

A Comparison of the Motifs on Kelantan and Yunnan Silverware

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Abstract

As a carrier of material culture, silverware decoration reveals the cross-cultural differences between Yunnan and Kelantan. Yunnan is dominated by natural imagery, and absorbed the craftsmanship of the Central Plains by land, adapting it to polytheistic beliefs; Kelantan is influenced by Islam, and adapted Persian techniques by sea, forming an abstract and taboo aesthetic. Both NRLs face the same challenges, with the semantics of Yunnan's ornamentation dissolving and Kelantan's programming. Oral history archiving and artisanal heritage are recommended to balance tradition and innovation. The study revisits the dialectic between cultural boundaries and artistic fusion.

Keywords: Silverware Patterns, Comparative Studies, Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation

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1.0 Introduction

As the core carrier of material culture, silverware decoration not only carries the aesthetic concepts and technological traditions of regional societies, but also reflects the complexity of belief systems, ethnic identities and cross-cultural interactions in symbolic metaphors (Wang, J., 2018). Yunnan, China and Kelantan, Malaysia are located at the crossroads of the East and Southeast Asian cultural spheres, and have historically become melting pots of diverse artistic styles due to trade networks. Rooted in the multicultural soil of the Yi, Bai, and Dai ethnic minorities, Yunnan silverware is characterised by the intermingling of nature worship and Chinese culture (Chen Hongmei, 2009). Kelantan silverware, on the other hand, is deeply influenced by Malay traditions and Islamic teachings, forming a forbidden aesthetic centred on abstract botanical and calligraphic motifs (Nazirah Mohamad Ba'ai, 2022). Although silverware craftsmanship in both regions has been listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage, existing studies are mostly limited to typological descriptions of ornamentation in a single geographical region and lack a systematic comparative perspective, which makes it difficult to reveal the cultural dynamics and technological diffusion paths behind the differences in ornamentation. This paper takes decorative motifs, technology and social functions as the analytical framework, and aims to answer the following questions: first, how do natural imagery and religious discipline dominate the choice of decorative motifs in Yunnan and Kelantan, respectively? Second, do the technical differences in the core crafts of burin engraving and hollowing between the two places reflect the constraints of cultural boundaries on the dissemination of knowledge? Through cross-regional comparisons, this study attempts to break away from the mono-cultural centrism of traditional art historical studies and re-examine the transmission networks of ornamentation in the 'land and sea corridors'

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of Yunnan and Kelantan, thereby demonstrating the permeability and mobility of cultural and geographical boundaries in the fusion of art.

2.0 Literature Review

Existing research on silverware motifs has long been limited by geographical nativism and disciplinary divisions, creating a split between the scholarly narratives of Yunnan and Kelantan. In Yunnan studies, scholars have mostly focused on the correspondence between ethnic identity and motif symbols. For example, Zhou Xia (2020) attributes the peacock motifs on Dai silverware to primitive nature worship, but ignores the cross-cultural path that they may have been introduced through the marriage of the Mubang Tusi in Myanmar, and fails to correlate them with similar motifs in the myths of the 'Peacock Dynasty' in Kelantan (Ahmad, Khairi & Kamarudin, 2023). Kamarudin, 2023). Although such studies reveal the symbolic function of motifs, they lack systematic samples due to their over-reliance on scattered cases, and tend to reduce multi-ethnic shared motifs (e.g., the mixing of Bai butterfly motifs and Yi sun motifs by craftsmen in Heqing, Western Yunnan Province) to an appendage of 'ethnic purity' (Wong & Danley, 2018). In contrast to the Kelantan study, the shaping of Islamic regulation on the abstraction of ornamentation is repeatedly emphasised, but Ahmad et al.'s (2023) "religious determinism" fails to account for the diversity of differentiation in ornamentation within the framework of the same religion - field evidence suggests that artisans differentiated between royal and commoner objects (Albarokah & Wargadalem, 2023), implying that motifs also served the function of social hierarchical labelling. However, the diversity of ornamentation on everyday silver objects has long been obscured by the fact that most of the existing Kelantan research samples focus on courtly artefacts, resulting in a functional interpretation that favours the 'sacred' at the expense of the 'secular'.

The common shortcomings of the two studies highlight the urgency of a comparative perspective. Firstly, the selection of the samples is generally artifact-specific, with Yunnan studies focusing on ceremonial silverware, Kelantan on courtly objects, and the genealogy of ornamentation on common everyday objects nearly blank, which not only distorts the functional interpretation, but also obscures the actual impact of trade and daily use on the evolution of ornamentation. Secondly, the analysis of craftsmanship is confined to the description of tool types and lacks the correlation between the combination of techniques and the style of decoration. For example, Yunnan artisans used multi-toothed burins to achieve dense stippling to mimic natural texture (Wu, Jiehan, Chen, Junwei & Wang, Yuitong, 2023), while Kelantan made use of the flat-tipped burin to shape smooth curves in line with Islamic aesthetics (Ahmad & Khairi, 2022), but the existing literature has failed to integrate such observable differences into the comparative framework of culturally-driven mechanisms. More critically, the prototypes of ornamentation that may have been shared between the two regions have not been traced due to disciplinary barriers, leaving the study of artistic diffusion caught in a dichotomy between land and sea paths.

At the methodological level, the reliance on quantitative data in traditional technology history research faces practical difficulties. Metal composition analysis, for example, is difficult to prove due to the state of preservation of samples and technological confidentiality (e.g. Yunnan craftsmen refused to disclose alloy ratios). Instead, this paper focuses on observable differences in craftsmanship: by building a representative sample bank of 100 pieces (50 pieces each from Yunnan and Kelantan), covering from 19th-century traditional artefacts to contemporary commodities, and screening them according to their function (ceremonial, daily life, tourism), style (naturalistic, geometric, literal), and complexity, the paper ensures multi-dimensional coverage of the evolution of ornamentation. In terms of research methodology, the study integrates field interviews (oral histories of 8 artisans) and museum objects to form a triangulation of 'culture-technology-function'. Despite its limitations, this study provides a new chain of material evidence for land-sea artistic exchange and demonstrates the potential for integrating interdisciplinary approaches in ICH research.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts Mixed Methods, integrating quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation, with the aim of systematically comparing the thematic, technological, and functional differences between Yunnan and Kelantan silverware ornamentation. The design of the study is centred on a three-dimensional comparative framework (motifs, techniques, and social functions), and triangulation is used to ensure the credibility of the data. In terms of sample selection and data collection, a sample pool of 100 pieces of silverware (50 pieces from Yunnan and 50 pieces from Kelantan) was established, covering ceremonial objects (30%), everyday objects (40%) and tourist commodities (30%) from the 19th to the 21st centuries, in order to balance the functionality with the representativeness of the times. Sample selection followed the principle of geographical diversity. Physical data were obtained from museum collections (60%), private collections (20%) and field collections (20%), and all samples were authenticated by experts to exclude fakes. In order to compensate for the unpredictability of technical micro-parameters (e.g. burin inclination), the study focused on observable differences in the techniques, such as the visual comparison between the 'multi-toothed burin with dense dots' of Yunnan and the 'flat burin with curvilinear undercuts' of Kelantan, and the cultural logic of this technique was explained in the context of the craftsmen's oral narratives. The data collection was divided into three stages.

The data collection was divided into three phases: firstly, high-resolution scanning was used to digitally archive the motifs, recording compositional density, symmetry and hierarchy; secondly, toolmarks were observed and analysed to classify the types of techniques; and lastly, a field survey was conducted in Dali, Heqing, Yunnan and Kota Bharu, Kelantan, where 8 silversmiths were interviewed to trace the symbolic significance of motif symbols, the patterns of technological inheritance and the impact of modernisation. modernisation impacts. At the same time, the study systematically analysed the exhibition descriptions and historical archives of the museums in the two regions to cross-check the intergenerational and transmission paths of the decoration. The data analysis adopts

an interdisciplinary approach: at the quantitative level, a typology of ornamental themes is conducted; at the qualitative level, the Grounded Theory is applied to codify the three levels of the interview texts, to extract the core categories and to construct an explanatory model of 'ornament, function, and cultural logic'.

4.0 Findings

This study systematically compares the silverware decorations of Yunnan and Kelantan, revealing the differences in the artistic styles of the two regions and explaining the root causes of the differences at the level of cultural dynamics. Yunnan silverware decoration is dominated by natural imagery, including flora, fauna and human landscape symbols, and its realistic style is closely related to polytheistic beliefs. For example, the 'double-fish motif' in Yunnan silverware is interpreted as a symbol of the god of water (Artisan Interview No. YN-04), and its pupil-sunken eye burin detail mimics the movement of a live fish, reflecting an anthropomorphic worship of natural creatures. In contrast, Kelantan decoration has a higher proportion of abstract symbols, centred on Islamic vine (Awan Larat) and calligraphic motifs, and strictly avoids figurative creatures. It is noteworthy that the two regions share some of the motifs but assign very different meanings to them: the 'vine motif' in Yunnan symbolises the reproduction of life (associated with fertility rituals), while the same motif in Kelantan is interpreted as 'the flow of the invisible power of Allah' (Artisan Interview no. (artisan interview no. KTN-12)). This difference confirms the 'cultural filter' effect, whereby the same motifs are given opposing semantic meanings depending on the religious context (Table 1 Comparison of Kelantan and Yunnan silverware motif types).

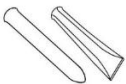







Table 1. Comparison of Kelantan and Yunnan silver pattern types

No	Category	Kelantan	Number of Abstract Element/ Percentage of Abstraction Elements (%)	Yunnan	Number of Abstract Element/ Percentage of Abstraction Elements (%)
1	Botanicals	38	34 / 89	37	10 / 27
2	Animals	3	3 / 100	39	12 / 31
3	Geometric Abstracts	40	39 / 98	26	26 / 100
4	Humanities and Landscapes	0	0 / 0	13	2 / 15
5	Texts	4	0 / 0	7	0 / 0

(Source: author)

However, the differences in craftsmanship between the two places map out the land and sea paths of technological diffusion. Yunnan silverware uses the 'multi-toothed burin' as its core tool, simulating the natural texture of feathers and scales through dense stippling, a technique inherited from the burin tradition of the Central Plains, but with local refinements. For example, Western Yunnan artisans increase the density of the burin's flat texture to enhance the accuracy of realism. Kelantan, on the other hand, relied on the 'flat-head burin' and the 'line-carving knife' to construct abstract motifs with smooth curves, and its tooling was influenced by the Siamese Sukhothai dynasty, but it was constrained by Islamic teachings to avoid the use of the Central Plains-style multi-toothed burin (Table 2: Comparison of the burin texture of silverware from Kelantan and Yunnan). (Table 2 Comparison of burinised muscular pattern tools and textures in Kelantan and Yunnan silver).



Table 2. Comparison of burinised muscular pattern tools and textures in Kelantan and Yunnan silver

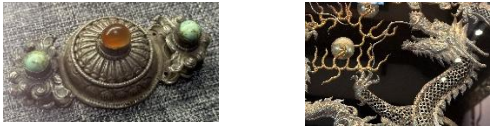
Region	Typical tools	Typical textures	Engraved texture	Image
Kelantan				
Yunnan				

(Source: author)

In addition, the differences in technique combinations are particularly significant (Table 3 Comparison of typical technique combinations of Kelantan and Yunnan silverware). Yunnan prefers relief carving and hollowing to enhance three-dimensionality (52% of the samples), such as the translucent carving of butterfly wings in the Bai ornaments, while Kelantan makes use of undercutting and filigree to maintain flat decorative surfaces (61% of the samples), such as the silver filigree twining patterns on the borders of royal vessels. In terms of technological diffusion, Yunnan absorbed Tibetan gilding through the Tea Horse Route, while Kelantan introduced Persian filigree by sea, but abandoned its figurative figure motifs in favour of purely geometric modifications.

Table 3. Comparison of typical technique combinations of Kelantan and Yunnan silverware

Region	Typical Techniques	Percentage (%)	Technique Legend
Kelantan	Shady engraving + filigree	52	 







(Source: author)

The impact of the tourism economy is geographically diverse: Yunnan's ornamentation is a 'collage of symbols' to cater for tourists' preferences, leading to a mix of cultural and semantic meanings; Kelantan's "cultural orthodoxy" is shaped by reinforcing Islamic elements to differentiate itself from other tourist crafts in South-East Asia. Kelantan, on the other hand, has reinforced Islamic elements to create 'cultural orthodoxy' in order to distinguish itself from other tourist crafts in Southeast Asia. It is important to note that young artisans in both regions have a significantly weaker understanding of the symbolic meaning of traditional motifs (only 12% of the interviews were able to fully explain ancestral motifs), and there is a risk of a gap in the transmission of skills. The quantitative data and qualitative evidence in this study suggest that differences in silverware ornamentation are not the product of 'cultural essentialism', but rather the result of a complex interplay of religious, technological and economic dynamics. Although the sample size (100 pieces) may have omitted some rare motifs, the core findings are robust to saturation tests and membership checks. These findings provide key insights into the preservation of NRM: Yunnan needs to pay attention to the mechanism of mutual appreciation of multi-ethnic motifs, while Kelantan should be wary of the over-commercialisation of motifs, and the common challenge for both places is how to maintain the intellectual discourse of artisans amidst the flood of modernisation.

5.0 Discussion

This study reveals how cultural values, technological traditions and economic functions synergistically shape regional artistic styles through a systematic comparison of Yunnan and Kelantan silverware ornamentation. The following discussion is based on three aspects: theoretical dialogue, methodological reflection and practical insights. While established theories of artistic communication emphasise the unidirectional diffusion of ornamental motifs through trade networks, this study finds that the differences in ornamentation between Yunnan and Kelantan reveal a two-way filtering mechanism of cultural interaction. Take the vine motif as an example, although it shares the symbolic archetype of the South China Sea Cultural Circle, it has been divided into distinct visual languages in the two places due to the differences in religious ethics and technological paths (Table 4 Comparison of the vine motifs on silverware from Kelantan and Yunnan). It confirms that the cross-regional mobility of ornamentation proposed in this paper is not passively accepted, but undergoes a dual reconstruction of local values and technological traditions. This theoretical framework has universal significance for the study of material culture. For example, Kelantan's 'de-figurative' adaptation of Persian filigree workmanship echoes Japan's 'de-religious' adaptation of European enamelling techniques during the Meiji period (Ma Jingchun, 2023), suggesting that the core of the cultural filter lies in the ability of local meaning systems to exclude and integrate. and integration capacity of the local meaning system at the core of the cultural filter.

Table 4. Comparison of the vine motifs on silverware from Kelantan and Yunnan

Region	Image	Basic pattern	Description	Arrangement
Kelantan			Wavy, with a branched skeleton, surrounded by thick leaves	Repeat arrangement
Yunnan			The branch skeleton is in a spiral shape, surrounded by leaves	Interleave

(Source: author)

This study finds that silverware ornamentation in the two regions faces similar dilemmas in the modernisation process, but derives opposite coping strategies. Yunnan attracts tourists through symbolic collage and activates hybridisation and innovation of multi-ethnic ornamentation, while Kelantan reinforces Islamic elements through programmatic production and resists globalised homogenisation with cultural orthodoxy. This contrast reveals a deep paradox in the survival of intangible cultural heritage - commercialisation is both necessary for the survival of traditional crafts, but may also lead to the dissolution of their cultural core. This paradox has not been adequately discussed in the existing literature. Although Yunnan's 'innovative adaptation' has been regarded by some scholars as a manifestation of cultural vitality (Zhang, Y, 2023), this study suggests that symbolic collage, if taken out of its original context (e.g., simplifying ceremonial tiger tattoos into tourist souvenirs), may sever the chain of meanings of the tattoos and lead to 'cultural amnesia' among the younger generation of craftsmen. cultural amnesia'. Therefore, ICH safeguarding policies need to shift from skills rescue to knowledge reproduction, such as recording artisans' oral histories through digital archives and incorporating the interpretation of decorative symbols into community education.

In addition, by integrating quantitative stylistic analyses with qualitative fieldwork, this study overcomes, to some extent, the disciplinary barriers of traditional material culture studies. For example, the cross-validation of ornamentation complexity comparisons

with craftsmen's oral accounts effectively explains that the high density of ornamentation on Yunnan ceremonial silverware is not only a manifestation of technical competence, but also an exhibition of social power. However, the inadequacy of some of the microscopic techniques forced the study to rely on visual categorisation, which may have led to simplification of craftsmanship differences. In this regard, future studies could introduce non-destructive testing techniques to quantify tool traces and test the robustness of the findings in conjunction with a larger database.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

By systematically comparing the silverware ornamentation of Yunnan and Kelantan, this study reveals how cultural, technological and functional dynamics shaped the differences and correlations between the artistic styles of the two regions. The differences between Yunnan and Kelantan silverware ornamentation are rooted in the dependence of religious ethics on the selection of symbolic systems and technological transmission paths. Yunnan's polytheistic belief system provided space for the survival of natural imagery, and its realistic style relied on the burin engraving technology of the Central Plains spread by land, which was adapted to local needs through gradual improvement; whereas Kelantan, bound by Islamic teachings, replaced the biological motifs with abstract vine motifs and calligraphy, and introduced Persian filigree technology by sea, but eliminated the figure motifs to form a tradition of technical transformation that was 'de-concretised'. Yunnan silver decoration is based on the mountainous terrain of Yunnan. Yunnan silverware, due to the relatively closed nature of the mountain economy, still maintains a strong ethnic identity function, and its ritual attributes are reinforced by the high complexity of the decoration and the weight of the silverware; whereas Kelantan silverware has accelerated its transformation from a sacred symbol to a tourist commodity under the impact of globalisation, and the density of the vine pattern has been reduced due to the demand for mass production, and the semantic meaning of the pattern has been gradually simplified. This asymmetrical evolution highlights the profound impact of economic models on the survival of NRM. In Yunnan, the tourism economy has given rise to a 'collage of symbols', which has led to cultural mixing but accidentally activated the cross-fertilisation of multi-ethnic motifs; in Kelantan, the reinforcement of Islamic elements has prevented cultural homogenisation, but the programmatic tendency of the motifs reveals a crisis of declining creativity. Methodologically, the integration of mixed methods in this study provides a replicable operational model for material culture research. On the practical level, the study finds two risks that warn of NRM conservation. Yunnan needs to be wary of the semantic dissolution of multi-ethnic ornamentation caused by the collage of tourist symbols, while Kelantan should curb the over-commodification of ornamentation. For both regions, re-establishing the intellectual discourse of the artisans, such as the inclusion of oral histories in the intangible cultural heritage safeguarding archives, is key to sustaining the vitality of the tattoos.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper breaks through the 'one-way diffusion' paradigm of traditional art communication theory, and puts forward a model of religious ethics, technological path, and economic function mechanism to systematically explain the generative logic of the difference between Yunnan and Kelantan silverware ornamentation. In terms of research design, this paper innovatively integrates quantitative style analysis and qualitative rooting theory, overcoming the methodological homogeneity of traditional material culture research. It provides a replicable operational paradigm for the study of intangible cultural heritage and bridges the disciplinary gap between artistic style and cultural anthropology. This paper exposes the core contradiction of ICH preservation - the tension between commercialised survival and the dissolution of the cultural core, and advocates the realisation of living heritage through digital archiving, community education and cross-border cooperation.

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