

Some Analysis of the Inheritance and Breakthroughs of Dali Bai Ethnic Intangible Cultural Heritage Jiamia

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Abstract: Dali Bai intangible cultural heritage Jiamia, as a national-level item of intangible cultural heritage, is a traditional local folk culture actively protected by the government. Compared with traditional forms, contemporary Bai Jiamia cultural and creative products have already made new breakthroughs in form and style. Because the burning nature of Jiamia and the limitations of its traditional styles make it inconvenient for use in modern home environments, this paper explores a new interactive experience for Jiamia by integrating Dali intangible cultural heritage Jiamia with incense-seal aromatherapy. Taking the materials and styles of Jiamia as the entry point, the study focuses on its core functions of “burning as prayer, repeated use, and auspicious meaning.” It innovatively transforms the traditional paper-burning form into an incense-based form. Through the reconstruction of carrier materials, visual style, and usage scenarios, the paper introduces incense-seal aromatherapy as a gentler and more sustainable alternative to traditional burning, thereby integrating a new interpretation of intangible cultural heritage with practical application.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Jiamia; Inheritance; Incense Seal

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1. Introduction

1.1 Current State of the Inheritance of Dali Bai Jiamia as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Dali Bai intangible cultural heritage Jiamia is a form of folk belief art that uses woodblock prints as its carrier and takes burning or posting rituals as its core elements. Traditional Jiamia conveys blessings through paper, yet its method of burning has certain limitations and traditional constraints in modern living environments. Dali Bai intangible Jiamia was included in the Yunnan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2017. In terms of materials and craftsmanship, traditional Dali Bai Jiamia commonly uses pear wood blocks, mainly carved in relief, with bold and vigorous lines, and is printed on bark paper using ink made with pot soot. Its styles can be divided into three categories: totemic nature, Benzhu tutelary deities, and household or everyday deities, with more than 600 subtypes. The colors used in printing are also meaningful: red paper represents festivity; yellow or green is used for Benzhu worship; and white paper is mostly used for funerary contexts. Jiamia is therefore a folk art that integrates carving, papermaking, and belief. Today, the Jiangzhiji Jiamia Woodblock Print Art Museum, located in Xizhou Ancient Town, Dali, integrates Jiamia collection, exhibition, and hands-on experience. The museum displays hundreds of Jiamia woodblocks collected and created by Zhang Renhua, a municipal-level representative

inheritor of Bai Jiaman craftsmanship. It also provides an interactive experience area where visitors can make rubbings of Jiaman patterns under the guidance of technicians and experience the distinctive charm of this intangible cultural heritage technique.

Figure 1. Jiaman rubbing materials (Image source: Jiangzhiji Jiaman Woodblock Print Art Museum)



Figure 2. Original Jiaman blocks and rubbing materials (Image source: Jiangzhiji Jiaman Woodblock Print Art Museum)



1.2 Research Objectives

Research on the living inheritance of Dali Bai Jiaman art should preserve its vitality and developmental nature. Protection and inheritance should take place within the environment in which intangible cultural heritage is generated and developed, and should be carried forward in people's everyday production and life, thereby promoting the living inheritance of Dali

Bai Jiamia art.^[1] In design practice, enlarging or reducing the core motifs in Jiamia patterns can make the images more vivid, intensify emotional expression, and enrich the appeal and expressiveness of the work, thereby emphasizing the artistic value of key elements.^[2] It enlightens us to carry out design and creative research based on focusing on the form and cultural characteristics of the Dali Jiamia itself.^[3]

The existing modes of inheritance for Dali Bai intangible cultural heritage Jiamia mainly include the following:

1.2.1 Family-based and master-apprentice inheritance

This mode of inheritance mainly focuses on woodblock carving skills. Representative inheritors include the father and son Zhang Ruilong and Zhang Chunzheng from Shangguan Village, as well as Zhang Renhua from Zhoucheng Village. These three are currently primarily engaged in the inheritance and development of Dali Jiamia. In addition, Su Baozhen is a folk Jiamia inheritor from Weishan, Dali. With the advancement of Dali's intangible cultural heritage protection work, the government encourages inheritors to recruit apprentices. The learning content includes carving techniques, pigment ratios, and an understanding of the ritual procedures, myths and legends, taboos, and customs behind each Jiamia block.

1.2.2 Systematic inheritance through schools and aesthetic education

This mode includes introducing Jiamia into courses in art design, ethnology, and related majors at universities such as Dali University and Dianxi University of Applied Technology of Applied Sciences, enabling students to engage in innovative design and academic organization. In some primary and secondary schools in Dali, Jiamia has been incorporated into after-school interest classes. Inheritors regularly enter schools to teach, allowing children to print Jiamia by hand and learn about Benzhu belief and related folk stories, thereby cultivating cultural identity. We should also reasonably apply the shapes, colors, and textures in Jiamia graphics through the use of design principles. By leveraging the characteristics of Jiamia graphics and the advantages of image information transmission, it can better enrich design expression and learning.^[4]

1.2.3 Construction of intangible cultural heritage training centers and bases

The construction of intangible cultural heritage training centers and bases mainly refers to inheritance spaces jointly established by the government and inheritors. In 2018, with the support of the prefectural and municipal culture and tourism bureaus and intangible cultural heritage departments, Zhang Ruilong, a provincial-level inheritor from Shangguan Village in Xizhou, Dali, established the Jiamia Training Center of the Dali Cultural Ecology Protection Experimental Zone. He also launched a series of intangible cultural heritage cultural and creative products and hands-on experience programs for tourists and local residents, effectively promoting the inheritance and popularization of Jiamia.^[5]

1.2.4 Market-driven inheritance

This is a market-driven mode of inheritance and is currently the mode with the broadest coverage and fastest dissemination. It transforms Jiamia from a "ritual object" into a "cultural commodity." This mode includes cultural and creative product development: traditional Jiamia patterns are printed on T-shirts, canvas bags, notebooks, coffee mugs, keychains, refrigerator magnets, scarves, packaging, ornaments, and other products.^[6] Such products are very common in cultural and creative stores in Dali Ancient City, Xizhou Ancient Town, and Shaxi Ancient Town. Experiential tourism is another important form: tourists pay a fee at guesthouses, cafes, or intangible cultural heritage workshops to experience the entire process of "selecting a block, applying ink, placing paper, and brushing the print."^[7] Although this mode simplifies the ritual connotations of Jiamia, it greatly expands its visibility and audience base. In the field of guesthouses and spatial aesthetics, many high-end guesthouses use Jiamia as a decorative element or provide free rubbing experiences for guests, making it a window through which new Dali residents and tourists can understand local culture.

1.2.5 Digital and academic preservation-based inheritance

This mode includes the scanning of Jiamia blocks and the construction of databases by relevant cultural departments, as well as the publication and production of new media content and the dissemination of stories behind Jiamia. To a certain extent, these approaches break through geographical limitations.

1.2.6 Inheritance through festivals and rituals

The final mode is inheritance through festivals and rituals. Although the frequency of Jiamia use has declined in modern life, Bai villages still preserve the tradition of using Jiamia during occasions such as Benzhu festivals, the Torch Festival, house-

beam-raising ceremonies, and funeral rituals. This constitutes a form of deep inheritance.

1.3 Theoretical Perspective

To further clarify the theoretical basis of this study, this paper introduces the perspectives of cultural reproduction and experience design. From the perspective of cultural reproduction, the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage is not a simple preservation of traditional forms, but a process in which cultural symbols are continuously reinterpreted and reconstructed in new social contexts. Dali Bai Jiama originally functioned as a ritual medium for communicating blessings through burning. When it is transformed into an incense-seal aromatherapy product, its symbolic meaning does not disappear; rather, it is transferred from a sacrificial scene to an everyday aesthetic and emotional-healing scene. This process reflects the contemporary reproduction of intangible cultural heritage symbols.

At the same time, from the perspective of experience design, the value of intangible cultural heritage innovation lies not only in visual redesign or product transformation, but also in the reconstruction of users' sensory, emotional, and ritual experiences. The Jiama incense seal integrates visual patterns, olfactory perception, slow-burning behavior, and personal prayer into a continuous experience process. Compared with the instant burning of traditional Jiama paper, the incense-seal form extends the ritual time and strengthens users' participation, perception, and emotional connection. Therefore, this study regards the innovation of Jiama not merely as a material or formal breakthrough, but as a cultural experience redesign based on symbolic transformation, sensory interaction, and contemporary life scenarios.

2. Reflections on the Inheritance and Innovation of Dali Bai Jiama Intangible Cultural Heritage

2.1 Existing Innovations

Regarding the inheritance and innovation of Dali Bai Jiama intangible cultural heritage, current observations show that innovation is mainly reflected in naming, sales, dissemination, and function. These aspects are discussed below. In the past, Jiama names corresponded directly to the functions of deities, such as the "God of Joy," "Benzhu," and "Road God." These names were based on Bai beliefs and agricultural needs and emphasized divine authority. Such naming no longer fully meets contemporary social needs. People have begun to use more creative and personalized names, such as "Good Dream Jiama," "De-office-vibe Jiama," and "Success Jiama." These names better suit the preferences of young people today, transforming the traditional functions of Jiama into forms of psychological comfort and personal value expression. At the same time, the coexistence of traditional naming and modern creative naming allows Jiama to preserve traditional culture while making contemporary Jiama culture easier for modern audiences to accept.

2.1.1 Sales

In the past, Jiama could only be purchased in certain local places, such as Dali's March Street, Benzhu temple fairs, or funeral-supply shops. Most were loose sheets of single-color paper horses, very inexpensive, and mainly sold to middle-aged and elderly Bai people. It was difficult for tourists from outside the region to encounter them. Today, both Jiama products and sales channels have been upgraded. Derivative products such as notebooks, canvas bags, refrigerator magnets, and scarves have emerged, while offline experience workshops, e-commerce live-streaming, and cross-brand collaborations have expanded sales channels. The sales range has also broadened. At the same time, pricing has become tiered: there are traditional paper Jiama costing only a few yuan, as well as higher-priced products, meeting the needs of different consumers.

2.1.2 Dissemination

In the past, Jiama was passed down orally through families or master-apprentice relationships, and its circulation was largely limited to Bai villages. Outsiders often regarded Jiama as "feudal superstition" or "rough woodblock prints." Today, through the combination of digital media and educational activities, inheritors use short videos and live-streaming to show the production process and explain the Bai pantheon. Some individual videos have reached more than one million views. In addition, study tours, university intangible cultural heritage workshops, Jiama art festivals, and other activities have transformed Jiama from a village talisman into a widely recognized cultural symbol, allowing Jiama culture to enter a broader range of households.

2.1.3 Function

In the past, the main function of Jياما was ritual use, such as conveying prayers through burning. Different deity images corresponded to different wishes and blessings; for example, the “Road God” protected safe travel. These Jياما had clear temporal validity and sacrificial attributes. Today, the functions of Jياما have diversified. Fashion-oriented Jياما has become a medium for young people to express emotions, while Jياما used in new Chinese-style decoration can represent the cultural identity of Bai youth and serve as a material object for intangible cultural heritage education. Some inheritors have even attempted to participate in public social issues through newly carved blocks with themes such as “environmentally friendly Jياما.”

2.2 Breakthroughs in Style and Materials: Incense-Seal Aromatherapy as an Example

As an important intangible cultural heritage of the Dali region, Bai ethnic group Jياما has a core function in various sacrificial rituals: by burning Jياما paper, people “deliver” their prayers to deities or ancestors. The key to this behavior lies in “burning,” which evokes the incense-seal form of incense burning. The incense seal is one of the most visually aesthetic and ritualized forms in traditional Chinese incense culture. Incense powder is pressed with a mold onto incense ash to form a continuous pattern, such as the character for blessing, lotus motifs, or meander patterns. After being lit from one end, it burns gradually along the pattern. The burning time of an incense seal ranges from half an hour to several hours. It has both a timekeeping function—ancient people once used incense seals to measure time—and ritual beauty, embodying the spiritual core of “the unity of Dao and vessel” in Chinese incense culture. Inspired by incense seals, the “Jياما incense seal” enables Jياما to achieve breakthroughs in materials and styles by integrating life aesthetics. It brings together visual symbols, olfactory experience, and ritual action. The following discussion systematically explains the exploratory breakthroughs of the Jياما incense seal from four dimensions: materials, style, craftsmanship, and function.

First, the burning carrier material is renewed. The transformation moves from burning paper to burning aromatic materials. The traditional carrier for burning Jياما is handmade straw paper, represented by Heqing white cotton paper and bamboo paper. Such paper is made from paper mulberry bark or bamboo pulp, has relatively long fibers, and absorbs ink well; however, after burning, it leaves only ashes and offers no additional sensory experience. In everyday urban homes, burning Jياما paper is also inconvenient, whereas the use of incense burning can make the practice more accessible. As modern people pursue higher quality of life and richer spiritual experiences, single-layer textual or visual information is no longer sufficient to satisfy users’ expectations for a “sense of ritual.” The first breakthrough of the Jياما incense seal is therefore to upgrade the burning carrier from ordinary paper to a Jياما-shaped incense seal made of natural functional incense powder. Through this material innovation, the burning culture of Bai Jياما gains a new sensory dimension, while the cultural experience of incense burning is also enriched and developed.

Second, the stylistic form is innovated. The Jياما-pattern mold is made of copper or stainless steel with a moderate thickness, and the hollowed-out parts correspond to the lines of the Jياما pattern. During use, the incense seal is placed on flattened incense ash, incense powder is filled in and scraped level, and after the mold is lifted, the incense powder remains on the ash surface, forming a Jياما pattern exactly matching the mold. When one end of the pattern is lit, the incense powder smolders slowly along the lines. As the fireline moves, the Jياما image seems to “come alive.” Through the transition from static image to dynamic burning, the image no longer disappears instantly as it does when a sheet of traditional Jياما paper is swallowed by flame. Instead, the incense-powder seal burns gradually along the lines of the pattern. Users can clearly see how the fireline advances stroke by stroke along the characters “Good People Meet,” and the entire process lasts from several minutes to several tens of minutes, creating a strong visual sense of ritual. At the same time, the shift from standardized products to personalized creation is significant: differences in how tightly each user fills the powder and how strongly they scrape it level lead to variations in burning speed and smoke form even when the same mold is used. This “non-reproducibility” enhances the unique value of the experience.

Third, the craft shifts from woodblock carving to the production of metal incense-seal molds. The core technique of traditional Jياما is woodblock carving, in which inheritors use custom iron knives to carve reversed images in relief on hardwood. This skill requires years of training, and woodblocks are prone to wear, cracking, and splitting. The core technique of incense-powder seals, by contrast, shifts to the production of metal incense-seal molds. Its technical logic is connected to

woodblock carving, yet also differs from it, and it overcomes the earlier problems of easy wear and cracking in traditional templates.

Fourth, the experience changes from rapid burning to a slow-burning meditative ritual. The ritual action of traditional Jiama is extremely brief: one takes out the Jiama paper, silently recites a wish, lights one corner, and the paper turns to ash within seconds. This “instant burning” mode suits the rapid and high-frequency demands of village rituals—for example, hundreds of Jiama sheets may be burned during a single Benzhu festival—but for modern urban users it lacks immersion and psychological transition. The incense-powder seal extends the burning process to about half an hour, enhancing the rhythm and psychological experience of the ritual, lowering the cultural threshold for using Jiama, and deepening the therapeutic value of the experience. Traditional Jiama use requires familiarity with the Bai Benzhu pantheon, ritual taboos, and other complex knowledge, making it difficult for outsiders to “use it correctly.” The incense-powder seal simplifies the ritual: users do not need to know the specific origins of “mountain gods” or “earth gods”; they only need to understand the universal wish for household peace and light the incense seal. At the same time, many users report that the fragrance and visual flow produced by slow burning have effects similar to “meditation” and “anxiety relief,” allowing the Jiama incense seal to become a tool for urban self-care rather than merely an object of curiosity about another culture.

Although the Jiama incense-seal aromatherapy model provides a possible path for the contemporary transformation of Dali Bai Jiama, its application still requires careful consideration. First, in terms of cultural adaptability, the redesign of Jiama should avoid reducing it to a purely decorative symbol. The selection of patterns, names, and usage scenarios should remain connected with Bai cultural meanings, ritual logic, and local knowledge. Second, in terms of authenticity, innovation should not replace traditional Jiama practices, but should form a complementary mode of living inheritance. Traditional ritual use, woodblock printing, and folk belief contexts still constitute the cultural foundation of Jiama. Third, in terms of market acceptance, the incense-seal form may be more suitable for young consumers, cultural tourism spaces, guesthouses, museums, and lifestyle brands, but further user research and market testing are needed to evaluate its real acceptance and sustainability. Therefore, the proposed design transformation should be understood as an exploratory practice rather than a complete solution. Future research may further examine user experience, cultural interpretation, and community participation in the process of Jiama innovation.

3. Discussion and Limitations

Although the integration of Dali Bai Jiama with incense-seal aromatherapy provides a possible path for the contemporary transformation of intangible cultural heritage, this innovative approach still faces several limitations and potential controversies.

First, in terms of feasibility, the transformation from paper burning to incense-seal burning requires further technical verification. Traditional Jiama paper burns quickly and completely, while incense powder burns slowly and depends on factors such as powder density, humidity, mold precision, and airflow. If the incense-seal pattern is too complex, the burning line may be interrupted, which could affect the continuity of the ritual experience. Therefore, the selection of Jiama patterns, the design of incense-seal molds, and the proportion of incense powder still require repeated testing and optimization.

Second, in terms of cultural adaptability, Jiama is not merely a decorative image, but a folk belief object closely connected with Bai ritual practices, Benzhu worship, local deities, and village life. When Jiama patterns are transformed into lifestyle products, there is a risk that their original ritual meanings may be simplified or weakened. Therefore, the redesign of Jiama should avoid using sacred or highly ritualized images in inappropriate commercial contexts. Community participation, consultation with inheritors, and respect for local cultural taboos are necessary to ensure that innovation remains culturally sensitive.

Third, in terms of authenticity, the Jiama incense seal may raise debates about whether such transformation preserves or alters the essence of Jiama culture. On the one hand, replacing paper with incense powder changes the original material form and ritual procedure of Jiama. On the other hand, the core symbolic logic of “burning as prayer” is retained and reinterpreted through a slower and more immersive sensory experience. Therefore, this study does not regard incense-seal aromatherapy as a replacement for traditional Jiama rituals, but as a complementary form of living inheritance in contemporary life scenarios.

Fourth, in terms of market acceptance, although the incense-seal form may appeal to young consumers, cultural tourism

spaces, museums, guesthouses, and lifestyle brands, its actual acceptance still needs empirical verification. Different users may have different understandings of Jiamā: local Bai communities may pay more attention to ritual authenticity, while tourists and urban consumers may focus more on visual beauty, fragrance, and emotional healing. This difference may influence product positioning, communication strategies, and long-term market sustainability.

Finally, this study also has methodological limitations. The current research mainly focuses on conceptual analysis and design exploration, while systematic user research, market testing, and community-based evaluation remain insufficient. Future studies may conduct interviews with inheritors, local residents, tourists, and consumers to further examine the cultural interpretation, emotional experience, and practical feasibility of Jiamā incense-seal aromatherapy. In addition, issues such as intellectual property protection, commercialization boundaries, environmental safety, and the standardization of incense materials should also be further discussed.

In summary, the innovation of Jiamā should not be understood as a simple transformation of traditional symbols into consumer products. Rather, it should be regarded as a cautious process of cultural translation, in which traditional meanings, contemporary lifestyles, sensory experiences, and community recognition need to be balanced.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses several reflections on the inheritance and innovation of Dali Bai Jiamā intangible cultural heritage, with particular attention to breakthroughs in Jiamā materials and styles. It focuses on the creative transformation of Jiamā's core function of "burning to communicate." The study proposes an innovative path centered on Jiamā incense-seal aromatherapy, combining traditional Jiamā with Chinese incense-seal culture to realize four breakthroughs. In terms of materials, natural incense powder replaces traditional handmade paper, resolving the inconvenience of burning paper and adding olfactory experience. In terms of style, the two-dimensional flat image is transformed into a three-dimensional incense-seal pattern, enabling a ritualized presentation from static image to dynamic burning. In terms of craftsmanship, pear-wood relief carving shifts toward the production of metal incense-seal molds, improving durability and standardization. In terms of functional experience, instant burning is transformed into a slow-burning meditative ritual, simplifying the cultural threshold while strengthening therapeutic value and scenario adaptability. On the premise of preserving the core connotations of Jiamā—"burning as prayer, blessing, and auspicious meaning"—this study reconstructs materials, styles, craftsmanship, and experience in an integrated way. It promotes the transition of Jiamā from a sacrificial object to a meaningful object for everyday life rituals, achieving both the living inheritance and contemporary interpretation of intangible cultural heritage and offering a practical reference for the innovative development of Bai Jiamā and similar heritage projects.

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