral transmission (e.g., Gao Jinfu, 5th generation) and government protection preserve this tacit knowledge (e.g., Chenggong Xiaoyao Village’s artisans). Figure 6 visually presents the Tile-cat forms and characteristics from various regions across Yunnan, including Yong sheng, Jianchuan, Chenggong, Qujing, and Wenshan, highlighting differences in regionality, craftsmanship, and individual artisans’ styles.

Tile-cat is crucial in regional identity construction. Many areas view it as a cultural emblem (e.g., Kunming Chenggong “Hometown of the Tile-cat,” ICH listed). Community rituals (e.g., sculpting contests) reinforce local identity. In Heqing, Tile-cat is a key Bai symbol, embodying tiger worship. Artisans like Gao Jinfu become symbols of local pride. Tile-cat transcends craft to symbolize local cultural identity, embodying Yunnanese character (kindness, diligence, etc. [Hong Haibo]). Urbanization efforts integrate Tile-cat into new community life, reshaping identity regardless of physical changes.

Local government actively integrates Tile-cat via ICH protection/tourism, confirming its cultural gene status. Yunnan has 19 Tile-cat ICH projects, 40+ inheritors. Government support (training bases, funding) ensures knowledge/skills transmission. Zhang Cai trained over 3000 students in Kunming's Xiaoyao Village, hoping to perpetuate the craft.

Tile-cat also represents Yunnan globally. Its appearance on national and international stages (e.g., 2025 Shenzhen Fair, Dali's "Tile-cat National Tours") reinforces its regional identity as a "Yunnan element." Media praises it as a "cultural envoy," building bridges globally. Su Longxiang proudly calls Tile-cat "our mascot of Yunnan," confirming its deep imprint on regional identity.

Node D highlights the Tile-cat's dual value in local knowledge and regional identity. Local forms preserve wisdom. Tile-cat's wide recognition as Yunnan's cultural symbol, from local "Hometown" to national stage, connects history, present, local, and national. Deep local roots provide resilience; identity reshaping infuses new meaning.

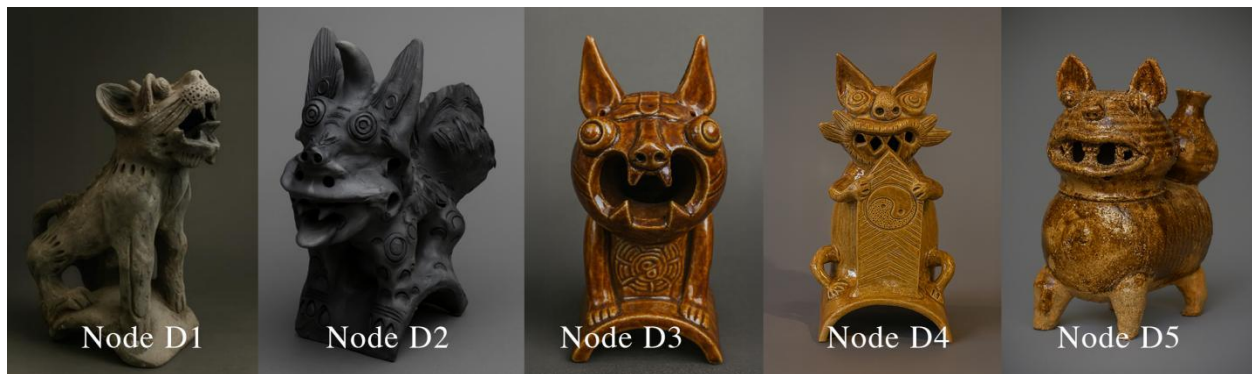


Figure 6 Tile-cat Regional Stylistic Variations
Source: Researcher, 2024

4.5 Node E: Cultural Reproduction and Symbolic Reconstruction

The 2010s saw Tile-cat enter new revitalization. Cultural reproduction, through inheritance, education, media, re-created cultural elements. Symbolic reconstruction reinterprets meaning/image. Tile-cat features protected skills, new interpretations, and wide dissemination.

ICH policies elevated Tile-cat crafting. Yunnan governments built inheritor rosters, training bases, and funded preservation. Tile-cat crafting became formally protected, with local forms recognized as ICH projects. "Kunming Tile-cat" (2023) gained provincial ICH status, boosting its value. This gave Tile-cat symbols legitimacy; artisans became "ICH inheritors," attracting youth and organizing knowledge. This systematic reproduction enhanced Tile-cat's visibility and dignity.

Education and experience show Tile-cat reproduction success. "Tile-cat in classroom" is real: schools/universities integrate crafting, with masters teaching. Students gain skills and cultural interest. This aids cross-regional dissemination and audience cultivation. Local Tile-cat experience activities proliferated (e.g., "DIY workshops"), allowing tourists to craft Tile-cat. Social media notes reflect satisfaction. This immersive tourism is common. Student/tourist participation transformed the Tile-cat from exhibit to creation, making individuals practitioners. As a tourist said, "Taking home my own unique Tile-cat was very meaningful." The Tile-cat gained new meaning as a life aesthetic/cultural experience symbol, representing "a kind of life called Yunnan."

Tile-cat also achieved broader symbolic reconstruction via exhibitions. In a notable cross-sector collaboration, the Kunming Metro partnered with the "K4" Tile-cat IP brand to launch a dedicated Tile-cat-themed subway train, featuring related creative and cultural products (Figure 7). At Shenzhen Fair, 100+ Tile-cat works (pendants, tea sets) showcased innovation, with cross-brand collaborations. Trademarks/patents (60+ copyrighted products) transformed Tile-cat into a mass-producible, cross-platform cultural symbol/IP. It's now a flexible IP image, retaining core

elements (e.g., pointed ears, wide smile) as a recognizable cultural logo. This expands dissemination: Tile-cat on packaging, everyday items, even digital games. Semiotically, Tile-cat evolved from guardian deity to an open cultural symbol representing Yunnan tradition, creativity, joy. This polysemy offers opportunity (broader acceptance) and challenge (maintaining core meaning). Innovations largely retain “guardian/auspicious” themes. This positive cycle renews symbols while preserving spirit.

Media and public discourse repackage Tile-cat’s meaning. Director Hong Haibo likened its spirit to Yunnanese character. Media connected Tile-cat to “Guochao” and “ICH new trend,” shaping a trendy image. Some call Tile-cat Yunnan’s “city IP” and “cultural mascot.” Unlike commercial cartoons, Tile-cat’s deep roots give it higher symbolic value. Media strengthened its status, subtly reshaping Yunnan’s public perception. Tourists learning about Tile-cat online now seek hands-on experiences. This “deterritorialized” Tile-cat into a widely circulated popular symbol. A key reconstruction outcome: Tile-cat is now associated with Yunnan’s cultural creativity/ICH trend, not just old figurines. This public shift stems from designers, inheritors, media, and policy. New interpretations extend tradition to contemporary life. Tile-cat successfully reconstructed: retaining its “guardian/auspicious” genes, symbolizing Yunnan’s multicultural integration.

Yet, cultural reproduction faces challenges. Commercial value increases, but so do low-quality imitations and IP abuse concerns. Inheritors (e.g., Su Longxiang) struggle with few apprentices and low income, common ICH challenges. Despite rising popularity, ensuring craft continuity and fair income needs broad effort. Su Longxiang hopes for a Tile-cat museum; Zhang Cai trains thousands of students. These highlight the human-centered need for reproduction. The Tile-cat must also adapt continuously. Su Longxiang’s “ICH crossover” experiments (e.g., combining with wood carving or humidifiers) explore new applications, as part of its ongoing symbolic reconstruction.

Node E, on the Tile-cat’s cultural reproduction/symbolic reconstruction, shows an encouraging cultural landscape. Tile-cat leaped from rooftop to contemporary trend, its meaning enriched. Government ICH protection, education, tourism marketing, and media shaping transformed Tile-cat from “ancestral” to “belonging to all.” As commentary states: “Once guarding homes, it now descends as folk art, showcasing Chinese culture’s charm in a new form.” The Tile-cat symbol has achieved a successful transformation.



Figure 7 Tile-cat IP & Urban Integration (Node E Phase)
Source: Kunming Metro & K4 collaboration (public campaign)

5. Discussion

Analysis of Tile-cat’s five evolutionary nodes clarifies its transformation, identity reshaping, and adaptation strategies. Its development reflects shifting socio-cultural values. Key conclusions focus on Tile-cat’s symbolic co-construction of local identity, its resilience, and how findings enrich theories.

5.1 Symbolic Transformation and Co-construction of Local Identity

Tile-cat’s shift from religious guardian to Yunnan’s cultural emblem reflects continuous local identity reconstruction. Traditionally, Tile-cat fostered village faith and cohesion. Modernization initially challenged it, but cultural elites and market forces revived it. Tile-cat’s meaning transcended religion, becoming a local art treasure.

Yunnan regions leveraged Tile-cat (e.g., ICH declarations) to reshape identity, boosting local pride. Tile-cat became a provincial symbol, recognized as “Yunnan Mascot,” embodying holistic regional identity. This shows that symbol transformation and identity reshaping are intertwined: symbols offer new vehicles for identity, while identity needs drive symbolic reinterpretation. The same principle applies to other local cultures seeking renewed identity, often by reviving traditions to connect past and future and to foster unity.

5.2 Adaptive Strategies as Cultural Resilience

Tile-cat’s vitality amidst social change stems from flexible cultural adaptation strategies. Adaptation means adjusting cultural elements for survival. Tile-cat exemplifies this (Table 3):

Tile-cat’s vitality amidst social change stems from flexible cultural adaptation strategies. Instead of rigid adherence to original forms, various actors proactively re-create the symbol by adjusting its meaning, aesthetics, function, and dissemination methods, supported by institutional frameworks. These multi-faceted adaptations, along with their key actors, specific initiatives, and potential risks, are detailed in Table 3. This open attitude is central to Tile-cat’s ability to engage with modernity. As artisan Wang Ziqiang stated, “Any ancient craft changes with the times. Without change, it couldn’t evolve.” This mindset is the very embodiment of cultural resilience.

Table 3 Adaptive Strategies for Cultural Resilience

Strategy Type	Main Actors	Typical Initiatives	Theoretical Mapping	Potential Risks
Meaning Adaptation	Traditional Artisans, Young Designers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Embedding ingots/coins in mouth - Oral narratives shift from “evil-dispelling” to “fortune-attracting” 	Market-Symbolic Negotiation—Reinforcing consumer value through reinterpretation	Symbolic desacralization, cultural superficiality
Aesthetic Adaptation	Young Designers, Creative Studios	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Q-version cartoon styling - Celadon glaze, gradient painting - Crossover elements (e.g., “mushroom <i>Tile-cat</i>”) 	Same as above: Symbolic Negotiation)	Excessive cutification, dilution of “tiger spirit”
Functional Adaptation	Designers + Cultural Creative Enterprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daily item transformation (coffee cups, humidifiers, doorstops) - Themed homestay soft furnishings 	Consumer Identity Project—Transforming Tile-cat into everyday self-presentation props	Utilitarianism overriding symbolism, short product lifecycle
Dissemination Adaptation	Douyin/Xiaohongshu Bloggers, E-commerce Platforms, Tourism Experience Centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DIY experience classes, viral short videos - E-commerce detail pages’ “Guochao” narratives 	Media-Ideology platform algorithms amplify “Yunnan Mascot” discourse	Homogenization of popular items, content superficiality
Institutional Adaptation	Local Government, ICH Centers, Trademark Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ICH declaration and inheritor recognition - Establishment of training bases/museums - IP trademark and copyright operation 	Institutional empowerment & Media ideology combine to ensure legitimacy and branding	Over-administration, uneven resource distribution, marginalization of grassroots artisans

Source: Authors’ analysis

The adaptive strategies of the Tile-cat offer a compelling parallel to other globally recognized cultural symbols, such as Japan’s maneki-neko (beckoning cat). Both originated from local folk beliefs (protection and good fortune) and have been aesthetically adapted into a multitude of commercial forms, demonstrating significant market resilience. A key distinction, however, lies in the driving forces behind their recent reconstruction. The Tile-cat’s

transformation has been significantly accelerated by state-led Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) policies, which provided institutional legitimacy, funding, and a structured framework for transmission. In contrast, the

maneki-neko's global proliferation was driven more organically by commercial innovation and popular culture, with less direct government intervention. This comparison underscores how different pathways one state-guided, the other market-led can achieve the successful modernization of traditional symbols, highlighting the importance of context in cultural resilience strategies. Comparing state-guided (Tile-cat) and market-led (maneki-neko) routes suggests our five-stage model is portable across contexts, with parameters set by governance and market logics. This clarifies boundary conditions for transferring the framework to other heritage symbols.

Authenticity in this study sits between object-based and constructive forms: consumers recognize a preserved "tiger spirit" (object cues) while accepting redesigned surfaces (constructive negotiation). The SEM shows a full mediation authenticity raises identity value, which then drives intention explaining why cute-ified Tile-cats remain culturally legitimate when core cues (stripes, stance, guardian narrative) are retained.

5.3 Research Findings and Theoretical Dialogue

The Tile-cat case affirms key theoretical perspectives.

Cultural Semiotics: Tile-cat's changing symbolism (e.g., eyes/teeth from deterrence to humor) shows how "signifier" and "signified" gain new stability over time. It supports "meaning drift" theory: symbols acquire new interpretations without complete detachment from their roots.

Identity Construction Theory: Tile-cat demonstrates symbols' central role in identity. Whether through family worship for tradition or urban branding for regional promotion Tile-cat offers identity material. Quantitative findings confirm: cultural authenticity boosts symbolic identity value, driving purchase. Symbolic identity shifts (deity to IP) guide identification method adjustments (religious veneration to cultural consumption), with symbols as key "mediators."

Consumer Culture Theory: Tile-cat's commodification shows that value depends on market performance. Aesthetic negotiation and positioning allowed a niche cultural object to enter the mainstream, converting use-value into symbolic value. Quantitative data (78.4% preferred "cute" Tile-cats; authenticity drives purchase) validates aesthetic negotiation's core role. However, consumer-driven innovation can partly hollow out meaning. "Cultural narration" becomes vital for balancing commercialization with cultural depth.

Together, these integrated perspectives comprehensively explain the Tile-cat's symbolic evolution.

5.4 Practical Implications and Future Outlook

Tile-cat's evolution offers insights for modern traditional culture inheritance. It's a successful paradigm: government, folk innovation, and market revitalize an ancient symbol. Tile-cat's path (from endangered craft to ICH, rooftop guardian to cultural envoy) offers lessons. Challenges remain: lack of inheritors, commercialization risks, urban loss of traditional spaces. Balancing economics and culture, innovating while preserving, needs ongoing exploration. Recommendations are as follows:

Deepen Education & Dissemination: Strengthen Tile-cat/ICH promotion; use digital media (VR/AR) for museums/games, fostering youth understanding/identity/conservation.

Support Inheritor Mechanisms: Establish robust incentives for artisans, improving income/status, encouraging new learners, ensuring transmission.

Enhance Creative Quality: Guide enterprises/designers to explore Tile-cat essence; unify cultural authenticity/innovation; prevent low-quality homogenization.

Protect Cultural Spaces: Preserve/restore Tile-cat-related landscapes (ridgepoles, museums), providing tangible anchors for cultural experience.

This study, while multi-dimensional, has limitations. It focused on a living heritage, with less emphasis on “endangered” cases. Future research could explore the Tile-cat’s international dissemination or compare it with other roof-ridge beast cultures to test the broader applicability of the framework.

5.5 Limitations

The authors acknowledge several limitations in this study. Firstly, the number of interviewed traditional artisans and inheritors (n=8) is relatively small, which may limit the representativeness of their views. While these interviews provided critical in-depth qualitative insights, future research employing a larger sample size could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the artisan community. Secondly, this study focuses specifically on the Tile-cat as a successful case of cultural revitalization. A comparative analysis with less successful cases of heritage adaptation could provide further insights into the factors underpinning cultural resilience.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically reveals the Tile-cat’s evolution from a local ritual symbol to a contemporary cultural IP. This process is not a passive demise, but a proactive re-creation involving diverse actors.

The core finding is that the Tile-cat’s vitality stems from tension between a stable symbolic core and flexible external expressions. Its “guardian” and “auspicious” genes persist through “ritualization secularization commodification IP-ization,” forming cross-temporal cultural resilience. Its adaptable forms, functions, and dissemination methods, through “meaning” and “aesthetic negotiation,” align with evolving demands.

The Tile-cat case showcases both enduring traditional beliefs and innovation. Spanning millennia, its journey from eaves to tabletop, and from rural to global, represents a splendid chapter in Yunnan’s cultural adaptation. It offers a valuable Chinese case for understanding local knowledge’s modern transformation of local knowledge. The Tile-cat proves that traditional culture is not a static “relic,” but an activatable, reshapeable, and empowerable “resource.” By drawing from history and innovating, symbols connect with modern life, achieving “creative transformation and innovative development.”

Tile-cat will continue its unique trajectory, offering insights for the preservation and innovation of global traditional culture.

7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout this research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including artisans, designers, and consumers, and all collected data were anonymized to protect their privacy.

8. Acknowledgements

This research benefited from extensive support. Thanks to all participating Tile-cat artisans (Gao Jinfu, Li Shouwu, Su Longxiang), young designers, and cultural tourism professionals for invaluable data. Thanks to consumers and “Gen Z” focus group participants for quantitative/qualitative data. Appreciation to Yunnan Provincial Library and Archives for historical document access. Thanks to two research assistants for data coding and organization.

This study was supported by the General Project of Humanities and Social Sciences Research of the Ministry of Education of China, “Research on the Integration and Innovation of Yunnan Ethnic Minority Visual Elements in Local Cultural and Creative Product Design” (Project No.: 19YJC760069).

9. References

- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(3), 868-878. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426626>
- Liu, X., & Yan, K. (2017). Research on ethnic cultural and creative products taking Yunnan Tile-cat as an example. *Art & Design (Theory)*, 2017(3). <https://doi.org/10.16824/j.cnki.issn10082832.2017.03.050>

- Ma, J. (2012). Continuity and innovation: The evolution of Tile-cat craftsmanship in Beibanbang village. *Southwest Borderland Ethnic Studies*, 2012(1), 142-151.
- Ma, J. (2022). A comparative study of Heqing Tile-cats and Binchuan Tile-cats. *Decoration*, 22(2), 108-112.
- Sun, R. (2021). An analysis of the connotative characteristics and image redesign of Yunnan Tile-cat. *Art & Design*, 2(16), 141-143.
- Tao, S. (2009). The cultural connotations of the Tile-cat placement custom. *Journal of Yunnan Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 26 (1), 54-57.
- Tao, S. (2011). Analysis of the diverse characteristics of Yunnan roof beast art. *Sixiang Zhanxian*, 37(2), 145-146. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1001-778X.2011.02.031>
- Wang, J., Tian, Y., & Chen, B. (2021). Semantic transformation and application of Heqing Tile cat in the perspective of daily life. *Packaging Engineering*, 42(8), 241-247. <https://doi.org/10.19554/j.cnki.1001-3563.2021.08.032>
- Xiang, L., & Chen, S. (2019). Memory, aesthetic capital, and fashion—taking the creative design of Jianchuan traditional craft in Yunnan as an example. *National Art*, 2019(5), 29-42.
- Yang, Z. (2000). *Primal images and objects*. Kunming, China: Yunnan Education Press.
- Yang, Z. L. (2002). Tiger-shaped cat and its role in protecting homes: The guardian beasts in Yunnan's traditional residential architecture. *Today's Ethnic Groups*, (9), 40-42.
- Yunnan Provincial People's Government. (2022, December 27). *Notice on the publication of the fifth batch of provincial-level intangible cultural heritage representative project lists in Yunnan Province* (Document No. Yun Zheng Fa [2022] No. 55). Yunnan Provincial People's Government.
- Zeng, Y. (2012). Interpretation of the symbolic meaning of ethnic tourist commodity “Tile-cat.” *Tourism Overview (Industry Edition)*, 2012(7), 27-28.
- Zhang, Q. (2008). The cultural connotation of Tile-cat. *National Arts Research*, 2008(4), 49-52. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1003-840X.2008.04.010>