

Study on the Artistic and Cultural Value of Tile Cats in Heqing, Yunnan Province

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Abstract: As one of the roof beasts in Yunnan, tile cat has strong regional characteristics and cultural connotations in the long-term development of Yunnan Dali Bai folk culture. The article studies the artistic and cultural value of the tile cat in Heqing, Yunnan, in terms of its regional profile, origin, material, shape, colour and cultural symbolism. The tile cat as a regional symbol will run through the whole process of Heqing ethnic culture, promote the development of Dali ethnic minority areas through cultural inheritance, provide more literature references for the tile cat culture, and promote the development of the non-heritage culture of China's roof beasts.

Keywords: Tile Cats in Heqing; Artistic and Cultural Value; Modeling Features.

1. Introduction



Figure 1. "Heqing Tile Cat standing on the roof"

In the vast and profound Chinese culture, ancient architecture culture plays a pivotal role, and its influence penetrates into the life of the nation. In many residential buildings, we will often see in the roof will stand a variety of beasts, they are not only part of the building, but also the carrier of cultural heritage. These beasts are powerful and domineering, some naive, each with its own demeanour and meaning, their presence for the ancient architecture adds a mysterious and solemn atmosphere. The roof beast is more common in traditional Chinese architectural roof decoration, now, the roof beast is not only the building decorations, but also a cultural symbol, which contains a deep national spirit and good wishes. For example, dragons and phoenixes symbolise power and dignity in traditional Chinese culture, while the unicorn represents good fortune and auspiciousness. The existence of these roof beasts not only demonstrates the superior skills of ancient craftsmen, but also reflects our people's aspiration and pursuit of a better life. Rich in connotations, they often stand on top of buildings and are the product of concepts materialised into decorative components.

In Yunnan roof beast decoration, the various ethnic minorities of the multicultural integration of each other and symbiosis, the most common roof decoration in addition to the Dai nationality peacock, elephant, the bird of the wonderful and Tile Cat. Therefore, the tile cat is affectionately

called "cat guard". In general, the roof beast is an indispensable part of China's ancient architecture, which perfectly combines the rich cultural connotation and unique artistic style, providing valuable reference and inspiration for our architectural design today.

In recent years, most of the domestic scholars' researches on tile cats in Heqing, Yunnan are applied design researches, and the basic researches are slightly thin. For example, Yang Jiaying and Li Dongna's "Exploration of the modelling of the artistic characteristics of the Heqing Tile Cat in the "National Tide"; Wang Xinyuan and Tian Ye's "Research on the Cultural and Creative Product Design of the Jianchuan Tile Cat in the Field of Non-Heritage"; and Zhang Tingyi and Zhang Handong's "Interpretation of the Visual Composition of the Tile Cat in Heqing and the Significance of Cultural Innovation" are all about digging deeper to activate the Tile Cat and analyze the current situation and development potential of Tile Cats from the perspective of design and application. They all explore and activate the Heqing tile cat and analyse its current situation and development potential from the perspective of design application, and explore and practice it. Dong Jianhua and Tian Ji's "Auspiciousness on the Roof - A Study on the Art of Heqing Tile Cats in Dali" and Ma Jia's "A Comparative Study on Heqing Tile Cats and Binchuan Tile Cats" summarise and integrate the culture and art of the Heqing Tile Cats in Yunnan through comparison. These scholars believe that the tile cat into the regional culture, architectural decoration and folk art as one of the traditional folk crafts, has a very high cultural heritage and art protection value.

2. Overview of Heqing Tile Cats in Yunnan Province

Yunnan Province, since the establishment of New China, its administrative division has undergone several changes. Initially, it was under the administration of Lijiang area, however, after 1956, it was divided into Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. Here, with its long history and deep culture, dating back to before the Han Dynasty, Heqing County has been an integral part of the Southwest Yi region. Heqing County is a beautiful scenery, rich in produce, simple people, the Tang Dynasty Fanchuo's "Yunnan Zhi" (also known as the "Book

of Barbarians") a book in the name of "E Kun", that is, the current Heqing. Heqing County is a multi-ethnic area, where residents mainly rely on crop cultivation as their main source of income. The ethnic groups here are rich and diverse, including the Bai, Han, Yi, Lisu, Miao and Zhuang. These ethnic groups have influenced and integrated with each other in the course of long-term historical development, forming unique cultural traditions and lifestyles. This multi-ethnic distribution not only reflects the cultural diversity of Heqing County, but also makes the culture of Heqing County more colourful and unique.

Scholar Wang Jichao also mentioned in the interactive development of Dali's local culture and the culture of the migrant population: "Dali culture is an organism made up of many different cultural factors that are interconnected and interact with each other, and since its emergence, it has experienced a process of evolution from simple to complex, from different cultural factors working independently of each other to the integration and unification of different cultural factors, and has formed a multilayered and intertwined culture of the present day. Multi-level and intertwined relationship system of cultural factors." [1] Therefore, as an important member of the series of roof beasts, the tile cat of Heqing, in the field of Yunnan roof beast art, shows a unique face of cultural diversity and becomes a form of art that combines elements of multiple cultures. This art form not only absorbs the traditional essence of the local people, but also absorbs the rich nutrients from different regional cultures, which makes Heqing's Tile Cat occupy a place in the art of Roof Beasts, and with its unique artistic charms and profound cultural connotations, it has won the widespread recognition of the people.

Nowadays, the tile cat has evolved into a precious intangible cultural heritage skill in Heqing, and the tile cat has been silently guarding the local residents on the roof for hundreds of years. This unique technique not only reflects the love and desire of the people of Heqing for life, but is also a symbol of their wisdom and hard work. As a guardian deity, Tile Cat carries people's hope for a better life, and at the same time conveys their attachment to their homeland and their adherence to traditional culture. In the long history, the tile cat has gradually become the iconic symbol of Heqing, representing the unique charm and cultural heritage of this place.

3. The Artistic Expression of Tile Cat in Heqing, Yunnan Province

"Intangible cultural heritage is the cultural treasure of the Chinese nation, carrying the cultural essence of various ethnic groups, containing the genes and concepts of national culture, with multiple cultural values of literature, art and science, the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage is an important way to enhance cultural self-confidence, and promote the development of cultural prosperity." [2] Tile cats, as a folk art form unique to the Heqing region, not only carries rich local cultural connotations, but also shows the unique aesthetic concepts and artistic creativity of the people of Heqing. From its historical background, diverse styling design, traditional material selection, distinctive use of colours to the deep cultural symbolism, the tile cat is undoubtedly a multi-dimensional research object, and the artistic value it contains should not be ignored. Through the in-depth study of Tile Cat, we can more systematically

understand its important position in Heqing culture, and then provide scientific theoretical support and practical guidance for its protection and inheritance.



Figure 2. "Heqing Residential Buildings"

3.1. Discover the origins and folklore of the Heqing Tile Cat

The origin and legend of the Tile Cat has been described in various ways, with different versions in different parts of the local. Among them, the first one about the origin of the tile cat originates from a legend full of magical colours circulating in the region. The story happened a long time ago, when ghosts and monsters frequently infested the Dali area, making the people live in dire straits. One day, a fairy passed by and witnessed the suffering of the people and felt compassion. In order to protect the people, the god named a tiger to guard the city. Since the tiger guarded the city, ghosts and monsters no longer dared to come to their doorsteps, and the people finally lived a peaceful and happy life. In order to commemorate this guardian tiger, people carved its image on the tiles, which is one of the legends that the tile cat evolved from the image of the tiger. In addition, according to Yang Yang scholars of Dali Heqing folk tile cat analysis it concluded that the tile cat originated in the Ming Dynasty period, the Ming Dynasty, a kind of beast known as "mocking the wind", modelled like a tiger, folk also known as "Zhenjihu", the image of the Central Plains into the Dali after the people of Dali, according to their own understanding and aesthetics, the people of Dali. After this image was introduced to Dali from the Central Plains, the people of Dali changed its shape and orientation according to their own understanding and aesthetics, and applied it to the architecture of residential buildings. [3] During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the economy of the Heqing region flourished and became one of the favourite places for the tea and horse culture of merchants and traders. Therefore, originating in the Ming Dynasty and imported and developed by the Central Plains culture, the historical origin of the tile cat is also justified. This legend and exploration not only reveals the origin of the Tile Cat, but also reflects the reverence of China's folk culture for nature and gods, as well as the evolution and development of folk art in the long course of history.

The story of the second origin legend originates from the Nanzhao period in Dali, where at the foot of the Cangshan Mountain, there was a hard-working woodcutter couple who lived a simple and happy life. One day, on their way back from harvesting timber, the couple accidentally found an injured kitten lying alone and helpless in the freezing winter

air. With compassion in their hearts, the woodcutter couple brought the kitten back home and took care of it carefully, healing its wounds and bringing it back to life. However, as the years went by, the couple's health deteriorated as a result of caring for the kitten. Gradually, they were no longer able to work, and their lives fell into disarray. The kitten was so grateful that it often climbed up to the roof, watched for smoke rising from the roofs of the houses, and then went to the door to ask for food. In the Dali Bai folk, there is a proverb that says "a cat is a blessing", so the villagers were always happy to give the kitten food and pampered it. Until one day, the kitten stood on the beams of the house hissing and hissing with a mournful voice, which attracted the attention of the villagers. When they rushed to the couple's home, they found that they had passed away in their home. After the villagers buried the couple, the kitten remained steadfast at home, guarding the once-warm home from the roof every day until its body, too, became dry. In order to commemorate this loyal kitten, the villagers invited its ashes to the master mason to build and burn a statue of the cat. From then on, when every house was built, one of these statues would stand. Because the first statue was made by the master mason's hands, the cat was called "Tile Cat" to commemorate its loyalty and bravery.

The third theory is that the Heqing area was previously part of Lijiang, where they categorised houses into "yang" and "yin". The "Yang Mansion" refers to the housing of the living, while the "Yin Mansion" refers to the graves of the dead. In the local area, the tile cat is a common decoration, mainly used to decorate the "Yang Mansion". The image of the cat is very similar to that of a domestic cat crouching on the ridge of a house, and its original meaning is that of a tiger that eats ghosts. This kind of cat is not only a kind of decoration, but also has some kind of symbolism, reflecting the importance of people's homes and their love of life. In Lijiang, the use and meaning of this tile cat has been passed down for a long time and has become part of the local culture. People's love and use of tile cats is not only to beautify their houses, but also to pray for peace and good luck. This unique residential decoration culture, to a certain extent, reflects the customs and ethnic characteristics of the Lijiang region. The image and meaning of tile cat not only show the cultural characteristics of Lijiang area, but also send people's desire for a better life.

3.2. Shape and Color Characteristics of Heqing Tile Cat

The production of tile cat has very high requirements in the selection of materials, usually, the production of tile cat will give preference to high-quality clay as the main raw material. This is because if the quality of the clay is not good, then in the subsequent firing process, the tiles will easily crack, which will not only affect the moulding of the tiles, but also bring difficulties to the production process. Therefore, the quality of the clay is directly related to the success or failure of the tiled cat production. In addition, the clay needs to be screened and processed several times before making tiled cats to ensure that its quality meets the requirements for making tiled cats. During the production process, the plasticity of the clay is extremely high, which is to facilitate the craftsmen to be able to carve and decorate various patterns at a later stage. Only with good plasticity can tile cats present rich shapes and exquisite patterns. It is worth mentioning that there is a special rule in the production process of Heqing tile cat, that is, it does not need to be glazed. This makes the local Nanhe

Bay and rice fields an important source of raw materials for tile cats. Here, the craftsmen can collect clay of excellent quality, which provides sufficient raw materials for the production of tile cat.

The core of the production process lies in the words "kneading", "kneading", "sticking", and "drying". The image of the cat is not bound by a fixed style, there is no pre-set mould, and does not rely on high-tech tools, but only by the craftsman's dedication to art and years of accumulation of skills, with a ball of wet clay, a pool of water, and even occasionally with the help of a few discarded carbon pen tubes, you can give life to the clay. At the beginning of the production process, the craftsmen will soak the clay in water, then mix it with fine yellow clay in proportion, and through repeated kneading and dividing, gradually outline the basic contours of the tiled cat. In this process, a large column becomes the main body of the cat, four small columns become the agile limbs, the oval face jumps out, the rectangular base stabilises the whole, and a few strips of clay are the tail, tongue and facial details of the cat. The next step is shaping, because the head of the cat is lifted upwards to present a kind of head-straightening posture, so the limbs are required to be stretched out in front and flexed at the back, which naturally forms a tilted angle when connecting with the main body. The face of the Tile Cat is made into an oval with delicate techniques, and details such as the lips, tongue, fangs and chin are kneaded out of clay strips; the eyes are inlaid with clay balls, and the upper and lower eyelids are outlined with thin strips of clay. The eyes are set in balls of clay, and the upper and lower eyelids are outlined with thin strips of clay. The ears and nose are triangularly shaped, and the nose is punched with two holes to ensure ventilation. The tail is cleverly moulded into an "S" shape, adding to the dynamic nature of the cat. Finally, the carbon pencil tubes is used to carve out a beautiful circular pattern on the body of the cat, which adds a touch of elegance to the work, and the cat is then ready to be dried in the sun and burnt.

However, the humidity of the clay needs to be controlled during the production process. As the clay needs to be constantly dipped into water to maintain its softness during the shaping process, but excessively wet clay is prone to deformation, so it is necessary to dry some of the clay to the right level of humidity before continuing the operation. In addition, the hollow design of the cylindrical body of the tiles reduces weight and facilitates air circulation during firing, ensuring a flawless finished product. For the skilful Tile Cat makers, the transformation from clay to finished product takes only a few minutes, which is not only a demonstration of the maker's skills, but also a tribute to the heritage of traditional culture.

When analysed from the stylistic features, the most striking feature is the extremely tense mouth, which occupies more than half of the head space in an exaggerated manner, as if it were an abyss capable of devouring everything in the world. The eyes are as open as the brightest stars in the night sky, looking upwards, revealing a kind of curiosity and exploration of the unknown world. The ears are like two small knives, alertly standing up, always catching the wind and grass around, this form is just like the old saying: "Eyes watch six roads, ears listen to all directions", which vividly demonstrates the Tile Cat's sensitivity and agility as a guardian. The internal structure of the cat's mouth is even more impressive, with two sharp fangs at the top and bottom, flashing with a cold light, as if capable of instantly tearing

apart all threats. In contrast to these fierce fangs is a row of neatly arranged, white as jade, small teeth, which are closely attached to each other. The tongue, on the other hand, extends playfully between the two fangs, adding a touch of playfulness and cuteness to the Tile Cat. This design not only shows the majesty and power of the Tile Cat as a guardian, but also gives it a unique charm and elegance. However, as the wheel of time rolls forward, cultural exchanges and integration have become an unstoppable trend. The image of the Tile Cat has also begun to evolve, and it is no longer confined to the traditional role of the guardian of the roof, but in a new posture in people's eyes. Nowadays, you can see all kinds of tile cat products in the market, which are either delicate and refined, or rough and bold, or mean good luck, or convey good news. Among them, the exquisite Tile Cat ashtray has won people's favour with its unique shape and practical functions; the auspicious Pagoda Cat has become an indispensable decoration for most people's homes with its majestic posture and beautiful meaning; and the Double Happiness Cat, which conveys good news, and the Six Fortunes Cat, which symbolises happiness, have become the preferred gifts for celebrating festivals and welcoming newborns with their joyful ambience and beautiful meanings. These works not only retain the original charm and charisma of the cat, but also incorporate modern design concepts and aesthetic elements, giving new life and vitality to the traditional art form of the cat.

In the use of colour, the most well-known image of the Heqing Tile Cat is its grey tone, this colour choice is quite meaningful, it echoes the tone of the traditional Dali Bai residential houses, presenting a different kind of harmonious beauty. In the traditional architecture of the Dali Bai, grey and white are the two most common and typical colours, which not only represent the Bai people's reverence for nature, but also reflect their love of life and pursuit of beauty. The uniqueness of Heqing Tile Cats is that they are seldom glazed, so most of their colours maintain the original texture of the raw materials, which makes the Tile Cats look more simple and unadorned, full of rich natural atmosphere. At the same time, this is the land guarded by the cat, the Bai people's philosophy of simplicity, the unity of mankind, showing the unique charm of the Heqing cat. In contrast, the Kunming Tile Cat has a clear difference in colour with the Heqing Tile Cat, and the Kunming Tile Cat is commonly found in an earthy yellow hue. Although this earthy yellow tone is very different from the grey tone of the Heqing Tile Cats, it also reflects the unique beauty of the Tile Cats and the unique role they play in different regional cultures. Whether it is the grey white of the Heqing Tile Cat or the earthy yellow of the Kunming Tile Cat, both of them are an integral part of our traditional culture, and are the crystallisation of the wisdom and art of our ancestors, which are worth cherishing and passing on to us.

3.3. The Cultural Significance of Heqing Tile Cat

Roof beasts have been of great cultural significance since ancient times, representing the folk culture, religious beliefs and regional characteristics of the people behind them. Tao Shuxia scholars have pointed out that: "in Yunnan specific ethnic groups or specific areas of the roof above the formation of the unique characteristics of the national roof beast type, become the direct embodiment of the religious beliefs of the nation or even become the iconic symbols of the national architecture." [4] Therefore, the cultural symbolism of the tile

cat to suppress evil and seek good fortune, and to absorb gold and bring good fortune is also one of the manifestations of the folk culture of the Heqing people.



Figure 3. "Color analysis chart of Heqing tile cat"

According to the legend of tile cat, tile cat is mostly used to decorate houses, often placed in the lintel of the house or the roof ridge on the eaves, not only has the role of decorating the house building, but also has the function of subduing evil and driving away ghosts. In the Heqing area, the existence of the tile cat has a special significance. People here regard folk activities as an integral part of their daily lives. Whether it is for marriage, funeral, earth moving or festivals, they will pray to the gods for blessings. This long-standing belief in people's hearts is the concept of "coexistence of humans and gods".

The core of this concept is the respect and worship of "nature", which is also the reason why tile cat are closely related to the humanistic connotation and national spirit of Heqing. [5] Faith and culture are closely related, and each nation has its own unique cultural traditions ,The sense of natural harmony embodied in the tile cat is a microcosm of the cultural spirit of China's ethnic minorities. The existence of the Tile Cat is not only a decorative object, but also a symbol of faith and a kind of spiritual power. Placing the Tile Cat in the centre of the roof is a kind of trust and reliance on its function of suppressing evil and driving away demons. Local people believe that if there is a demon, the tile cat will be able to devour the demon and guard the peace of Heqing. This belief is a precious treasure in China's folk culture and a reflection of the harmonious coexistence between the people of Heqing and nature.

In addition, the tile cat also has the symbolism of attracting wealth, which is closely related to the modelling design of the tile cat. In Dali Bai folklore, there is a saying that "a cat is a blessing", which is another important reason for the existence of the Tile Cat. [6] The main shape of the tile cat is a hollow cylinder, which is derived from the folk culture of Dali, meaning "swallowing clouds and spitting out mist" and "swallowing gold to bring good fortune". The hollow is able to hold things, and the large mouth shape symbolises that it can swallow all bad things, one in and one out, thus bringing good luck and good fortune. In this way, the Tile Cat can guard the home and bless the party with peace, as well as gather money and bring wealth. As the saying goes: "Swallowing gold and silver, attracting wealth and treasures", the Tile Cat symbolises the wide acceptance of good luck and wealth from all directions, bringing wealth and good fortune to people's lives.

In a word, Tile Cat has a high cultural value in Dali Bai folklore in China, and its shape and meaning reflect the wisdom and faith of the local people. Tile cat is not only a kind of artwork, but also a kind of symbol, carrying people's desire for a better life and hope for a happy future. Through the Tile Cat, people convey the wish of attracting wealth and prosperity, good luck and good fortune, and also pass down this unique folk culture.

4. Summary

This paper describes the artistic and cultural value of the tile cat in Heqing, Yunnan from the regional overview, the origin of the tile cat, the modelling and colour characteristics, cultural symbolism and other aspects. It aims to pass down and carry forward the culture of tile cat better.

To sum up, this paper aims to contribute to the inheritance and development of this folk art through in-depth excavation and elaboration of the artistic and cultural value of Yunnan Heqing tile cat. We look forward to more people to understand and appreciate the beauty of tile cat, and jointly guard this

valuable cultural heritage.



Figure 4. "the tower Tile Cat"

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