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Cement Tiles in Southern Fujian: Symbolic Evolution and Identity in Cultural Syncretism

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Abstract

Southern Fujian, China, was a crucial hub for overseas Chinese migration, with close exchanges with foreign countries from the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Cement tiles, introduced to Southern Fujian via Europe and Southeast Asia (Nanyang), are a typical product of cultural fusion, reflecting the complex interaction between local Southern Fujian traditions, Nanyang culture, and Western aesthetics during a specific period of time.

Purpose: This study explores the material culture and process of identity construction of cement tiles in Southern Fujian.

Methods: Employing an interdisciplinary research approach, this study conducted systematic archival research and fieldwork in Quanzhou, Xiamen, and Zhangzhou, and combined cultural analysis, semiotics, and historical ethnography for in-depth analysis.

Results: The results indicate that the evolution of symbolic meaning, exemplified by cement tile patterns, represents an active acceptance and localisation of foreign culture rather than passive absorption. Local artisans purposefully and creatively employed external elements, integrating them into the existing aesthetic system of Southern Fujian, and conveying symbols of kinship, wealth, and social status. Thus, these tiles became a powerful visual symbol of modern identity in prosperous overseas Chinese communities.

Conclusion: This research indicates that Minnan cement tiles are not merely decorative items but also material carriers of cultural integration. This study contributes to a broader exploration of materiality, cultural integration, and identity construction phenomena in the coastal hometowns of overseas Chinese within specific cross-border interaction and exchange contexts.

Keywords: Cement Tiles, Identity, Symbolic Evolution, Material Culture, Semiotics

Introduction

Throughout human history, material culture has played a vital role. Different material cultures carry corresponding social memories, and human communal living shapes collective identity and reflects cultural changes across eras. In cross-cultural, cross-regional, and transnational areas, where economic, cultural, and social exchanges are frequent, the material culture of these regions often exhibits unique cultural fusion and diversity. The Minnan region of China, located on the southeastern coast with convenient maritime transport, is an important “hometown of overseas Chinese.” Leveraging its unique geographic location and social migration background, it has become a key hub for the integration of Chinese and foreign cultures. In Minnan’s social development, foreign building materials have become a distinctive feature, with cement tiles serving as a decorative element that has played a significant role in Minnan architecture. In the process of modernisation, cement tiles are

not only a material carrier of the culture of the hometown of overseas Chinese but also reflect cultural symbols and identity during a specific period. These cement tiles, with their exquisite patterns, rich colours, and superb craftsmanship, reflect the cultural interactions between Minnan and foreign countries. This provides an important perspective for studying cross-cultural integration across different regions and countries, the evolution of the symbolic meaning of cultural symbols, and the construction of identity.

At that time, the Minnan region was economically underdeveloped and socially unstable, leading many Minnan people to leave their homes and migrate abroad. Southeast Asian coastal countries, with their geographic locations, social environments, and abundant crops, have become the basis for their livelihoods. Through hard work, thrift, and continuous struggle, they established and developed themselves. Even after accumulating wealth, these immigrants remained deeply attached to their hometowns, often sending money and goods back to support their development. Comfortable and impressive houses are a primary need for construction and improvement. This led to the introduction of overseas architectural styles, decorative elements, and lifestyles into the Minnan region through the construction of Western-style residences (Yang Lou) and mixed-style buildings (Fu Zi Lou) (see Figure 1). Cement tiles were introduced to the Minnan region from Europe and Southeast Asia and quickly developed into a popular architectural symbol (Xiao, 2022; Han, 2019; Huang, 2017). With continuous social development and historical accumulation, cement tiles gradually transcended their basic function as building materials, evolving into a unique cultural symbol reflecting the overseas Chinese's longing for their hometowns, aspirations for a new life, and social status. With the passage of time and rapid urbanisation, many once-renowned patterned-brick buildings are facing demolition, reconstruction, or oblivion. This threatens the cultural memory and identity of these buildings, leading people to lose valuable spiritual and cultural wealth. Therefore, preserving memory in the new society and enabling young people to understand and accept the value of material culture are crucial. By

restoring memory, the multi-layered connotations and meanings of patterned bricks can be passed down, allowing people to participate in the historical and cultural education.



Source: Photographed by Yangdongfang Zhou, 2025

Figure 1 A Building with a Western-style Design in Quanzhou

Existing studies have examined the history, patterns, and conservation of Minnan cement tiles but have paid limited attention to their role in cultural integration and identity construction in the overseas Chinese context. In particular, the active localisation of foreign motifs by local artisans remains largely unexplored.

Objective

This study explores the symbolic meaning and identity construction of cement decorative tiles in the Minnan region of China. By discussing the development history of cement decorative tiles, this study analyzes the “symbolic reconstruction and symbolic meaning” of tile patterns from a semiotic perspective, revealing how local artisans creatively integrated foreign elements and patterns with the traditional culture of Minnan, thus endowing these patterns with new cultural connotations. These decorative tiles have become material carriers for constructing social spaces and individual identities, effectively connecting the Minnan region with the world. This study contributes to restoring social memory, exploring sustainable development paths for material culture, and leveraging the significant influence of material culture on historical and cultural education.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship has established an important foundation for understanding Minnan cement tiles, but its emphasis remains uneven. Historical studies have mainly treated cement tiles as imported modern materials and symbols of architectural change, highlighting their circulation along the Chinese coast and their association with overseas Chinese modernity ([Han, 2019](#); [Han & Zuo, 2016](#); [Huang, 2017](#)). In contrast, pattern-based studies focus more on formal classification, colour systems, and decorative composition, demonstrating the multicultural sources of Minnan tile imagery but often stopping at stylistic description rather than explaining how meaning was socially produced and reinterpreted ([Li et al., 2022](#); [Yang, 2021](#); [Xiao, 2022](#)). Semiotic studies offer a more interpretive approach by examining how decorative motifs convey ideas of wealth, status, and auspiciousness; however, these analyses are often applied in relatively static ways and pay insufficient attention to the historical process through which foreign motifs were selectively localised in specific social contexts ([Chen, 2019](#); [Ling & Lü, 2018](#); [Wan et al., 2022](#)). Studies on spatial production, cultural memory, and identity broaden the discussion by framing material objects as mediators of lived space, memory transmission, and diasporic belonging ([Xiang, 2008](#); [Jin, 2017](#); [Mahmud, 2024](#); [Naumova, 2025](#)). However, compared with object-centred or theory-driven interpretations, fewer studies have connected these macro-theoretical perspectives to the micro-level practices of artisans, households, and community users. In addition, heritage revitalisation studies increasingly emphasise digital redesign and commercial applications ([Wu et al., 2024](#); [Zhang & Zhang, 2023](#)), whereas craft-based approaches stress authenticity, material continuity, and community participation ([Shen, 2023](#)). The tension between these two paths shows that current research has not yet fully explained how Minnan cement tiles operate simultaneously as aesthetic objects, memory carriers, and identity-making materials. Therefore, a more integrated approach is needed to examine how symbolic transformation, cultural localisation, and identity construction intersect in the cross-border context of Southern Fujian.

Methodology

This study adopted purposive sampling to select the research sites and participants. Quanzhou, Xiamen, and Zhangzhou were chosen as the primary field sites because they preserve representative examples of Minnan architecture featuring cement tiles and have historically strong connections with overseas Chinese migration and cross-border cultural exchanges. Participants were selected based on their direct knowledge, experience, or professional involvement with cement tile buildings and related cultural practices. The sample included homeowners and residents of historic tile-decorated houses, local cultural scholars, heritage practitioners, craftspeople, and designers engaged in the preservation, revival, and reinterpretation of cement tiles. Priority was given to participants who could provide rich information on the historical use, symbolic meanings, family memory, and contemporary transformation of cement tiles. This purposive strategy ensured that the study gathered in-depth and contextually relevant perspectives rather than aiming for statistical representativeness of the sample.

This study employed ethnographic research methods to collect empirical data. The specific work included: 1) documenting, through text and images, the types of buildings in Quanzhou and Xiamen that still use cement tiles, encompassing traditional dwellings, Western-style buildings, and arcade-style houses; 2) conducting immersive experiences and observations of spaces that still use cement tiles or draw inspiration from their designs (including shops, cafes, and cultural venues); and 3) conducting in-depth interviews with key information providers (see Table 1). The respondents included homeowners of cement tile buildings, local cultural scholars, and professionals dedicated to the revival of traditional crafts or contemporary design. These interviews aimed to collect personal and family narratives to explore the emotional value, cultural perception, and role of cement tiles in identity construction across different groups of people.

Table 1 Data Record of Cement Tile Color Schemes

Source	Dominant Tile Hue	Color Combination	Color Combination	Number of Colors (by hue)
32 How Café		Red	Red, White	Two
Nanzhou Tile Factory Sample Book		Yellow	Light Yellow, Dark Yellow, White with accents of Green and Red	Five
Huang Rongyuan Mansion		Blue	Blue, White	Two
Jizhi Department Store		Green	Green, White, Yellow with accents of lines and dark brown dots	Four
Nanzhou Tile Factory Sample Book		Black & White	Black, Yellow, and White	Three

All field observations and collected data, as well as the results of textual record analysis, were coded and thematically analysed using qualitative data analysis software to extract key insights into material subjectivity, symbolic spaces, and cultural memory practices. On the one hand, coding was grounded in empirical data; on the other hand, the coding

process was guided by theoretical frameworks such as “cultural memory,” “identity,” and “symbolic evolution.” This process helped identify and analyse key themes, thereby elucidating the symbolic evolution of cement tiles, the mechanisms of identity, and the formation of cultural memory practices (Table 2).

Table 2 Data Record of Cement Tile Patterns (Sample)

Source	Tile Pattern	Primary Pattern Elements	Tile Arrangement
Nanzhou Tile Factory Sample Book		Geometric shapes	Four-way continuous repeat

Haitian Tanggou Mansion (in Gulangyu)		Plants, flowers	Four-way continuous repeat
32 How Caf�		Abstract "pulled flower" design	Independent/Isolated
32 How Caf�		Lotus Flower Pattern	
Haitian Tanggou Mansion (in Gulangyu)		Lines, geometric borders	Border/ Perimeter

Results

The Historical Integration and Localization of Cement Tiles in Southern Fujian

The historical evolution of cement tiles in the Minnan region showcases their transformation from an imported building material to a symbol of the local culture. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the opening of Xiamen Port, economic development, and the return of overseas Chinese, cement tiles entered Fujian as a foreign commodity. In early architecture, these tiles, owing to their unique materials, shapes, colours, and craftsmanship, became important symbols of social status and wealth for the locals. With the establishment of local tile factories, especially the Xin Nan Zhou Tile Factory in 1921, the material culture embodied by cement tiles underwent a significant transformation. Local artisans actively and creatively understood and used these tiles when building houses; from another perspective, they were translators and creators of various cultures. They incorporated European geometric patterns, Southeast Asian floral motifs, and traditional Chinese auspicious patterns (such as

bats symbolising wealth and peonies symbolising prosperity) into the design and production of local tiles. One creative integration is reflected in the use of colour. The tiles use bright red and warm colours, which are favoured by residents. By harmoniously integrating them into a new visual language, they effectively incorporate local aesthetics and symbolic systems (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Color Comparison Between Similar Patterned Tiles from the Minnan Region and Those From Early Europe

Symbolic Reconstruction and Multilayered Meaning

From Peirce's semiotic perspective, the patterns on cement tiles themselves contain a complex symbolic system. This system comprises various symbolic elements, imbued with profound cultural connotations, conveying specific cultural meanings, auspicious connotations, and aesthetic expressions through unique pattern designs and color combinations. These symbolic elements not only possess strong visual appeal in practical applications but also play a vital role in architectural construction, becoming an indispensable part of buildings. The subtle meanings inherent in cement tile patterns, such as expressions of love, unity, and strength, help us understand their function and symbolic significance within a socio-cultural context. They can be viewed as icons (representing natural forms), indicators (pointing to practical meanings such as social status, wealth, and ideals), and symbols (carrying cultural codes related to blessings, family, and prestige). This multi-layered symbolic meaning allows these tiles to be seen as a microcosm of cultural symbolic representation. In overseas Chinese communities, they are both non-verbal representations of identity, embodying family honor and clan cohesion, and material cultural expressions of the community's international experience and cultural adaptation, reflecting the integration and development of the distinctive culture of the Minnan region with local culture.

Spatial Production and the Construction of Lived Memory

From the perspective of symbolic space theory, cement tiles, as an important material medium, carry a diverse and integrated culture, playing a crucial role in shaping modern life, social memory, and identity in the Minnan region. At the level of perceived space, the tiles' material, especially their surface smoothness and durability, meets modern industrial standards. Simultaneously, the patterns and colors of the tiles, extracted from culture, resonate with visual psychology, directly influencing the interior and exterior spaces and atmosphere of buildings, visually guiding and reshaping the daily behavior and sense of belonging of family members.

At the level of conceptual space, the tiles are seen as a material carrier of social ideals and cultural imagination. This style has transformed from "exotic tiles" symbolizing Western fashion to a symbol of modern civilized life. This selection process reflects a collective negotiation between society regarding "modernity" and "locality." Ultimately, Minnan tiles become a modern, diverse living space, a "memory field" full of emotion. They serve as a place to express family emotions and life memories. Even if the building's function changes, such as transforming a historical building into a café or museum, its capacity as a carrier of memory remains active, transforming physical space into a narrative space that promotes cultural continuity and emotional resonance.

Intergenerational Transmission and Identity Negotiation

These buildings, constructed with cement tiles, serve as carriers of cultural memory, embodying the local history, culture, family sentiments, and ritualistic memories. They play a dynamic and vibrant role in intergenerational memory transmission and in historical and cultural education. For the older generation who experienced the heyday of the Minnan region, these tiles are vivid and concrete representations of their memories, often transcending the boundaries of time and space when they see them. For younger generations, these tiles represent important historical and cultural heritage, connecting them to a glorious yet perhaps distant family history and stories they did not experience. Therefore, decisions regarding protection, restoration, or adaptive reuse are key practices in maintaining the transmission of cultural memory, effectively forming an informal, community-driven form of education. From the decline of communities and the vicissitudes of buildings to the transformation of old buildings into modern cultural spaces, these phenomena reflect the ongoing process of selective memory transmission and identity reshaping. When these spaces are carefully designed and interpreted, they can transform from mere places of memory into active classrooms that cultivate visual and cultural literacy. This transformation has not only facilitated the transfer of knowledge but also deepened people's understanding of material culture.

Contemporary Revival, Divergent Paths and Inherent Tensions

Currently, with the government's attention and the active participation of local people, the revival and development of cement decorative tiles are taking two main paths. The first path is driven by digital innovation and modern design, followed by economic revival through market acceptance. This revival treats patterns as aesthetic elements, extracting and transforming symbolic elements through digital reproduction and commercialisation, and applying them to cultural and creative products, as well as interior design. The second path emphasises the concept of "culture + craftsmanship revival" led by artisans, focusing on restoring the use of traditional materials and hand-pressing techniques, emphasising the ecological and environmental protection functions of materials, and stressing the importance of skill inheritance and knowledge. The core advantage of these two paths lies in the fact that the former emphasises socio-economic factors, while the latter emphasises cultural memories. The combination of the two grounds the inheritance and development of decorative tiles in social reality, with an economic foundation, solidifying cultural connotations, inheriting historical and cultural education, and achieving sustainable development.

Discussion

The study of Minnan cement tiles reveals the process of multicultural integration in profound detail. The introduction of culture does not represent a one-way transmission or passive acceptance but rather a creative endeavour undertaken by local people through spontaneous, active participation. Local artisans, community residents, merchants, immigrants, and the government actively deconstruct and reconstruct the forms and symbolic connotations of foreign material culture, leveraging local wisdom to integrate it into local aesthetic concepts and cultural systems, thus creating a multicultural phenomenon that is both globalised and locally distinctive. This cultural phenomenon highlights the close interaction between material culture and human practices. Minnan cement tiles not only reflect specific social relations but also serve as a key medium for overseas Chinese communities to connect with

tradition, engage with the world, and construct their identity. This study, combining Peirce's theory of symbolic space and Assmann's theory of cultural memory, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding cement tiles as a material cultural heritage. Bridges and alleyways constructed from bricks and tiles are both social products that regulate daily life and places that condense family memories, collectively forming a "memory space" for identity recognition. The sustainable revitalisation of cultural heritage must seek creative transformation while preserving cultural significance and community agency and avoiding simplification into flat symbols devoid of history.

Conclusion

This study, by reviewing the development of Minnan cement tiles from their importation and localisation to their contemporary cultural revival, elucidates their complex interactive relationship in cultural integration and identity construction, as well as their influence and role in social inheritance and historical and cultural education in Taiwan. Simultaneously, this study integrates semiotics and memory theory, constructing an analytical framework encompassing the dual perspectives of "social space producers" and "cultural memory banks." While this study has certain limitations in the breadth of case studies and the depth of micro-practice description, it provides paradigmatic inspiration for the study of material culture among a broader range of overseas Chinese people. Ultimately, the circulation and rebirth of a single tile embodies an important characteristic of cross-cultural exchange. This paper argues that the protection and interpretation of cultural heritage are closely related to how we understand contemporary society, which is constituted by multicultural exchanges. Based on this, the future of society should be deeply rooted in tradition while projecting confidence to the outside world.

Future research could expand this study in three ways. First, comparative studies across different coastal hometowns of overseas Chinese could further reveal regional similarities and differences in the localisation of cement tiles and other imported materials. Second, more micro-level ethnographic

research is needed to document the experiences of artisans, homeowners, and community members, especially regarding intergenerational memory and everyday heritage practices. Third, interdisciplinary approaches that combine material culture studies with digital humanities, heritage conservation, and community-based participatory research could provide new ways to preserve, interpret, and revitalise Minnan cement tiles in contemporary society.

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