

CULTURAL AND CREATIVE SOUVENIR DESIGN BASED ON YUNNAN WAMAO ELEMENTS

Zhou Chuan¹, Thanasisit Chantaree²

E-mail: cheryl.chuhanz@gmail.com, thacha1@kku.ac.th

¹ *Master of Design, Faculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University.*

² *Asst. Prof. Dr., Division of Design, Faculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University.*

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Abstract

This article mainly focuses on Wamao, one of the characteristic cultural symbols in Yunnan Province, China. With its exaggerated shape and highly expressive artistic style, it is not only a carrier of the local environmental culture, but also embodies the unique thoughts and ideas of the local people. This research aims to investigate: 1) Study the history and structure development of Yunnan Wamao culture. 2) Study the visual characteristics of Wamao in seven regions of Yunnan, China. 3) Study design souvenir based on Yunnan Wamao elements. The research methods used in this research include: 1) Literature analysis method, to understand the history and culture of Wamao, Yunnan. 2) Comparative form analysis method, comparative analysis of shape features of Wamao in seven regions of Yunnan. 3) Design Practice Methods, extract and transform the Wamao image, and design tourist souvenirs that conform to modern aesthetics. With the development of Yunnan folk culture and art design in recent years, Wamao elements have gradually appeared on different design carriers. The research results show that the design of Wamao souvenirs needs to highlight symbolism, emotion and regionality. The design method can be summarized into three key elements: symbolic and simple expression, emotional communication, and combining with other ethnic minority cultural symbols. The final design case is a souvenir series design that combines Wamao image and Yunnan Ethnic Minority motifs from seven regions. The products include postcards, scarves, Chinese round fans and Wamao pattern puzzle souvenirs. Which demonstrate innovative design methods of symbolic modeling, emotional affinity and cultural integration to meet the diverse needs of modern consumers for cultural souvenirs.

Keywords: Traditional Culture, Yunnan Wamao, Souvenir Design, Cultural Elements

Introduction

Wamao is a unique architectural decoration culture in Yunnan, as well as a traditional art culture. Wamao originated from the religious and folk beliefs of local ethnic minorities. With its unique shape and symbolic connotation, it has become an important part of Yunnan local culture. Wamao is a traditional folk craft used to protect homes, ward off evil, and prevent disasters, typically placed on the rooftops of houses. Across different regions and ethnic groups in Yunnan, it has developed into a variety of distinct forms. Wamao originated as an architectural ornament in ancient times, serving as a talisman to ward off evil and protect against misfortune. It is not only an artistic decoration but also a cultural symbol (Li, 1993).

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage is fundamentally based on its development, as the evolution of society influences the transmission of traditional craftsmanship. Therefore, innovation becomes the optimal approach to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (Ji, 2022). With the development of China's cultural and creative industries and the expansion of the cultural tourism market, Wamao elements are gradually being incorporated into local cultural and creative product designs, promoting Yunnan's ethnic culture through souvenir forms. Secondly, incorporating Wamao design elements into cultural and creative souvenirs through modern design methods can help sustain and pass on Wamao culture.

This study aims to deeply explore the cultural connotation and visual characteristics of Wamao elements, and explore the application methods of Wamao elements in souvenir design through the innovation of cultural and creative design methods. This study hopes to effectively inherit and innovatively apply Wamao, a unique cultural element of Yunnan, in modern society through creative design methods.

Research Objectives

1. Study the history and structure development of Yunnan Wamao culture.
2. Study the visual characteristics of Wamao in seven regions of Yunnan, China.
3. Study design souvenir based on Yunnan Wamao elements.

Research Methodology

This study adopts three research methods: literature analysis method, comparative form analysis method, secondary data analysis method to ensure a deep understanding of Yunnan Wamao culture, and combines it with design practice to modernize it and adapt it to the needs of the tourist souvenir market.

1. Literature analysis method: by collecting relevant books, papers and other literature materials, Investigate the history, culture and modeling characteristics of Wamao. Analyze and summarize the materials, craftsmanship, modeling and other aspects of traditional Wamao.

2. Comparative form analysis method: using the comparative study method of forms, expression characteristics, decorative elements, and body shape of the Wamao in seven regions of Yunnan was conducted.

3. Design practice method: In the design practice, the traditional Wamao shape is transformed into symbolic design. By extracting and transforming Yunnan Ethnic Minority motifs, tourist souvenirs that conform to modern aesthetics are designed.

Research Results

1. Results of a Study on the History and Development of Yunnan Wamao Culture

1.1 The History and Culture of Yunnan Wamao

Yunnan Wamao has a long history and is one of the important folk arts in southwest China, with rich local ethnic minority characteristics in Yunnan. Wamao is a tile decorative item placed in the middle of the roof of local residents in Yunnan, China. It is named after its appearance, which looks like a cat squatting on the roof. The most ferocious and representative parts of tiger and cat are selected for the shape of Wamao. The name, shape and craftsmanship of Wamao vary from region to region in Yunnan (Ma, 2012). Wamao are considered to be "mythological animals" that can look after homes and homes, ward off evil spirits and bring good fortune. Therefore, people in Yunnan expect to achieve the purpose of warding off evil spirits, praying for good fortune and attracting wealth through the worship of Wamao. Beyond its traditional role of devouring evil spirits, the Wamao has evolved over time as people continuously endowed it with additional powers and functions to meet their needs. In addition to its original purpose of protecting homes, it was also attributed with the ability to attract wealth and prosperity, ultimately transforming it into an all-powerful mythical guardian (Qian, 2012).

The earliest Wamao culture in Yunnan can be traced back to the Qin and Han Dynasties 2,000 years ago. The people of Kunming would carve Wamao on their doors. By the Sui and Tang dynasties Wamao were placed on the roof ridge, traditional Wamao is mostly carved with clay sculpture. The custom of placing them is mainly combined with traditional architecture or feng shui. Most of them are located on the roof and ridge of traditional folk buildings, and are usually placed in the center of the ridge. The origin of Wamao has a deep relationship with architectural components, folk customs, and religion. In short, it can be concluded that the Wamao is an external manifestation of the collective cultural consciousness of the local people to pray for auspiciousness and a happy life (Gong, 2018).

1.2 The Production Process of Yunnan Wamao

Due to the differences in regions and production techniques, the materials used to make Wamao are also different. There are many types of

Wamao, and their shapes are different. Most Wamao are made of clay, and a few areas use stone carving. The ceramic Wamao is more delicately made, with more vivid and concrete shapes, richer details on the facial features and limbs, and various shapes and styles. This is also the Wamao production method that is still used today.

The ceramic Wamao is hand-shaped by Artisans with minimal tools. Although the shaping techniques of the artisans may be different, whether it is the earliest bricklayers or the later Wamao artists, there is a “tiger-shaped” outline in the production shapes of various styles of Wamao. The following are the process steps of making Yunnan Wamao that the author has learned:



Figure 1 The author's process of making Wamao

Source: Author

1.3 The Structure and Evolution Process of Yunnan Wamao

The new generation of Wamao in Yunnan is a product of the new era. The inheritors of Wamao craftsmanship created it in response to the needs of the times under the combined influence of various subjective and objective conditions (Ji, 2022). Therefore, it is significantly different from the traditional Wamao, and has undergone major changes in function and shape, showing the following main characteristics.

Table 1 Wamao development changes in the context of the times

Wamao structure development changes	Last century Wamao	Existing Wamao
		
Changes of modeling	The overall shape is rough and fierce, with simple lines outlining the exaggerated mouth and eyes.	The pursuit of local characteristics, exaggerated and diverse modeling.
Wamao structure development changes		
Changes of structure	Bottom tube tile structure, convenient to stand on the roof, the body is half crouching or sitting.	The bottom becomes a square plate or removed, convenient for visitors to place, with the same long limbs and upright body.
Changes of volume	Standardized, depending on the size of the kiln. Volume is usually larger.	Smaller Wamao, easier for visitors to carry.
Changes of decorative	The decoration is made by simple tools such as knives and penholders, such as scratching and carving.	Incorporate contemporary pottery techniques, patterns are carved on the surface of the Wamao, making both the shape and decoration more diverse and modern.

Source: Author

The main function of traditional Wamao lies in religious and folk beliefs, representing functions such as exorcism and blessing, so the shape is relatively simple, emphasizing majesty and practicality. However, with the changes in modern architectural forms, high-rise buildings have replaced traditional bungalows, so Wamao has gradually weakened its functional positioning as a building component and faded out of people's daily lives. In recent years, the rise of cultural and creative industries in the tourist souvenir

market has provided new opportunities for the modern application of traditional culture. Therefore, the emerging Wamao pays more attention to ornamental and decorative aspects, becoming a creative product with cultural symbolic significance. As souvenirs or decorative ornaments, it dilutes the functionality of Wamao's traditional beliefs but enhances its appeal to modern tourists and consumers.

2. Aim to Study the Visual Characteristics of Wamao in Seven Regions of Yunnan, China

2.1 The Shape Features of Wamao in Seven Regions of Yunnan

There is a custom of placing Wamao in many areas of Yunnan, such as Kunming and Chenggong, Heqing, Jianchuan, Fengyi, Chuxiong, Yuxi, etc. The types of Wamao in different regions have different characteristics in appearance. Yunnan is a multi-ethnic region, and each ethnic group has different folk customs. Therefore, each ethnic group has different demands for the functions of Wamao, resulting in the various forms of Wamao in reality. However, the spiritual need of Yunnan people to exorcise evil spirits in Wamao has made the exaggerated and ferocious facial features of Wamao a common feature of Wamao in all regions. However, due to the differences in regions, craftsmen in different regions have different creative characteristics for Wamao.

Table 2 Characteristics of Wamao in different regions

Area	Structure	Material and Shape Feature
Kunming Wamao		Material: Yellow pottery clay, glaze. Wamao from the Kunming region is made from locally sourced yellow clay and is usually glazed. The head is a spherical pottery jar, and the body is made of a cylindrical pottery jar.

Area	Structure	Material and Shape Feature
Chenggong Wamao		<p>Material: Yellow pottery clay, un-glazed.</p> <p>The Chenggong Wamao is made by throwing and is usually not glazed, and there is usually a diamond-shaped Bagua diagram on the chest. Wamao consists of two pottery jars, the smaller is the head and the larger is the body. The mouth is slightly open, revealing four teeth.</p>
Heqing Wamao		<p>Material: Pottery Clay, unglazed.</p> <p>The Heqing Wamao is made of clay and not glazed. After firing, it is gray or black color. The biggest feature of the Wamao in Heqing is that the head is big and the body is small. The mouth is so big that it occupies 2/3 of the head, with 4 teeth, and the two ears stand upright above the eyes.</p>
Jianchuan Wamao		<p>Material: Black pottery, unglazed.</p> <p>Black pottery has the characteristics of fine texture and strong plasticity, and the embryo body is not glazed and colored. Jianchuan Wamao is handcrafted using local black pottery materials. There are six whiskers on either side of the cheeks, pointed teeth and ears, pointed horns on the top of the head.</p>
Fengyi Wamao		<p>Material: Pottery Clay, glaze.</p> <p>The Fengyi places emphasis on stylistic decoration. Compared to Wamao from other regions, each part of the Fengyi Wamao features more intricate and detailed designs. The overall style of wamao is more refined, belonging to the new generation of wamao in Yunnan.</p>
Chuxiong Wamao		<p>Material: Pottery Clay, unglazed.</p> <p>In terms of craftsmanship, employ the most primitive techniques. The first impression is simple and honest. The overall style of wamao is cuter, the Chuxiong wamao is solid and leans towards a more realistic depiction. Body the limbs are erect or lying, and the overall shape is like a domestic cat.</p>

Area	Structure	Material and Shape Feature
Yuxi Wamao		Material: Pottery Clay, glaze. Using the outlining technique of Yuxi blue and white porcelain, various patterns are carved on the surface of the Wamao, which is then coated with a transparent glaze, making both the shape and decoration more diverse and modern. The Wamao from the Yuxi region is a new generation of Wamao, resulting from the fusion of designs from various regions.

Source: Author

The rise of tourism has impacted Yunnan's ethnic crafts with exotic cultures and introduced diversified aesthetic concepts. These changes are also reflected in the changes in Wamao's shape. Judging from the historical development of Yunnan, the purpose of its aesthetic taste and artistic expression is to narrate the realization process of a certain activity that people are experiencing. These are the distinctive characteristics of art and culture in primitive society (Wang, 1999).

2.2 Analysis of Elemental Characteristics of Wamao

Wamao's symbolic and iconic design language is evident in its appearance, shape, color and decoration, and is identified and communicated through the following aspects:

1) Exaggerated shape and unique facial expressions

Wamao usually has a big mouth, protruding eyes and a wide head. These exaggerated designs make its image have a strong visual impact. The wide mouth is regarded as a symbol of warding off evil, while the protruding eyes convey the meaning of alertness and protection. This exaggeration not only improves the recognition of Wamao, but also makes it carry a strong symbolic meaning.

2) Symbolic modeling elements

Wamao's production takes the image of a tiger, combines the concept of "dispersed composition" with elements of domestic cats and

exaggerated modeling techniques (Dong, & Tian, 2015). Every detail of Wamao has been symbolized, such as pointed ears, round eyes, sharp teeth, etc., which symbolize protection and exorcism. This symbolic expression enriches the visual language of Wamao. The structure of Wamao is simplified but representative. The symbolic features make its image easy to remember and recognize, while giving it cultural symbolism, further strengthening the function of Wamao as exorcism and protection.

3) Cultural Communication of Totems and Folk Symbols

As a symbol of protection from evil, Wamao has a totemic character and is sacred. Totem worship exists in the ethnic minority areas of Yunnan, so the dots, lines, and surface decorations on Wamao also reflect the local religious culture and folk art. These geometric shapes also express religious beliefs and regional culture. For example, the Wamao have patterns of circles and arcs on their bodies. The circle represents the sun and the arc represents the moon. These are all manifestations of nature worship.

3. Design Practice of Cultural and Creative Souvenirs with Wamao Elements

3.1 Design Guidelines

When designing souvenirs of Wamao culture, it is necessary to preserve the cultural connotation of Wamao while giving it a modern feel and diversity to meet the needs of the contemporary market.

1) Extract the core visual elements and symbols of Wamao

From the perspective of semiotics, the core elements of Wamao are extracted, such as facial features, postures, and traditional patterns. These elements are the basis for the visual recognition of Wamao and are also important symbols that carry its cultural connotations. The method of morphological design is used to make the product shape symbolic (Hong, 2019). The symbols are simplified and abstracted based on the extraction of core elements, transforming the traditional image of Wamao into simple symbols to adapt them to modern design.

2) Innovative use of traditional colors

While retaining Wamao's traditional colors, we added brighter and softer color options to the product line to increase visual appeal and make the products more in line with the aesthetics of young consumers.

3) Add more emotional expressions

By adjusting the shape and expression in the design, Wamao is made more friendly or mysterious. By adding a smile and a gentle gesture, the emotional distance between Wamao and consumers is shortened, making it a more acceptable cultural souvenir.

4) Combined with other ethnic minority elements in Yunnan

In the design of Wamao souvenirs, cultural elements of other ethnic groups in Yunnan are incorporated, such as the floral patterns of the Bai nationality and the geometric figures of the Yi nationality. Through cross-cultural integration, the regionality of the souvenirs is increased to attract more tourists' interest.

3.2 Design Sketch

1) Traditional Wamao element extraction and analysis

Head shape: The head of a Wamao is usually larger than the body, and may have unique patterns or unicorn horns on the top of the head, with upright ears and exaggerated beard.

Facial features: Wamao's facial expressions are often exaggerated, especially with a large mouth and sharp teeth, and protruding eyes. The eyes can be round, oval, linear, or decorated around the eyes. The craftsmen focused on the eyes and mouth of Wamao because this can show its divine appearance. The open mouth is seen as a symbol of warding off evil, while the protruding eyes convey the meaning of vigilance and protection.



Figure 2 Wamao's visual elements

Source: Author

2) Wamao element symbol reorganization

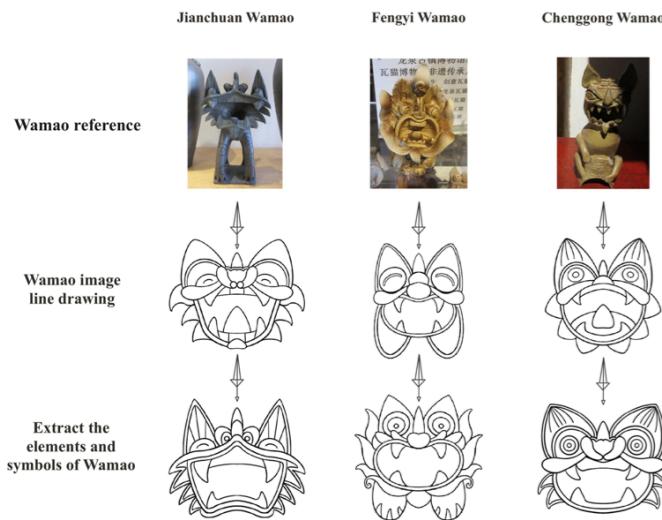
In the design, Wamao elements are simplified and symbolized, and complex patterns are transformed into simple lines or geometric shapes to adapt to the minimalist style of modern design. In the traditional Wamao image, the prominent big mouth, round eyes and slightly majestic expression are the most recognizable elements, symbolizing the traditional cultural significance of protection and exorcism. When designing, these elements are abstracted into geometric shapes, such as the arc of the big mouth and the dots of the eyes, and simplified into easily recognizable symbolic forms. In the symbolization process, some Wamao elements can be selectively highlighted as the visual focus of the design. For example, the “big mouth” of Wamao can be highlighted to express the meaning of protection.

The traditional Wamao has a more majestic image, while the modern design tends to convey a more friendly and friendly emotion. Therefore, the Wamao's expression can be softened, such as making the eyes rounder and the corners of the mouth smiling, thus presenting a protective and warm image. This symbolized Wamao image is more likely to impress modern consumers and enhance the emotional appeal of the image. By symbolizing and extracting Wamao's elements for pattern evolution, the final Wamao image sketch is as follows:



Figure 3 The extraction and evolution of Wamao's image elements-1

Source: Author

**Figure 4** The extraction and evolution of Wamao's image elements-2

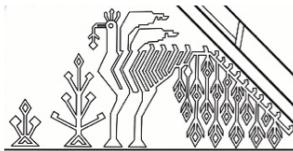
Source: Author

3) Combined with Yunnan Ethnic Minority motifs elements

On the basis of the symbolization of the Wamao image, motif elements of other ethnic minorities are added, and evolved and reorganized the motifs. The final image is not only a guardian symbol of the Wamao, but also a symbol of the diverse ethnic cultures of Yunnan. This fusion can be reflected in the facial, body patterns or surrounding patterns of the Wamao, giving it a richer cultural ductility. Below is the extraction and reconstruction of local ethnic minority patterns selected by Wamao in seven regions of Yunnan:

Table 3 The extraction and reconstruction of Yunnan ethnic minority motifs

Area	Yunnan Ethnic Minority Motif	Extract and Refactor
Kunming	 苗族: 石榴花	

Area	Yunnan Ethnic Minority Motif	Extract and Refactor
Heqing		
Chuxiong		
Yuxi		
Jianchuan		
Fengyi		
Chenggong		

Source: Author

3.3 Wamao Image and Motifs Design Showcase

The symbolized Wamao image is used in multiple image designs to form a series of designs. By designing Wamao images with different shapes and expressions, a rich combination series is formed, allowing consumers to combine and collect in a variety of ways, while strengthening the recognition of Wamao elements. The author combined the basic shape of Wamao with the traditional patterns of ethnic minorities in Yunnan. In terms of color, the bright colors of the embroidery of Yunnan ethnic minority costumes were used, so

that the product not only retains the traditional auspicious meaning, but also increases the visual appeal.

By refining the geometric characteristics and color system of ethnic minority motifs and organically combining them with the Wamao image, the beauty of the integration of Wamao culture and ethnic minority culture is conveyed. When combining ethnic minority motifs, simplified, deformed and abstract design techniques are used to make traditional totems and patterns more in line with modern design language, while maintaining the recognition and artistic appeal of their cultural symbols. The final design prototype combining the Wamao image with Yunnan ethnic minority motifs is as follows:



Figure 5 Wamao Image and Motifs Design

Source: Author

3.4 Wamao Souvenir Design Showcase

In the design of Wamao souvenirs, in order to further enrich the cultural connotation and visual language of the products, the Wamao image designs of seven regions in Yunnan are combined with the most representative local ethnic totems and embroidery patterns, and modern patterns that conform

to the seven Wamao image styles are designed. This design method not only inherits the traditional artistic composition of Wamao, but also injects the essence of Yunnan's multi-ethnic culture, strengthening the regionality and cultural characteristics of Wamao souvenirs. The prototype of the cultural and creative souvenir design based on Wamao elements is as follows:

(1) Wamao postcard designs for seven regions

Design concept: With the artistic Wamao image as the theme, characteristic elements are selected according to the different regions where Wamao are located. For example, the background is the traditional pattern or motifs of the most representative ethnic minority in Yunnan, combined with the Wamao image to design the motifs.

Target group: Tourists who like to collect or send postcards.

Design features: Focus on showing the connection between Wamao culture and the unique ethnic minority culture of Yunnan, and enhance cultural communication.



Figure 6 Wamao postcard designs for seven regions

Source: Author



Figure 7 Wamao postcard designs for seven regions (the back)

Source: Author



Figure 8 Wamao postcard designs for seven regions (two-sided)

Source: Author

(2) Wamao scarves designs

Design concept: Beautifully designed scarves that combine the Wamao image with the motifs of Yunnan ethnic minority embroidery.

Target group: mid-to high-end consumers who pursue fashion and cultural connotations.

Design features: Use bright ethnic colors and complex embroidery motifs as additional elements to enhance the decorativeness and cultural value of the silk neckband.

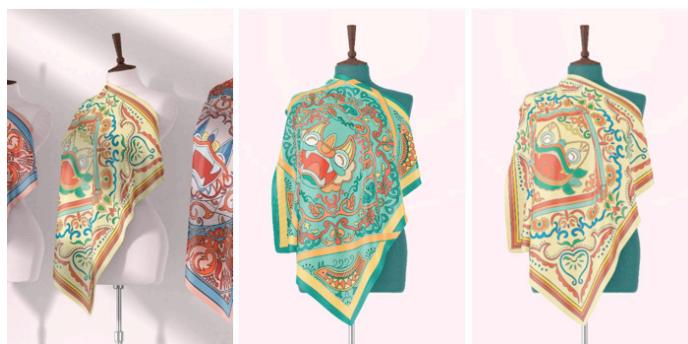


Figure 9 Wamao scarves designs

Source: Author



Figure 10 Wamao scarves designs

Source: Author

(3) Chinese round fan designs

Design concept: Round or fan-shaped round fans, with Wamao decorative patterns as the theme of the fan design.

Target group: tourists who prefer cultural souvenirs, especially female consumers.

Design features: using traditional ethnic color matching and modern design language, with hand-woven bamboo fan handles, emphasizing local handicraft characteristics. Cultural transmission: Each round fan comes with a brief description of Wamao culture, which helps tourists understand the cultural background and symbolic meaning of Wamao.



Figure 11 Wamao Chinese round fan designs

Source: Author

(4) Pattern puzzle designs

Design concept: The color matching and patterns of Yunnan ethnic minority embroidery are combined with the Wamao image, allowing

consumers to understand the Wamao culture and local artistic characteristics during the puzzle process.

Target group: Suitable for family tourists, children and cultural enthusiasts.

Design features: The puzzle souvenir has interactive value, enhances fun, and spreads the story behind the Wamao culture.



Figure 12 Wamao Pattern puzzle designs

Source: Author

Conclusions

This study aims to explore the application and innovation of Wamao elements in the design of cultural and creative souvenirs in Yunnan, focusing on the historical culture, modeling development and modeling characteristics of different regions of Wamao, and conducting symbolic analysis based on Wamao modeling elements and applying them in the design of modern cultural and creative souvenirs. Through systematic modeling research and design practice, this study draws the following main conclusions:

- 1) Through the study of the history and modeling development of Wamao, a foundation is laid for the comparative analysis of Wamao morphology in different regions, and it is convenient for the subsequent symbolic transformation of Wamao's visual characteristic elements.
- 2) The symbolic design method successfully enhances the recognition

of the Wamao pattern, allowing it to retain its traditional cultural symbolic meaning in a simple form. Through emotional design, Wamao has gained a friendly and friendly character while maintaining the traditional “guardian” meaning. This transformation meets the needs of modern consumers for emotional connection and enhances the emotional value of souvenirs.

3) Incorporating cultural symbols of other ethnic minorities into Wamao elements enriches the cultural level of the design, making Wamao souvenirs not only represent a single symbol, but also a symbol of the integration of multiple cultures. This integration strategy helps to deepen the cultural connotation of the product and attract consumers with different cultural backgrounds.

In summary, the innovative design methods of symbolic design, emotional expression and integration of cross-ethnic elements enable Wamao symbols to maintain their traditional meaning while being more in line with the aesthetic trends and emotional needs of the modern consumer market, providing an effective practical path for the promotion of Wamao souvenirs in the field of cultural creativity.

Discussion

The new method of combining symbolization and emotionalization in this paper provides an innovative design framework for the modern application of Wamao cultural elements, which has high applicability. In addition, the study explores the feasibility of cross-cultural integration. On the basis of Wamao symbolization, more elements of Yunnan ethnic minorities are integrated to study the visual coordination between different ethnic cultural symbols, providing more references for the diversified design of souvenirs.

This study explores the effectiveness of symbolic, emotional expression and cultural integration in the design of Wamao souvenirs. The proposed design method has practical application value in solving the problem of modern expression of Wamao traditional culture. This study provides a feasible design idea for the inheritance and promotion of Wamao culture.

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