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Cultural Translation and Design Transformation of Yi Tiger Dance: A Case Study from Yunnan, China

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Against the backdrop of the deep integration of culture and tourism, ethnic culture has become an important experience component in tourism activities. Based on the theory of cultural translation, this study explores the principles and paths for the translation of the "Tiger Dance" culture of the Yi ethnic group, aiming to promote the dynamic inheritance and cross-cultural exchange of the Tiger Dance culture in modern daily life.

Methodology: This research adopts a mixed research method combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to study the visual elements, movement systems, and cultural connotations of the Yi ethnic group's "Tiger Dance". Through focus groups and questionnaires, the illustrations and cultural and creative products were evaluated.

Results: This study has revealed the cultural connotations of the Yi ethnic group's tiger dance at both the intangible and tangible levels, and has constructed a translation mechanism based on the principles of cultural authenticity, practicality, aesthetics, and ethics, and using the paths of symbol decoding, symbol deconstruction, and image reconstruction. Through the application practice of illustration design and in the creative and cultural products, after the verification through focus groups and questionnaires, it has been proved that it can highly accurately achieve the functional transformation of tiger dance culture from ritual to daily life and the participatory experience, and has good feasibility and effectiveness.

Conclusion: Studying the Yi ethnic group's tiger dance culture based on the theory of cultural translation can broaden its dissemination channels, enhance consumers' understanding of intangible culture, provide new ideas for the contemporary translation of intangible cultural heritage, and promote the deep integration of Yi culture with modern life.

Keywords: Cultural Translation; Yi Ethnic Culture; Tiger Dance; Illustration Design; Cultural Experience

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Introduction

The homogenizing forces of modern society are constantly shrinking the living space of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), making it difficult for traditional practices to adapt to changing lifestyles. Against this backdrop, the "translation" of culture—the process of interpreting, reinterpreting, and expressing cultural meanings—has emerged as a crucial strategy. Cultural translation theory offers a scientific perspective that goes beyond interlingual conversion, focusing on how cultural symbols, meanings, and practices can be effectively disseminated and recontextualized (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). This aligns with China's current policy of strengthening ICH protection and innovative development (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021).

However, the application of cultural translation theory to specific ICH forms remains underexplored. Most existing studies either treat translation as a metaphorical concept without operational frameworks, or limit it to linguistic or museum display contexts (Du & Shi, 2025; Zhang, 2013). In the field of Yi ethnic culture, research on the "Tiger Dance" (also called Tiger Sheng) has predominantly focused on its folkloric origins, ritual functions, and current state of inheritance (Yang, 2017; Wang, 2020). Recent studies have begun to explore design applications using semiotics (Kang, Sun & Xiong, 2025) or modern stage adaptation (Guo & Wang, 2021). Nevertheless, these efforts suffer from two major gaps. First, they lack a systematic translation mechanism that explicitly links cultural analysis to design principles and paths. Second, they rarely evaluate the feasibility of the translated products through mixed methods, leaving the effectiveness of cultural transformation unverified. Moreover, no study has yet addressed how to translate the intangible dimensions of the Tiger Dance-such as its cosmology, ritual efficacy, and community memory-into everyday products without diluting core meanings.o address this problem, this study critically reviews existing literature on cultural translation. While scholars such as Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) have established culture as the unit of translation, subsequent applications have often remained at the level of abstract "cultural borrowing" or "adaptation," lacking concrete procedures for symbol decoding and re-encoding (Xu, 2008). Some design studies have extracted visual elements from ICH but ignored deeper ritual meanings and ethical constraints . Furthermore, the practicality and aesthetic transformation principles are rarely discussed together. This study engages with these debates by proposing that cultural translation of ICH must simultaneously observe four principles—authenticity, practicality, aesthetics, and ethics-and three operational paths: symbol decoding, symbolic deconstruction, and imagery reimagining.

This research has made new progress in three aspects. First, instead of isolated element extraction, we build a full-cycle translation mechanism grounded in the dual (tangible/intangible) cultural analysis of the Tiger Dance. Second, we go beyond design creation by testing feasibility through focus groups and questionnaires, providing empirical evidence for the

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effectiveness of the translation. Third, we apply the mechanism to multiple everyday product carriers, demonstrating how ritual functions can be metaphorically translated into modern protective and interactive experiences. In doing so, this study not only helps preserve the Yi Tiger Dance but also offers a replicable model for the cultural translation of other ICH forms facing similar modernization pressures.

Objectives

1. To analyze the cultural connotations and symbolic system of the Yi Tiger Dance.
2. To construct a cultural translation mechanism and translation principles for the Yi Tiger Dance culture.
3. To apply the translation mechanism to illustration design and cultural-creative product development, and to evaluate its feasibility.

Literature review

The original meaning of "transliteration" refers to a special translation behavior where one language is translated into another (Lu, Zhou & Liu,2007). In the context of contemporary Chinese art, cultural transliteration is no longer merely a translation behavior between different languages and texts (Zhang, 2013). In the process of cultural exchange and dissemination, cultural transliteration plays a key role (Zhu, Ye & Tang, 2025). The "cultural turn" proposed by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere in translation studies in 1990 officially established "culture" as the basic unit of translation, which is regarded as the theoretical foundation of "cultural translation". Cultural translation is the process of converting elements, meanings and other components from one cultural context to another. This process involves the re-encoding of symbols, meanings and emotions, which can rejuvenate traditional culture in a modern context (Du & Shi, 2025).

In terms of the inheritance and protection of the Tiger Dance culture, as its popularity has grown and it has attracted more and more attention, there have emerged phenomena such as the weakening of its religious nature, the shallowness of its content, and severe commercialization (Yang, 2017). At the same time, there is also a lack of protection awareness and a cultural gap. Through interviews with local Yi people, it was found that the national intangible cultural heritage "Tiger Dance" has been lost very seriously, especially the lack of learning of "Tiger Dance" culture by children, which has caused a serious cultural gap in the inheritance of "Tiger Dance" (Wang, 2020). Since 2021, research on the Yi ethnic group's Tiger Dance culture has shifted towards modernity and design application studies. The success of the modernity construction of the Yi ethnic group's Tiger Dance culture in Shuangbai County lies not only in the rationality of the construction system but also in its grasp of the cultural connotation and aesthetics of the Tiger

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Dance. By creating a new stage outside the ritual context, it continuously enriches the content of Tiger Dance performances, achieving the transformation of the Tiger Dance from a traditional folk ritual to a modern cultural performance (Guo & Wang, 2021). Some scholars have redesigned the totem patterns of the tiger dance based on Peirce's semiotic theory, integrating characters and patterns into cultural and creative products, so as to better inherit and develop the precious Chuxiong Yi Tiger Dance culture (Kang, Sun & Xiong, 2025). In terms of the dissemination of the Tiger Dance culture, due to geographical constraints, the outside world has insufficient awareness of the Tiger Dance, and there is a lack of cross-cultural communication channels. Local teenagers also have few opportunities to come into contact with the Tiger Dance (Bian, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

The framework of this study is shown in Figure 1:

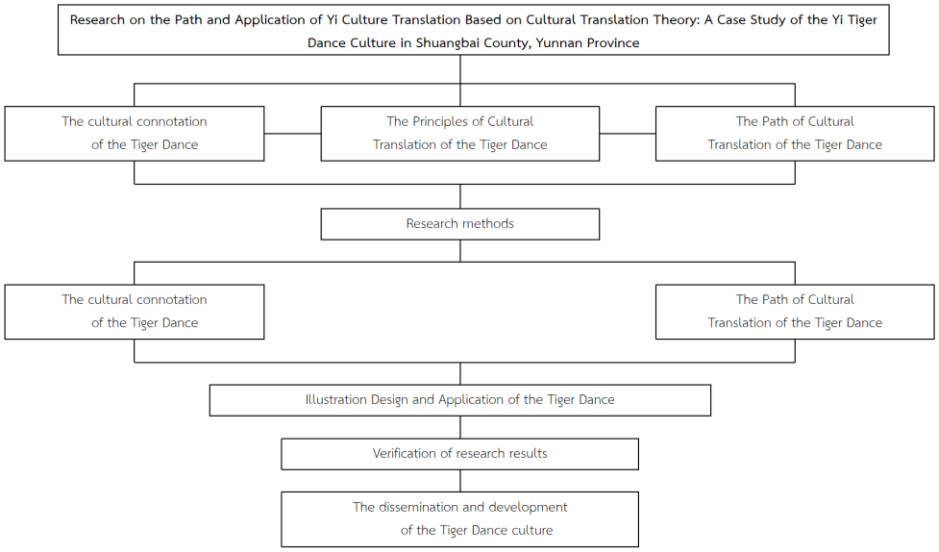


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

The literature review method involves systematically collecting, organizing, analyzing and synthesizing existing literature to reveal the essence, patterns or historical background of the research subject, thereby forming a scientific understanding of the facts. In this study, the literature review was used to analyze the origin, current status of inheritance, cultural connotations and development trends of the tiger dance culture. The field investigation method is an empirical research approach that involves in-depth study of the natural living environment or social

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scenarios of the research object, and systematically collects first-hand data through methods such as direct observation, participation experience, and in-depth interviews. In this study, the participant observation method, focus group method and in-depth interview method were adopted to interview inheritors, cultural center staff and community workers to obtain research data, in order to systematically understand the current development status and problems faced by the tiger dance culture. The questionnaire survey method involves distributing a uniformly designed questionnaire to the target population, using Questionnaire Star to design and distribute the questionnaire to obtain quantitative data, and using SPSS to analyze the data to describe the characteristics of the phenomenon or test theoretical hypotheses. In this study, the questionnaire survey and data analysis were used to evaluate the feasibility and rationality of examples and cultural creative products.

Results

1. The Cultural Connotations of the Yi People's Tiger Dance

At the tangible cultural level, the Tiger Dance centers on physical practice and has developed a unique symbolic expression system. Dancers wear tiger skins made of wool felt and have tiger head patterns painted on their faces. By imitating the movements of tigers such as walking, running, rolling, and playing, a complete set of "tiger-shaped narrative" movement language is formed, which reflects the aesthetic characteristics and ritual symbolism embedded in the Yi people's traditional "Tiger Dance" performance (Qian, 2015). The props used in the dance, such as copper bells, gourds, and rattan sticks, also carry specific cultural meanings. The sound of the copper bells symbolizes the roar of tigers in the mountains, the gourds symbolize the worship of fertility, and the rattan sticks are used in the "beating" action during the exorcism ceremony. The dance venue is usually chosen in the village center square or in the fields, and the layout of the venue and the formation of the dance team together constitute a tangible cultural landscape.

At the intangible cultural level, the Tiger Dance is deeply rooted in the spiritual world and social structure of the Yi people. Its core connotation is first reflected in the combined belief system of totem worship and ancestor worship. The tiger is regarded as the ancestor of the Yi people and serves as a medium connecting humans with deities and the living with the ancestors. Secondly, the Tiger Dance has the ritual function of exorcising evil and bringing good fortune. Through the complete process of "inviting the tiger", "dancing the tiger", and "sending the tiger", it purifies the village space and symbolically marks the transition of the annual cycle. Thirdly, the dance contains the ancient cosmology and ecological wisdom of the Yi people. The tiger is depicted as the master of the mountains and forests and the guardian of the natural order. The

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interaction between humans and tigers reflects the Yi people's understanding of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Finally, the Tiger Dance is a carrier of community memory. Through oral and physical transmission from generation to generation, it conveys the historical process, agricultural culture, and social norms of the Yi people, becoming an important mechanism for consolidating ethnic identity and maintaining social structure.

2. Cultural Translation Mechanism of the Yi Tiger Dance

2.1 The Principles of Translating the Culture of the Tiger Dance

In the process of translating the Tiger Dance culture, it is necessary to follow the principles of cultural authenticity, practicality, aesthetics and ethics. First, it is essential to maintain the originality of the culture, ensuring the complete transmission of core symbols and ritual connotations, and avoiding the loss of meaning due to excessive simplification or distortion. Secondly, attention should be paid to the organic integration of the translation results with contemporary people's daily life scenarios. Through functional innovation, the living inheritance can be achieved, allowing the elements of the Tiger Dance culture to be embedded in practical fields such as modern design and cultural and creative products, thus enabling the culture to continue through "use". Thirdly, the original artistic features of the Tiger Dance should be respected, and its aesthetic elements such as tiger patterns, dance postures and ritual atmosphere should be extracted for contemporary aesthetic transformation. While retaining the ancient and simple texture, artistic expressions that conform to modern visual logic and emotional resonance should be created. Finally, ethics should be adhered to. The Tiger Dance of the Yi people embodies the symbiotic logic between humans, nature and society, and has educational and moralizing effects on future generations. The translation process should respect its traditional taboos and emotional identification. Among these four principles, cultural authenticity is the foundation, practicality is the path, aesthetics is the bridge, and ethics is the bottom line, jointly constructing the overall methodology for the translation of the Tiger Dance culture.

2.2 The Transliteration Path of the Tiger Dance Culture

This study proposes three translation paths: Decoding of Symbols, Symbolic Deconstruction, and Reimagining of Imagery. First, Decoding of Symbols. The Yi people hold the tiger in the highest regard and consider themselves descendants of the tiger. The Tiger Dance vividly reflects the essence of the Yi people's totem worship of the tiger, that is, the worship of a power beyond human strength. It is no longer merely a form of dance but a symbolic expression that connects the thoughts and emotions of humans and gods. During the decoding process, appropriate choices should be made based on the demands of social and cultural development as well as people's daily lives, and its essence should be interpreted with contemporary values

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and significance. Secondly, Symbolic Deconstruction， Symbolic deconstruction is an important process and method in cultural translation, referring to the process of analyzing and reconstructing symbols. From the perspective of design semiotics, symbols carry both cultural meanings and visual communication functions, and their reinterpretation in design can enable traditional cultural elements to be understood within contemporary visual systems (Xu, 2008). Re-encoding is the process of creating expressive symbols, which is different from logical symbols. Its encoding basis is "subjective emotion", that is, symbols established based on subjective values. During the deconstruction process, designers need to have a profound understanding of the tangible and intangible culture of the Tiger Dance. They not only need to examine it from an artistic aesthetic perspective, but also need to conform to the development trend of the times, aesthetic trends, and meet the needs of people's lives. Finally, Reimagining of Imagery ， Reimagining a new narrative logic between tradition and modernity is a process of connecting traditional national sentiments with modern spiritual culture and recreating them. For instance, the tiger, which has the function of protection and warding off evil spirits, can be integrated into the design of masks, perfectly combining the function and meaning of "protection", which can make people feel a stronger sense of pleasure and security psychologically.

3. Illustration Design of Yi Tiger Dance and Its Application in Cultural and Creative Products

3.1 The Process of Illustration Design of Yi Tiger Dance

Based on the translation principles of cultural, aesthetic, practical and ethical aspects and the analysis of the tangible and intangible culture of Tiger Dance, this part begins the creation of illustration works. Firstly, narrative design, in the creation of illustration sketches, elements that can represent the characteristics and appearance of the life of the Yi people are extracted and transformed into design elements. The illustration line drawing uses the dance movements of Tiger Dance and the tools used in production labor as elements, artistically reproducing the scenes of rice planting, harvesting, plowing and winnowing. Secondly, character design, taking the bell as the distinctive element, the "tiger skin" made of black wool felt is tied on the back, forming both vivid and exaggerated "tiger ears" and "tiger tails". Then, the "king" character is painted on the forehead of the tiger dancer with red, yellow and white paints, and the whiskers of the tiger are painted near the mouth, and stripes similar to those of the tiger are painted on the arms and legs, presenting an artistic image of the tiger. Finally, scene design, through the analysis of the patterns, colors and performance scenes of the costumes, warm tones are used for the colors, which are in line with the mysterious and passionate atmosphere during the performance, accurately presenting its cultural connotation through visual language.In terms of illustration style,

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the traditional and simple Tiger Dance culture is combined with the contemporary trend of "national trend culture", creating an image that is both traditional and modern. This enables it to integrate into modern society, better meeting the demands of the times and public aesthetic tastes, and effectively achieving the cross-domain dissemination of Tiger Dance culture (Figures 2).



Figure 2 Tiger Dance in a Chinese-style trend illustration

Note: Constructed by the researcher

3.2 Application of Yi Tiger Dance in Cultural and Creative Products

When discussing the application of the Tiger Dance illustration in cultural and creative products, it is necessary to clarify the logical connection between the cultural context of the Tiger Dance and the usage scenarios of the products (Table 1). Meanwhile, the selection of product carriers is based on the in-depth deconstruction of the core of the Tiger Dance culture and its mutual adaptation with modern life scenes in terms of both functionality and significance. The aim is to transform the traditional Tiger Dance culture from a momentary performance into a continuous experience integrated into daily life, and to generate new meanings through two-way interaction, thereby achieving the goal of cultural translation.

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Table 1 The Logical Connection between Cultural and Creative Products and the Yi Tiger Dance Culture

Cultural context	Key elements	Cultural and creative carriers	Relevance to cultural context	Usage context logic
Ritual and Field	Village square, exorcism, and blessing	Mug	The translation of daily companionship and shared dining culture	The integration of the sacred ritual sense and daily life metaphorically represents the transformation of the Tiger Dance's spirit of praying for health and warding off evil into daily companionship and protection.
Narrative and Symbol	Tiger created the world, taught people to farm, exorcised evil and brought good fortune	Jigsaw puzzle	The translation of dance rituals and visual narratives	The act of "decoding" and "inheriting" the culture through simulation helps to deeply understand the narrative structure of the Tiger Dance culture and achieve a shift from "observer" to "participant"
Function and Spirit	Praying for a bountiful harvest, an increase in population, community well-being, and cohesion;	Notebook, mouse pad	The translation of spiritual forces such as bravery, strength, and protective deities	A "guardian space" full of cultural energy is constructed to provide spiritual shelter and strength, and the "guardian" function is transferred to the high-pressure work context of modern times
Ordinary and Sacred	Daily life and spiritual beliefs	Mask	The translation of physical amulets for warding off diseases and evil spirits	Precisely realizing "functional translation" and "cultural metaphor" enables the wearer not only to perform health protection but also to wear a "modern amulet" with a deep sense of cultural identity, highlighting the adaptability and vitality of the culture

3.2.1 Mug Design

The Tiger Dance mainly performs twelve fixed sets of movements and a series of actions imitating agricultural production. The performance of actions such as the tiger plowing the field aims to show the relationship between the tiger and agricultural culture, convey people's

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psychological longing for favorable weather and abundant harvests, and highlight the implication that only through hard work can one reap rewards. It has a moral educational function and is rich in the flavor of secular life. The water cup is a commonly used drinking tool in people's production and labor. Applying the theme illustrations of the Tiger Dance's agricultural activities to the decorative design of mugs visually demonstrates the intrinsic connection between Tiger Dance culture and agricultural culture, promoting the integration of Tiger Dance culture into the daily life of modern people (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Mark Cup

Note: Constructed by the researcher

3.2.2 Jigsaw Puzzle Design

Jigsaw puzzles are an important medium for the interactive experience design of the Yi ethnic group's Tiger Dance culture. The process is one of deep participation and experience. Firstly, jigsaw puzzles are an interactive game of "disassembly and reassembly". By transforming dynamic scenes into static visual language to achieve the deconstruction and reconstruction of images, it stimulates the desire and initiative to understand the Tiger Dance culture. Secondly, the Yi ethnic group's Tiger Dance has formed a complete narrative chain from worshipping the tiger, learning the tiger, dressing up as the tiger to sending the tiger away. The jigsaw puzzle game enables players to shift from "passive" participation to "active" discovery, thereby enhancing their understanding and memory of the culture. Thirdly, when watching the performance, the audience gains a brief aesthetic experience at the visual level, while the jigsaw puzzle game requires participants to focus their vision, touch and thinking on every detail, thus establishing a connection

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between culture and the individual and achieving an immersive cultural experience. Finally, jigsaw puzzles are a relatively fashionable, relaxing and interesting form of cultural and creative products. Through the design of jigsaw puzzles, static cultural narratives are transformed into interactive, in-depth and personalized immersive experiences, achieving a trinity of cultural dissemination, artistic appreciation and interactive entertainment (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Puzzle Design

Note: Constructed by the researcher

3.2.3 Office Supplies Design

Office supplies focus on shape and functional design, lacking cultural warmth and experiential quality. Incorporating the illustrations of the Tiger Dance into office supplies can infuse them with profound cultural narratives and spiritual energy, transforming them from mere practical items into cultural symbols that carry the mission of cultural dissemination, identity recognition, and aesthetic experience. The Tiger Dance culture embodies qualities such as courage, vitality, and unity, endowing office supplies with multi-dimensional values including cultural transmission, identity marking, aesthetic experience, and spiritual inspiration. This enables users to draw inspiration and strength during use, creating a cultural atmosphere and turning the office into an authoritative space for cultural transformation, dissemination, and reproduction, achieving a transcendence from "functional use" to "spiritual resonance" (Figures 5).

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Figure 5 Mouse pad

Note: Constructed by the researcher

3.3 Mask Design

In modern society, masks have transcended their practical functions and evolved into accessories, becoming symbols of personalized cultural expression. In Yi culture, tigers are believed to possess the power to ward off evil spirits and diseases. Incorporating tiger dance illustrations into masks unifies their functional and symbolic aspects, infusing these everyday protective items with powerful spiritual protection and cultural identity. They become "amulets" for actively expressing cultural confidence and good wishes. By wearing masks featuring tiger dance culture, people can achieve multiple psychological satisfactions in terms of functionality, emotion, spirit, and aesthetics, transforming a simple protective act into a flowing display of modern folk culture carrying ancient blessings, and creating an aesthetic space that connects tradition and modernity, function and faith (Figure 6).

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Figure 6 Mask

Note: Constructed by the researcher

3.4 Feasibility Test of Product Design Scheme

This part adopted a combined verification method of focus group interviews and questionnaire surveys. In the focus group interviews, the user group gave a score of 4.00 in both "cultural compatibility" and "product carrier matching degree", with a standard deviation of 0. This indicates that all participants highly approved of the design's ability to accurately convey the cultural connotation of the lion dance and the reasonable selection of carriers. The high scores (4.67 and 4.17) of the expert group in these two aspects, along with the extremely small difference (0.67 and 0.17) between them, further formed a double verification. The research results show that culturally-oriented illustrations and product designs can effectively encode the symbolic meaning of the lion dance into a format that is acceptable to contemporary consumers. The verification scores of experts and users confirmed the cultural compatibility (with a Cronbach's coefficient of 0.949).

Discussion

The application of cultural translation theory can effectively bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, culture and daily life, expand the dissemination range and acceptance degree of the tiger dance culture, and achieve a "participatory" aesthetic state between the subject and the object. "Participation" refers to the seamless integration and interaction between the aesthetic subject and the object, emphasizing the experience of generating aesthetic feelings in daily life (Gao & Ding, 2014). This study breaks through the limitation of the superficial

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combination of the tangible culture of the tiger dance and creative products, focusing on organically integrating the functions, semantics and spirit of the tiger dance culture with the functions, aesthetics and values of modern culture and creative products, so that the tiger dance culture can be experienced and perceived in daily life. However, the connotation of intangible cultural heritage is complex, and it is necessary to pay attention to respecting the authenticity of the culture and the accuracy of translation to avoid cultural alienation and misinterpretation. The translation principles and paths proposed in this study provide a referenceable method and path for the translation of intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This research indicates that the "Tiger Dance" is a symbolic expression of the lifestyle, religious beliefs and survival wisdom of the Yi people in Shuangbai County. It also serves as a spiritual bond that maintains ethnic stability and promotes emotional communication, playing a significant role in enhancing ethnic cohesion and cultural identity. Theoretically, applying cultural translation theory to illustration and product design can facilitate the modern dissemination of Tiger Dance culture. Practically, cultural translation theory provides methodological guidance for illustration and product design, proposing three translation paths of cultural, aesthetic, practical and ethical principles, as well as symbol interpretation, symbol deconstruction and image reconstruction. It also designs illustrations and cultural and creative products of the Tiger Dance. Quantitative and qualitative methods are used to test and evaluate the works, verifying the rationality of the research results.

Recommendation

Our interviews revealed a lack of funds, limited exposure of the younger generation to the culture of the tiger dance, and a lack of design and innovation capabilities among the inheritors. Therefore, we suggest that policymakers provide special funds to protect the "tiger dance" culture and establish a cultural database. To make the development of the tiger dance culture more scientific, managers should establish a community-oriented inheritance system and systematically cultivate cultural inheritors. Practitioners can enhance their design and innovation capabilities to meet the diverse demands of the market.

This study has certain limitations. In future research, a cross-disciplinary approach should be adopted to further analyze the cultural, artistic, and economic value of the tiger dance. Meanwhile, in subsequent studies, the sample range should be further expanded to include students, tourists, and other groups, and technologies such as virtual reality and mixed reality should be used to enhance the dissemination effect of the tiger dance culture.

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