



“Traditional Beauty” and “Experimental Beauty”: A Dual-Dimensional Comparison of Design Strategies and Aesthetic Pathways in Digital Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. With the widespread integration of digital technologies into Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) design practices, a comparable analytical framework for examining how design strategies shape aesthetic experience and cultural evaluation remains underdeveloped. This study takes Splendid Southwest and Interweaving Ethnos as representative cases of the protective strategy and generative strategy in digital ICH design. Drawing on Kivy's Emotional Pathway and Dewey's Experiential Pathway, a dual-dimensional evaluation framework was constructed and operationalized into an “8+2” evaluation structure comprising eight core dimensions and two cultural dimensions. A questionnaire-based paired comparison was conducted with 103 valid responses, using a shortened single-item instrument and a 5-point Likert scale. The paired-samples t-tests with FDR correction showed no statistically reliable differences across the eleven measured indicators. Wilcoxon robustness checks suggested two localized differences, with Splendid Southwest scoring higher on V2b and E4. Taken together, these findings suggest that protective and generative strategies should not be understood as a simple hierarchy of aesthetic value, but as different modes of organizing emotional activation, cultural recognizability, and reflective engagement.

Keywords: digital ICH, design strategy, Kivy emotional pathway, Dewey experiential pathway, protective strategy

1 Introduction

The increasing integration of digital technologies is reshaping the design logic of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), interactive systems, and digital platforms have transformed ICH from a

primarily representational cultural object into a structured design system composed of information architecture, visual systems, and interaction flows. In this transition, aesthetic experience is no longer determined solely by value judgment; rather, it is gradually constructed through specific design decisions and user engagement pathways. Designers must therefore negotiate between the continuity of traditional symbols and contemporary modes of expression, reorganizing visual order, sensory stimulation, and experiential sequencing to redefine how cultural beauty is articulated in digital contexts.

Recent discussions on digital ICH design have gradually converged around two dominant orientations. One is the protective strategy, which emphasizes clarity of information architecture, stability of layout hierarchy, and continuity of visual order to ensure the accurate representation of symbolic systems [1, 2, 3, 4]. The other is the generative strategy, which introduces algorithmic production, multisensory stimulation, and interactive uncertainty to expand the contemporary design expression of traditional symbols [5, 6]. Meanwhile, studies addressing multi-stakeholder participation, cultural integrity, and communication effectiveness provide complementary perspectives for evaluating digital ICH design [7, 8, 9]. Overall, existing research has focused primarily on design orientations and value judgments, but has paid less attention to systematically analyzing how different strategies organize aesthetic experience. In other words, the relationship between design strategies and aesthetic outcomes has not yet been decomposed into comparable structural dimensions.

From the perspective of aesthetic generation mechanisms, digital ICH experience can be understood as comprising at least two interrelated layers: emotional responses triggered by formal organization, and experiential integration formed through participatory processes. The former concerns how visual order, rhythm, and sensory stimulation shape emotional structures, while the latter addresses how interaction, narrative, and context construct a continuous experiential process [10, 11, 12, 13]. Building upon this distinction, this study draws on Kivy's account of the relationship between form and emotion [14] and Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience as a continuous process [15], transforming them into two analytical dimensions—Emotional Pathway and Experiential Pathway—to construct an operational dual-dimensional aesthetic evaluation framework. This framework enables the examination of how different design logic produce distinct aesthetic mechanisms in terms of emotional structuring and experiential formation.

Based on this framework, the study addresses three research questions:

- (1) Do the protective and generative strategies exhibit significant differences along the Emotional Pathway and the Experiential Pathway?
- (2) How can the observed evaluative tendencies be interpreted through specific design variables in the two cases?
- (3) Do the two strategies differ in Perceived Cultural Credibility and Cultural Discussability?

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it translates aesthetic theory into measurable design variables, constructing a reusable evaluation framework for analyzing aesthetic pathways in digital ICH design. Second, through a paired comparative approach, it explores how different design strategies may relate to variations in emo-

tional structuring, experiential organization, and cultural evaluation. Third, it synthesizes the strategic distinctions between protective and generative pathways in terms of design principles and experiential effects, offering methodological guidance for decision-making between order-based preservation and disturbance-based generation. While the study is situated within a Chinese cultural context, its findings provide context-sensitive insights and require further validation across larger samples and diverse cultural settings.

2 Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a questionnaire-based paired comparative design to examine two digital ICH design strategies. In this study, “protective strategy” and “generative strategy” are used as operational categories for comparing two design logics, rather than as a hierarchy of aesthetic value. The protective strategy refers to digital ICH practices that prioritize cultural continuity, documentation, and legibility. It is informed by studies on ICH safeguarding, inventorying, digital archiving, and digital dissemination, and is identified through features such as information organization, classification, semantic annotation, and stable presentation structures [16, 17]. The generative strategy refers to digital ICH practices that activate traditional symbols through computational transformation and participatory interaction. It is informed by generative art and interactive digital heritage studies, and is identified through features such as algorithmic recombination, bodily input, real-time feedback, and controlled uncertainty [18, 19].

The case selection followed a theory-driven purposive sampling logic. Both cases are digital ICH practices related to ethnic textile or pattern traditions in China, and both involve visual presentation and digital mediation, which provides a basic level of comparability. However, the two cases differ clearly in their design logic. Based on the operational criteria above, Case A, Splendid Southwest, was selected as an example of the protective strategy because it centers on an information platform, classified database, semantic annotation, and stable browsing structure. Case B, Interweaving Ethnos, was selected as an example of the generative strategy because it uses motion capture, real-time computation, dynamic visual generation, and sound feedback to transform traditional motifs into participatory and variable aesthetic forms. Therefore, the two cases are not treated as statistically representative of all digital ICH projects, but as analytically contrasting cases for examining the proposed dual-dimensional evaluation framework.

The two cases were presented in the same paired questionnaire format to ensure comparability across evaluation dimensions. The “8+2” framework was operationalized into eleven measured indicators because Emotional Activation Effectiveness was measured through two subindicators: Positive Emotional Intensity and High-Arousal Emotional Intensity. The evaluation framework was constructed based on the dual-dimensional framework proposed in this study (Table 1). The Emotional Pathway, derived from Kivy’s account of form and emotion, included Visual Order Clarity, Emo-

tional Activation Effectiveness, Sensory Disturbance Calibration, and Overall Aesthetic Evaluation. The Experiential Pathway, derived from Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience, included Interaction Controllability, Experiential Coherence, Potential for Everyday Integration, and Depth of Aesthetic Reflection. In addition, two cultural dimensions, Perceived Cultural Credibility and Cultural Discussability, were included.

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the two cases across the Emotional Pathway, the Experiential Pathway, and the Cultural Dimensions. FDR correction was applied for multiple comparisons, and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted as robustness checks.

Table 1. Evaluation Dimensions of the “8+2” Framework

Pathway	Code	Dimension
Emotional Pathway (Kivy)	V1	Visual Order Clarity
	V2	Emotional Activation Effectiveness
	V2a	Positive Emotional Intensity
	V2b	High-Arousal Emotional Intensity
	V3	Sensory Disturbance Calibration
	V4	Overall Aesthetic Evaluation
Experiential Pathway (Dewey)	E1	Interaction Controllability
	E2	Experiential Coherence
	E3	Potential for Everyday Integration
	E4	Depth of Aesthetic Reflection
Cultural Dimensions	C1	Perceived Cultural Credibility
	C2	Cultural Discussability

Note. V2 was measured through two subindicators, V2a and V2b. Therefore, the “8+2” conceptual framework was operationalized into eleven measured indicators in the statistical analysis.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited through online questionnaire distribution. A total of 103 valid responses were collected. All participants evaluated both cases, making the dataset suitable for paired comparison. The questionnaire collected background information including age, design-related experience, ICH-related familiarity, direct connection with the relevant cultural context, and prior exposure to the two cases.

2.3 Materials and Stimuli

(1) Case Stimuli

Case A: Splendid Southwest, presented as a web-based digital platform.

Case B: Interweaving Ethnos, presented as a 3-minute demonstration video.

(2) Environmental Control

The two cases were presented through standardized questionnaire materials. Participants viewed the case materials independently before completing the corresponding evaluation items. The questionnaire was completed individually to reduce peer influence and group discussion effects.

2.4 Measurement Instruments

(A) Screening and Demographic Questionnaire

The background questionnaire collected information including age, design-related experience, familiarity with ICH or traditional crafts, direct connection with the relevant cultural context, and prior exposure to the two cases. (B) Case Evaluation Questionnaire

Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). To reduce participant fatigue during the paired evaluation of the two cases and to maintain comparability across evaluation indicators, each indicator was measured by one representative item. This shortened questionnaire design was aligned with the study's paired-comparison purpose, which aimed to compare perceived differences between the two cases across the proposed evaluation indicators.

2.5 Procedure

Participants first read the study information and completed the background questions. They then viewed the materials for Case A and Case B and completed the corresponding evaluation items for each case. The questionnaire included an attention-check item for data quality control. Response time was used only as a basic data-quality screening indicator, together with the attention-check item and straight-lining detection.

3 Results

3.1 Case Analysis

- Case A: Order-Continuity as a Protective Strategy

Splendid Southwest, a digital information platform on Tujia brocade developed by a research team at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute [20], is designed for educational, research, and public communication contexts. Its core objective is to ensure that cultural content remains visually accessible, structurally legible, and practically usable (Fig 1). The platform adopts a restrained design approach, emphasizing accurate information transmission and semantic clarity. The present analysis is based on publicly available materials and direct interaction with the platform.

At the level of information architecture, the platform is organized into five primary modules: history, region, craftsmanship, pattern, and inheritance. These modules establish a semantic progression from contextual background to detailed elements and from collective structures to individual actors. The PATTERN sub-database constructs an indexing system based on metadata such as nomenclature, classification, dimensions, techniques, and symbolic meanings, supporting both educational retrieval and design comparison. The INHERITANCE module visualizes transmission networks through timelines and genealogical diagrams, rendering historical processes and interpersonal relationships perceptible. At the system level, coordination between the web platform

and the AR application overlays patterns and textual information onto real-world contexts, extending informational display into immersive scenarios .

From a strategic perspective, the central principle of this project is the regulation of sensory stimulation and the reinforcement of semantic clarity. The visual system employs a dark background and centrally aligned layout, combined with a strict grid structure and unified color palette, positioning images as the primary visual focus. Bilingual labeling and high-contrast annotations enhance terminological precision and reading efficiency. Typographic hierarchy and line spacing are carefully calibrated to maintain rhythmic stability and prevent visual congestion or semantic ambiguity. In terms of motion and temporal control, transition rhythms are maintained at a low frequency and predictable pace. Intense flashing, abrupt displacement, and excessive visual noise are avoided in order to preserve reading continuity. The interaction structure follows a clearly organized browsing logic. Users typically enter through the ORIGIN or PATTERN modules and proceed sequentially to DISTRIBUTION, CRAFTSMANSHIP, and INHERITANCE, forming a progressive experiential structure from source to dissemination and from technique to individual artisan.

Within this system, the designer functions less as a purely visual stylist and more as an organizer of information architecture and coordinator of visual systems. Through precise control of grid structure, color regulation, typographic hierarchy, transition rhythm, and feedback density, the platform balances authenticity, legibility, and usability. The resulting aesthetic pathway is characterized by order continuity and aligns with the logic of the protective strategy.

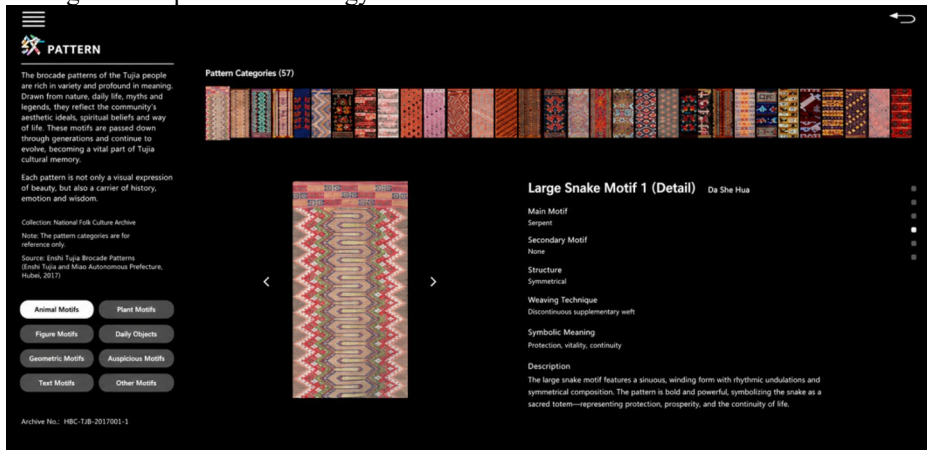


Fig. 1. The PATTERN section of the Splendid Southwest Tujia Brocade Digital Information Platform(<http://www.jinxiuxinan.cn/>)

- Case B: Disturbance-Based Generation as a Generative Strategy

Interweaving Ethnos, developed by a research team at Guangxi Arts University [21], takes Dong brocade patterns as its visual source and explores the recontextualization of traditional imagery within a real-time computational environment(Fig 2). Through the integration of bodily movement, algorithmic processing, real-time image generation,

and sound feedback, the project transforms traditional motifs from static decorative forms into responsive, deformable, and participatory generative structures. In this configuration, cultural symbols are no longer presented solely as objects of observation but function as processes that are activated and negotiated through interaction.

From a system perspective, the installation employs hand-motion capture as the input mechanism, which is processed through real-time visual computation and sound synthesis to produce dynamic feedback. The exhibition environment establishes a relatively stable interaction boundary. A loom-like structural frame defines the spatial relationship between participants and the projection surface, integrating bodily movement into the generative logic. The technical architecture does not operate as a focal point of display; rather, it provides the infrastructural condition for real-time generation, offering an interaction context that is structured yet open-ended.

At the level of design strategy, the project replaces fixed compositional order with controlled uncertainty. Geometric motifs derived from Dong brocade are abstracted into variable grids and repeating units. Through deformation, stretching, noise modulation, and mirrored layering, the system continuously produces dynamic configurations. Color modulation is restricted within a limited palette, with transitional nodes embedded to create cyclical shifts between recognizability and temporary disruption.

The interaction logic is based on nonlinear mapping. Similar gestures do not necessarily produce identical visual or auditory outputs. Movement speed, trajectory, and duration collectively influence the generative results. A slight intentional offset between sound and image is maintained, producing rhythmic tension and reinforcing immediacy and unpredictability. By regulating parameter boundaries, spatial calibration, and feedback rhythm, the designers maintain a balance between exploratory openness and structural stability. The experience thus retains generative flexibility without collapsing into randomness.

Overall, this case employs disturbance and real-time generation as its primary design language. Traditional imagery is transformed into a dynamic computational field rather than preserved as a fixed visual order. Its aesthetic pathway is defined not by continuity of structure, but by tension, negotiation, and reconfiguration within participatory processes, exemplifying the logic of the generative strategy.



Fig. 2. Interweaving Ethnos Interactive Installation

3.2 Statistical Results

- Emotional Pathway (Kivy)

The mean differences between the two cases were small across V1, V2a, V3, and V4 (Table 2). The Wilcoxon robustness test indicated a significant difference only in V2b, with Splendid Southwest receiving a higher score than Interweaving Ethnos.

Table 2. Paired Comparison Results Between Splendid Southwest and Interweaving Ethnos

Code	Case A M(SD)	Case B M(SD)	Δ B-A	Corrected comparison
V1	3.77 (1.04)	3.83 (1.06)	0.06	n.s.
V2a	3.74 (1.00)	3.84 (0.99)	0.10	n.s.
V2b	4.01 (0.98)	3.72 (1.04)	-0.29	W: $A > B$, $p = .044$
V3	3.86 (0.99)	4.01 (1.02)	0.15	n.s.
V4	3.90 (0.96)	3.92 (0.99)	0.02	n.s.
E1	4.07 (0.96)	3.88 (1.00)	-0.18	n.s.
E2	3.79 (1.04)	3.86 (1.06)	0.08	n.s.
E3	3.69 (0.99)	3.80 (1.05)	0.11	n.s.
E4	3.94 (1.03)	3.66 (1.02)	-0.28	W: $A > B$, $p = .044$
C1	3.96 (1.04)	3.70 (1.06)	-0.26	n.s.
C2	4.00 (0.98)	3.98 (0.99)	-0.02	n.s.

Note. A = Splendid Southwest; B = Interweaving Ethnos. Δ = B - A. The corrected result column reports the primary paired-samples t-test with FDR correction, and significant Wilcoxon signed-rank robustness-check results are marked with W. n.s. = not significant after FDR correction.

- Experiential Pathway (Dewey)

As shown in Table 2, no statistically reliable differences were detected in E1, E2, or E3 after FDR correction. For E4, the Wilcoxon robustness test indicated a significant difference, with Splendid Southwest receiving a higher score.

Overall, the Experiential Pathway did not show a consistent advantage for either strategy. The only corrected significant result appeared in E4 under the Wilcoxon robustness test, with Splendid Southwest receiving a higher score.

- Cultural Dimensions

As shown in Table 2, no statistically reliable differences were detected in Perceived Cultural Credibility or Cultural Discussability after FDR correction. Splendid Southwest scored slightly higher in C1, while the two cases were nearly identical in C2.

These results indicate that no statistically reliable differences were detected in Perceived Cultural Credibility or Cultural Discussability in this sample. Although Splendid Southwest scored slightly higher on C1 and the two cases were nearly identical on C2, these descriptive tendencies did not reach statistical significance after FDR correction.

3.3 Discussion

- Differences Across Emotional and Experiential Pathways

The results show that the two cases produced broadly comparable evaluations across most emotional and experiential dimensions. After FDR correction, the paired-samples t-tests did not detect statistically reliable differences across the eleven evaluation dimensions.

The Wilcoxon result for V2b suggests a possible difference in emotional activation, but this should be interpreted cautiously because the paired-samples t-tests did not remain significant after FDR correction. In other words, the distinction concerns the type of emotional activation rather than the magnitude of affective response. However, the results did not show a consistent advantage for the generative strategy along the Experiential Pathway. After FDR correction, no statistically reliable difference was detected in Experiential Coherence. The only corrected significant difference in the Experiential Pathway appeared in E4 under the Wilcoxon robustness test, with Splendid Southwest receiving a higher score. These results do not support a simple ranking of the two strategies. Instead, they indicate that the protective and generative cases organize emotional response, cultural recognizability, and reflective engagement through different design logics.

- Mechanisms of Key Design Variables

Integrating case analysis with the descriptive tendencies in the questionnaire results suggests that the two cases organize design variables in different ways. Within the protective strategy, grid systems, stable layout structures, rhythmic control, and semantic alignment collectively reinforce visual order and informational clarity. This configuration emphasizes legibility, interpretability, and reusability within an established cultural framework. By contrast, in the generative strategy, nonlinear mapping, parametric disturbance, and dynamic transformation function as mechanisms of experiential integration. Crucially, regulation of parameter boundaries and feedback rhythm maintains structural continuity, preventing generative processes from devolving into randomness. The relationship between the two strategies therefore appears to involve trade-offs among cultural legibility, experiential openness, emotional activation, and reflective engagement.

- Pathway Differences and Cultural Evaluation

At the cultural level, no statistically reliable differences were detected in Perceived Cultural Credibility or Cultural Discussability in this sample. This result does not mean that design strategy has no cultural effect; rather, it suggests that the two cases produced comparable cultural evaluations under the present measurement conditions. Protective strategies may still support cultural recognition and reflective interpretation, while generative strategies may expand experiential openness without necessarily reducing perceived cultural credibility. Cultural evaluation in digital ICH contexts therefore appears to be jointly shaped by structural organization and semantic continuity rather than by a single formal logic.

- Theoretical Implications.

Synthesizing these findings, strategic differentiation in digital ICH design appears as a set of trade-offs rather than a fixed layered structure. Protective and generative strategies should therefore not be interpreted as a binary opposition between authenticity and innovation. Instead, they represent alternative modes of organizing experience within digital environments. The central challenge in digital ICH design lies not in choosing between order and disturbance, but in sustaining experiential continuity and cultural association under differing structural logics.

- Limitations

Because the two cases were presented through different media formats, participants' evaluations may have been influenced by the mode of stimulus presentation. The findings should therefore be interpreted as perceptions based on standardized questionnaire materials rather than as direct behavioral evidence from equivalent interactive experience. Overall, this study provides an operational framework for comparing different modes of aesthetic organization in digital ICH design. Within the limits of the present sample, measurement design, and case selection, the study suggests that digital ICH design should not be reduced to a choice between preservation and innovation. A more useful question is how different design strategies balance cultural legibility, experiential openness, emotional activation, and reflective engagement.

4 Conclusion

his study constructs a dual-dimensional aesthetic evaluation framework for protective and generative strategies in digital intangible cultural heritage design. The framework is based on Kivy's Emotional Pathway and Dewey's Experiential Pathway. Through a paired comparison of Splendid Southwest and Interweaving Ethnos, the results show no significant differences between the two strategies across most evaluation indicators. The protective strategy strengthens cultural recognition, aesthetic reflection, and knowledge communication through clear information architecture, stable visual order, and explicit semantic organization. The generative strategy expands the participation and openness of traditional symbols in contemporary digital contexts through real-time interaction, algorithmic transformation, and sensory disturbance. The difference between the two strategies lies mainly in their modes of aesthetic organization. Therefore, the key issue in digital intangible cultural heritage design is to balance cultural legibility, emotional activation, experiential continuity, and depth of reflection according to specific communication goals, cultural contexts, and user experiences. Future research may further expand the sample size to test the applicability of this framework across different types of intangible cultural heritage and cross-cultural contexts.

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