

FROM MYTHIC COGNITION TO AESTHETIC FORM: A STUDY OF DONGBA PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

Dongba paintings are not simply “folk” decorations but operative ritual images in the Naxi Dongba religion, used to guide action, instruction, and shared memory in ceremonial settings. Although their histories and media forms have been described, the concrete pathway through which mythic cognition organizes visual language and sustains ritual efficacy has not been articulated with sufficient analytical clarity. This study therefore aims to explain how mythic cognition shapes Dongba pictorial representation and to identify the recurrent visual traits that make these images workable in ritual practice, while offering a compact analytic that can support heritage communication and design-oriented interpretation. Using an aesthetic-anthropology approach, we examine a controlled corpus across five media categories—pictographs, wooden/plank paintings, cardboard/bamboo-pen works, scrolls, and scripture-page paintings—and interpret them in relation to three recurring ritual contexts (purification, funerary guidance, and agricultural invocation). Analysis is conducted with a shared codebook (form reduction; symmetry/axis; movement cues; compositional scaffolds; and color-material accents), supported by an intercoder check to stabilize category boundaries. Five traits recur across media and rites: ritual-driven non-intentional production, nature-human interpenetration, calibrated exaggeration that indexes hierarchy and potency, iconic concreteness that prioritizes legibility, and durable stylization formed through long-term ritual transmission. From these traits, the article derives a three-part design grammar—legibility rules, operativity rules, and sequencing rules—that accounts for how Dongba images remain readable and actionable across formats. Conceptually, the study treats mythic cognition as an operative driver linking visual form to ritual work, interpretable through symbolic-form analysis (Cassirer), mythic participation (Lévy-Bruhl), and structural relations in myth (Lévi-Strauss). This framing supports more context-sensitive safeguarding—especially the procedural coupling of medium, function, and layout—and offers practical guidance for exhibition, bilingual interpretation, and community co-design under shared constraints of readability and respect for sacral content.

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1. Introduction

Dongba paintings were inscribed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List for their distinctive ritual function and artistic value (State Council of the PRC, 2006). The Naxi—about 330,000 people concentrated in and around Lijiang, northwest Yunnan—have long inhabited a cultural corridor linking Han and Tibetan spheres (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Over centuries, exchanges along the Tea–Horse Road brought Tibetan Buddhism (including Bön and tantric traditions), Mahāyāna Buddhism, Daoism, and the Confucian canon. Through selective integration with a local animistic tradition, these influences coalesced into the Dongba religion, a syncretic, polytheistic system widely observed among Naxi communities (Jackson, 1979). Scholarship generally traces many Yunnan minorities—including the Naxi—to ancient Qiang-related groups (Guo & He, 1994).

Within this religious ecology, mythic cognition—animism, nature worship, totemism, and ancestor veneration—persists most visibly in Dongba ritual life. Dongba paintings, with a history of over a millennium, serve as ritual media through which priests communicate with deities. Their pictorial language arises from projecting human intention and affect onto a spirited natural world, thereby rendering mountains, animals, celestial bodies, and forces as agentive interlocutors. Yet, despite their acknowledged ritual status, existing discussions often remain descriptive at the levels of history, typology, or iconographic listing; the mechanisms by which mythic cognition is translated into stable aesthetic traits and operative visual rules are still under-specified.

Scholarly attention to Naxi culture grew from the late nineteenth century and expanded in the 1930s–1940s, notably through Joseph F. Rock, whose corpus laid foundations for international Naxi studies (Poupard, 2020). Since the 1980s, research on Dongba language, religion, and folklore has accelerated in China and abroad. However, a systematic account of the aesthetic characteristics of Dongba paintings specifically under mythic cognition remains limited—this study addresses that gap.

Accordingly, this article asks: how does mythic cognition shape Dongba pictorial representation, and what recurrent visual traits enable these images to function effectively in ritual practice? To answer this question, the study combines literature-based inquiry, comparative analysis across materials and visual examples, and expert interviews/consultation to refine interpretations of

key motifs and ritual contexts (the methodological details are provided in the Methodology section). The scope is deliberately controlled to focus on the relationship between mythic cognition and aesthetic form in Dongba painting, rather than offering a general survey of all Naxi visual culture.

By clarifying this cognition-to-form pathway, the article contributes a more analytically explicit account of Dongba painting as an operative visual system: it identifies repeatable aesthetic features grounded in ritual logic, and it offers a basis for discussing heritage value beyond general statements of “uniqueness” or “tradition.”

2. Objectives

This study adopts an aesthetic-anthropology lens to explain how mythic cognition in the Naxi Dongba religion organizes the visual language of Dongba painting and makes images operative in ritual, pedagogy, and collective memory. The study is delimited to extant Dongba visual materials after the 18th century, when the tradition became more mature, and focuses on Naxi communities centered in Lijiang, Yunnan. The corpus is drawn from materials archived by the Lijiang Dongba Culture Research Institute, which serves as the primary selection criterion, and it covers five types of Dongba visual works: wooden ritual plaques (*paihua*), hanging scroll paintings, Dongba pictographic script/inscriptions, paper card/board paintings, and scripture illustrations. Within this controlled scope, the article pursues four objectives: (1) to theorize the aesthetic formation of Dongba painting under mythic cognition; (2) to identify and operationally define recurrent visual traits—rite-driven non-intentional production, nature–human interpenetration, power-signaling exaggeration, iconic concreteness prioritizing legibility, and durable stylization formed through long ritual transmission; (3) to distill these traits into a design-oriented grammar comprising legibility rules, operativity rules, and sequencing rules; and (4) to clarify implications for context-sensitive intangible-heritage safeguarding and cross-border heritage communication (e.g., museum display, bilingual interpretation, and community co-design). Intercoder consistency was assessed using a negotiated-agreement procedure: two coders independently coded a pilot subset with the shared codebook, discrepancies were logged and resolved through discussion, and the code definitions were refined iteratively before the full corpus was coded.

3. Methodology

This study examines how mythic cognition in the Naxi Dongba religious context is translated into repeatable visual form, and why Dongba images remain legible and usable as operative media in ritual practice. To address these questions, the study adopts a multi-method design. Document and authoritative-source review is used to establish an auditable boundary for the materials under study and to consolidate a stable typological frame for Dongba paintings and Dongba pictographic script (Table 1). On this basis, cross-media comparative visual analysis is conducted on institute-archived materials to identify recurrent formal traits and to distinguish medium-specific constraints from conventions shaped by cognition and ritual use. In addition, expert and practitioner interviews/consultations (three Dongba priests, two domain experts, and five Dongba painting educators) are used to calibrate motif interpretation, usage expectations, and potential lineage or regional variation. Interview inputs are incorporated into the refinement of coding definitions and the interpretation of findings. Coding is supported by a pilot phase and a consistency check to strengthen traceability and reliability.

3.1 Research design

The analysis follows a consistent sequence: corpus boundary clarification, cross-media comparison, and contextual interpretation. This design ensures that claims about recurrent traits are grounded in traceable materials and are interpreted with reference to ritual functions, teaching practice, and documented use.

3.2 Data and corpus

The study focuses on extant materials from the mature phase of Dongba culture after the eighteenth century, with a regional emphasis on Naxi communities centered in Lijiang, Yunnan. The primary corpus is drawn from holdings and archival records of the Lijiang Dongba Culture Research Institute. Inclusion is restricted to items that have been formally archived and catalogued, with traceable provenance in the institute's documentation. This delimitation both controls the historical and regional horizon of comparison and ensures that the visual evidence can be audited through catalog records.

To keep category definitions stable across the article, the study first consolidates the confirmed types and sub-types of Dongba visual-textual materials (Table 1). Public authoritative descriptions commonly summarize

Dongba painting into four major forms: scripture-related paintings, wooden plaque paintings, paper card paintings, and hanging scroll paintings. Within this frame, the study records sub-classifications that are consistently documented and also identifiable in the institute holdings. Wooden plaques are distinguished as pointed-headed deity plaques and flat-headed ghost plaques. Paper card paintings are documented either as deity-image cards versus pictorial manuals/canons, or—by use—as divination cards, “shu” images of nature deities, and five-panel crown sets. Because no unified public count of all surviving paper-card patterns has been established, paper cards are treated through confirmed classification logics rather than as a closed inventory.

Table 1 Dongba visual–textual materials

Material	Confirmed type or quantity	Working set scale	Source and verification
Dongba pictographic script	More than 1400 recorded units	Reference set for contextual reading	Public records; checked by experts, priests
Dongba painting overall	Four forms: scripture plaque card scroll	Organizing frame for the corpus	Public sources; verified by institute catalog
Scripture related paintings	Four parts: pictorial cover frontispiece topic	Approximately a dozen catalogued items	Institute catalog; checked by educators
Wooden plaque paintings	Two types: deity plaques ghost plaques	Thirty five catalogued items	Catalog plus interviews: 3 priests
Paper card paintings	Two systems; three use types	Over one hundred catalogued items	Catalog plus interviews: experts educators
Hanging scroll paintings	Two types: major deity ritual event	Over one hundred thirty catalogued items	Catalog plus interviews: 5 educators

Source: Researcher

Hanging scroll paintings are recorded by content as major-deity paintings and ritual-event paintings, with long-scroll exemplars such as the Shenlu tu used as reference cases for sequencing and guided viewing. Scripture-related paintings are documented to include pictorial writing units, cover/binding paintings, frontispiece paintings, and captioned or topic images, often featuring humans, animals, plants, auspicious emblems, cloud ribbons, chanting scenes, and episodes of welcoming deities or subduing demons. In addition to painting, the study includes Dongba pictographic script as a key visual–textual carrier. Public scholarship reports more than 1,400 recorded single-character units. At the same time, historical readings and usages show variation due to regional and lineage

differences; modern scholarship has substantially improved normalization and interpretive consistency, but the tradition is not treated as fully uniform.

The corpus is organized according to the Table 1 categories. Counts by type are: scripture-related paintings $n \approx 10+$, wooden plaque paintings $n = 35$, paper card paintings $n \approx 100+$, hanging scroll paintings $n \approx 130+$, and Dongba pictographic script/related textual samples $n > 1,400$ (where applicable). This distribution supports cross-media comparison and reduces the risk that conclusions are driven by a single medium.

3.3 Data analysis and reliability

To connect interpretation to practice and to reduce overgeneralization from a single lineage reading, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Dongba priests, two domain experts, and five Dongba painting educators. Interviews served two focused purposes: (1) confirming how specific media forms are used in ritual and teaching contexts and how participants are expected to read them; and (2) identifying where interpretations diverge by lineage or locality, so that divergence is reported rather than erased.

Visual analysis is conducted using a shared codebook designed to link cognition and ritual work to observable pictorial decisions across media. The codebook records: reduction and schematic depiction, symmetry and axial organization, movement and sequencing cues, compositional scaffolds (hierarchy, framing, clustering), and color/material emphasis. In this study, movement and sequencing cues are identified through visible indicators such as the directionality of gesture, gaze, or ritual objects; diagonal or repeated line work implying dynamism; posture or weight shift suggesting action; and modular arrangements that guide the viewer's reading path.

Intercoder consistency was assessed using a negotiated-agreement procedure: two coders independently coded a pilot subset (15% of the corpus) with the shared codebook, discrepancies were logged and resolved through discussion, and the code definitions were refined iteratively before the full corpus was coded. During full coding, ambiguous cases were flagged for joint review. This procedure stabilizes category boundaries and allows cross-media trait claims to be traced back to coding decisions rather than impressionistic description.

4. Results: The Influence of Mythic Cognition on the Representation of Dongba Paintings

The evidence suggests that Dongba painting is best understood not as a decorative “folk style” nor simply as a local variant shaped by neighboring traditions, but as an image system oriented toward ritual work: images are produced to act within ceremonies, to guide attention and action, and to stabilize shared understandings across generations. In this sense, mythic cognition does not remain an abstract worldview; it becomes visible in recurring pictorial choices—what is simplified, what is enlarged, what is made immediately recognizable, and what is fixed into durable formats through repeated use. Across media and ritual contexts, five traits recur with notable consistency: rite-driven non-intentional production, nature–human interpenetration, calibrated exaggeration for hierarchy and potency, iconic concreteness privileging legibility, and durable stylization formed through long ritual transmission. The sections below substantiate each trait and show how, together, they support the operativity of Dongba images in practice.

4.1 Corpus comparability and cross-media patterning

Dongba ritual images appear in multiple material forms that are conventionally grouped into scripture-related paintings, wooden plaque paintings, paper card paintings, and hanging scroll paintings. Although these media differ in scale and use, the analysis treats them as comparable in a restricted sense: each medium must solve similar ritual problems—rapid recognition, stable hierarchy, and actionable sequencing—under constraints of time, setting, and transmission. This allows recurrent traits to be tracked across formats rather than attributed to a single medium.

This subsection establishes the logic of comparison: the goal is not to reduce all media to one style, but to identify stable pictorial solutions to shared ritual tasks. The findings below therefore focus on repeatable traits that persist across media and contexts. This cross-media strategy anchors the “image system” claim in observable patterning rather than in general description.

4.2 Trait 1: Rite-driven, non-intentional production

Within mythic cognition, images emerge less from an autonomous aesthetic will than from ritual necessity—images are made to act, to address, and to align forces in the world. In such consciousness, imagination and object are

not sharply distinguished; affective projection renders mountains, animals, and celestial bodies as interlocutors whose dispositions can be engaged through rite and image. As Cassirer observed, the substrate of myth is not discursive reasoning but emotion—its order rests more on unity of feeling than on formal logic (Cassirer, 1997). This stance shapes iconography and style: motifs of nature worship, totemic animals, ancestors, and deities are depicted with directness and iconically economical forms to express immediate wishes—fertility, protection, healing, safe passage—rather than to pursue illusionistic representation (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). Emblematic creatures are selected for the capacities they condense. The frog, for example, indexes fecundity and seasonal renewal; its attributes are selectively amplified in images and, at times, in costume and ritual implements, to convey and enlist the power it signifies.

Non-intentionality here does not mean randomness or lack of skill; it indicates a production logic governed by ritual function. Across media, compositional economy and emblematic clarity are repeatedly used to secure efficacy and usability. This provides the first line of evidence that Dongba painting operates as a ritual image system rather than an autonomous art genre (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

4.3 Trait 2: Nature–human interpenetration

A central trait of mythic cognition is the refusal of a hard boundary between subject and object: humans and the more-than-human world are construed as affectively continuous. Dongba paintings therefore do not merely depict nature; they participate in a world where mountains, animals, and celestial bodies possess will and feeling, and where ritual images can realign those dispositions. As Cassirer notes, mythic order rests more on a unity of feeling than on formal logic (Cassirer, 1997). Accordingly, Dongba iconography renders nature worship, totemic animals, ancestors, and deities in concise, operative forms that express immediate wishes—fertility, protection, healing, safe passage—rather than detached observation (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). Within this affective ecology, frogs, serpents, tigers, avian figures, and celestial emblems condense capacities—regeneration, strength, guidance, auspicious timing—that participants seek to activate through performance.

Nature–human interpenetration functions as a pictorial logic, not simply a theme. It stabilizes the premise that nonhuman beings are agentive participants and that images can mediate engagement with them. This trait recurs across media

as a consistent basis for motif selection and representational structure (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

4.4 Trait 3: Calibrated exaggeration for hierarchy and potency

Exaggeration is a salient device in Dongba painting used to index potency, hierarchy, and moral valence within a mythological worldview. Figures associated with authority—deities, heroic ancestors, or tutelary beings—are rendered larger in scale, with amplified attributes, while malign agents appear diminished to visualize subjugation. The heroic ancestor Sanduo is often shown astride a tall white horse bearing an oversized spear, his augmented proportions signaling protective prowess; celestial figures are likewise depicted as surpassing earthly humans, animals, and trees to mark superior agency. Even when demonic beings must be shown as formidable, their bulk or armaments are typically kept subordinate to those of gods to maintain a clear ritual hierarchy. In images of Shu, the deity's representation contracts toward a small ghost or animal form when narrating harmful aspects and expands when emphasizing protection and beneficence (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963; He, 2008; Ma & He, 2021).

Exaggeration is not a failure of naturalism but a controlled convention for encoding rank and efficacy. By making hierarchy immediately visible, it supports fast, reliable reading during ritual action. This trait strengthens the claim that Dongba imagery is organized to guide practice and stabilize ritual order (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

4.5 Trait 4: Iconic concreteness and legibility-first strategies

A further hallmark of mythic cognition is its bias toward iconic concreteness: meanings are rendered as graspable images rather than abstract definitions. Dongba paintings function like visual propositions that appeal to sense and affect, translating cosmological ideas into immediately legible forms. What might appear “abstract” to modern viewers is often concrete within the Dongba system: painters select salient, diagnostic features and deploy them where ritual intelligibility matters most (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). This concreteness is anchored in everyday lifeworlds. Priests mobilize forms familiar to the community—red tigers, white oxen, frogs, monkeys, snakes—and mark power through iconic parts (heads, horns, claws) and emphatic implements (oversized blades, long spears, bows and arrows). The resulting style—simple schemata, continuous line, flat high-contrast color—privileges readability and force over illusionism while preserving dense symbolic charge (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963; He, 2008).

Iconic concreteness functions as a legibility strategy under ritual constraints: it compresses meaning into quickly diagnosable forms. This explains why the same motifs remain readable across contexts of chanting, instruction, and ceremonial deployment. The trait also prepares the ground for the “design grammar” synthesized at the end of this chapter (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

4.6 Trait 5: Durable stylization through long ritual transmission

Because Dongba paintings serve ritual ends, they exhibit durable stylization—fixed formulas of use, content, layout, and technique crystallized through long practice. Ritual prescriptions bind medium to function: the Divine Path scroll is displayed in funerary and transcendence rites; large scrolls of major deities are hung above the altar; ghost class marks are planted at thresholds to repel malign forces; and certain wind- or water-related class marks are set near trees or ponds to address those agencies (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963; Ma & He, 2021). Such prescriptions standardize the visual program of ceremonies. Codification also governs iconography and composition. Within many rites, officiants deploy numerous panels and charts to coordinate offerings and processions, and painters adopt stable schema—compact figures, continuous contour line, flat high-contrast color, and centripetal layouts—to secure transmission and ensure legibility (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963; Ma & He, 2021). Historically, stylization also reflects selective synthesis with Bön and Tibetan Buddhist *thangka* conventions—axis-centered arrangements and hierarchical registers—reworked through a local pictorial dialect marked by iconic economy (Rock, 1963).

Stylization is both a practical solution to ritual standardization and an outcome of mythic cognition’s preference for recognizable, efficacious forms. By binding medium, function, and layout into repeatable formats, it supports intergenerational transmission and cross-context usability. This provides a structural basis for treating Dongba painting as an operative image system (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

4.7 Synthesis: From five traits to a design-oriented grammar

Taken together, the five traits converge on a compact set of rules that explain how Dongba images remain operative across formats. First, legibility rules privilege reduction, contrast, and stable axial organization so that key agents and relations can be recognized quickly. Second, operativity rules align pictorial emphasis—especially exaggeration and movement- or action-cues—with ritual salience, clarifying hierarchy and intended engagement. Third, sequencing rules

support guided viewing through modular arrangements, repeatable layouts, and medium-specific placement conventions that coordinate ritual action and instruction. This synthesis links the empirical traits to a transferable analytic that can be used to interpret how Dongba pictorial form is organized to do ritual work.

5. Discussion

5.1 Dongba Religion as the operative frame of Naxi cultural practice

In Tylor's classic view, culture comprises "the complex whole" of knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and the capacities acquired as members of society (Tylor, 1958). In the Naxi case, Dongba culture articulates this whole through pictographs, paintings, costume, dance, music, and ritual, and these domains are best approached as a connected ritual ecology rather than as separate "art forms" (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). The Dongba religion is a non-centralized, polytheistic system rooted in Qiang-related shamanic and ritual practices and shaped by sustained exchange along the Tea–Horse corridor, selectively integrating Bön/Tibetan Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucian learning into an enduring local framework (Jackson, 1979; Poupard, 2020). Ritual specialists known as dongba mediate between human and more-than-human agencies in life-cycle and productive rites (He, 2008; Rock, 1963).

In this setting, paintings do not function as autonomous aesthetic objects but as operative ritual media embedded in procedures and performance. Figure 1 situates the discussion in a concrete ceremonial scene in which images, chant, movement, and objects co-produce ritual action.



Figure 1 Dongba Religious Ceremony Scene
Source: Researcher, Lijiang, Yunnan, 2022

Rather than re-stating the five recurrent traits detailed in Section 4, the discussion below explains why those traits take the forms they do: how the Dongba religious ecology sustains a cognition-to-form pathway, and how that pathway stabilizes legibility, hierarchy, and actionable sequencing across media.

5.2 Mythic cognition as a practical driver of pictorial form

In the Dongba cultural world, mythic cognition provides a deep cognitive grammar through which nature, society, and the sacred are perceived as a continuous, agentive field (Jackson, 1979; He, 2008). Classical theorists variously named this mode: Cassirer emphasized mythical thinking as a symbolic, affect-laden synthesis (Cassirer, 1992); Lévy-Bruhl described participation as a logic in which beings and qualities coexist and communicate without strict conceptual separation (Lévy-Bruhl, 1910); and Lévi-Strauss analyzed mythic operations as transformations guided by analogy and contiguity rather than formal abstraction (Lévi-Strauss, 1989). These accounts converge on three properties that directly matter for pictorial practice: concreteness over abstraction, participatory linkage between entities, and reasoning by resemblance and proximity.

Within Dongba practice, these properties help explain why visual form repeatedly prioritizes what Section 4 identifies as legibility-first strategies, calibrated hierarchy, and stable conventions. Mythic cognition does not merely supply “themes” (e.g., gods, animals, celestial bodies); it also shapes what counts as an efficacious depiction and what can be recognized and acted upon under ritual constraints. This is why pictorial choices often appear as compact, diagnostic, and procedurally aligned rather than illusionistic or individualized (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963; He, 2008).

5.3 Participation and animistic addressability in pictorial practice

Following Tylor, animism posits that humans and the more-than-human world share ensouled agency: persons, animals, plants, celestial bodies, and landscape features can perceive, intend, and respond (Tylor, 1958). In the Dongba context, this stance is not a residual belief but a live cognitive and ritual grammar: mountains, rivers, winds, stars, frogs, snakes, bears, and tigers are treated as interlocutors whose dispositions can be influenced through rite (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). Mythic narratives in Dongba scriptures further personify forces, allowing beings to speak, act with intention, and display emotion (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). Under these premises, images do not simply represent an animistic

cosmos; they instruct priests and participants how to address, placate, or redirect agencies through materially situated forms.

This helps interpret why certain emblems become especially “workable” across media. The frog-related emblem Bage, shown in Figure 2, illustrates how an animal sign condenses fertility, seasonal renewal, directionality, and protection into a compact, teachable form that can be invoked in ritual instruction (Jackson, 1979; He, 2008).



Figure 2 Dongba Sacred Frog Bage
Source: Researcher, Lijiang, Yunnan, 2022

5.4 Totemism, composite figures, and structural relations in image-making

Within the Dongba worldview, totemism operates as a modality of mythic cognition in which meaning and image are inseparable: emblematic animals simultaneously classify social groups and express desired capacities through representational forms (Zheng, 1992). Structural accounts read totemic systems as classificatory grammars that organize difference through perceived resemblances and oppositions (Lévi-Strauss, 1989). This helps clarify why composite figures and emblem clusters are not arbitrary embellishments but structured solutions for expressing relations—kinship, alliance, division of labor, and cosmological balance—through concrete analogies.

The composite figure of Shu provides a focused example. Ethnographic accounts describe Shu as a composite being—frog head, human torso, snake tail—signifying agnatic kin and the consolidation of lineages; traditions link its rise to migration and alliance expansion, aligning with broader shifts in social organization (Mu, 2005). In Dongba scripture, Shu is narrated as kin to humans, articulating an enduring division of ritual–ecological labor (Jackson, 1979; Rock,

1963). Read through Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on transformation, analogy, and contiguity (Lévi-Strauss, 1989), the Shu figure can be understood as a structural condensation: a single composite image that holds together multiple relational claims that are actionable within rite and instruction.

Figures 3 and 4 locate this discussion in the visual–textual continuum of Dongba pictographs, where diagnostic head profiles and action graphemes encode species identity, posture, and vector with minimal strokes (Li, 1991; Rock, 1963). This “iconic economy” aligns with accounts that link language and mythic cognition through image-based storage and holistic recomposition (Strelnik, 2019).

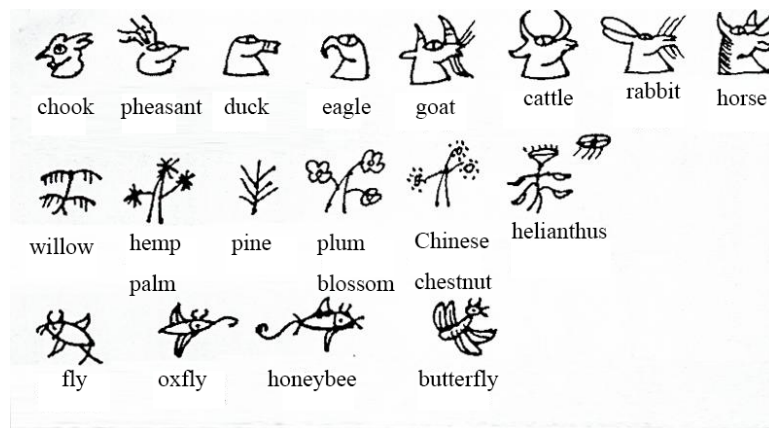


Figure 3 Dongba Pictographs
Source: Written by Researcher, 2022

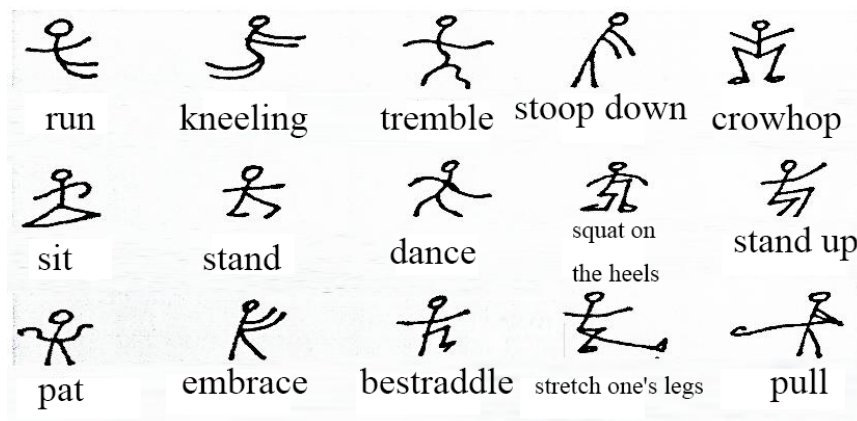


Figure 4 Dongba Pictographs
Source: Written by Researcher, 2022

5.5 Medium, function, and layout as a coupled ritual system

A key implication of the results is that Dongba imagery is stabilized not only by motif repertoires but by a coupled system of medium, function, and layout. This coupling is visible across the major media forms and helps explain

why recurrent traits remain stable across formats (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963; Ma & He, 2021). Wooden/plank paintings (often called class marks) are planted at thresholds or ritual grounds and disposed of after use, underscoring their instrumental character; their isomorphism with pictographic graphemes reflects the deep continuity between writing and image (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). Figure 5 illustrates this threshold-oriented, action-facing placement.



Figure 5 Dongba Wooden Painting

Source: Christine, M. (2011). Quentin Roosevelt's China: Ancestral Realms of the Naxi.

Cardboard or bamboo-pen paintings extend this operative economy into portable panels used for sacrifice, divination, and scripture-related functions; their economy of line and high legibility are consistent with the need to coordinate procedures in performance (Jackson, 1979; Li, 1991; Rock, 1963).



Figure 6 Dongba Cardboard Drawing

Source: Christine, M. (2011). Quentin Roosevelt's China: Ancestral Realms of the Naxi.

Scroll paintings, including long narrative-liturgical handscrolls, provide a medium for sequencing: for example, the Divine Path scroll visualizes itineraries across layered realms and is displayed in the most solemn rites to instruct and

assist passage (Ma & He, 2021; Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963). Figure 7 marks the place of scrolls as procedural maps rather than framed pictures.



Figure 7 Dongba Scroll Painting

Source: Christine, M. (2011). *Quentin Roosevelt's China: Ancestral Realms of the Naxi*.

By treating these media as parts of one operative image economy, the article avoids reducing Dongba painting to a classificatory inventory and instead explains how form is constrained and enabled by ritual work (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

5.6 Contemporary implications and boundaries

The findings also clarify contemporary implications without collapsing sacred media into general “design inspiration.” First, for visual communication and design, Dongba painting offers a tested repertoire for symbolic compression: minimal, diagnostic features and stable schemas can convey complex roles and procedures with immediate readability. Second, for artistic practice, Dongba images exemplify the operative image—pictures that do not only signify but do, eliciting and stabilizing collective action. Third, for heritage safeguarding, preserving the procedural coupling of medium, function, and layout helps maintain the link between intangible knowledge and tangible media (Ma & He, 2021; He, 2008).

Finally, the animistic substrate of Dongba painting—its insistence on a nature–human continuum—speaks to current concerns in environmental aesthetics and ethics. By rendering non-human agencies as addressable interlocutors, the corpus models a visual ethics of attention and reciprocity and

suggests pathways for art and design to engage ecological relations without collapsing into abstraction or mere illustration (Lévi-Strauss, 1989; Cassirer, 1997; Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that Dongba painting is best understood as an operative image system embedded in Dongba ritual life rather than as a purely decorative “folk style.” Across media—scripture-related paintings, wooden/plank paintings, paper card paintings, scroll paintings, and the broader visual-textual continuum of Dongba pictographs—the analysis identified recurrent visual traits that support ritual work: legibility under performance constraints, hierarchy and potency marked through controlled emphasis, and stable conventions sustained through long transmission (Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963; He, 2008; Ma & He, 2021). Read through the lens of mythic cognition, these traits clarify why Dongba images remain actionable across formats and generations: images are produced to guide attention and action, and to stabilize shared understandings in specific ceremonial procedures (Cassirer, 1997; Lévi-Strauss, 1989).

To make the contribution explicit and reusable, Figure 8 summarizes the article’s logic as a compact “knowledge map”: it links (i) cultural and ritual drivers, (ii) how those drivers are operationalized as observable codes, (iii) the evidence base (cross-media stability and representative cases tied to figures), and (iv) the resulting outputs (a three-part visual grammar and safeguarding implications). This map is intended both as a synthesis of this study and as a transferable template for other operative-image research in which belief systems, material constraints, and governance boundaries shape visual form.

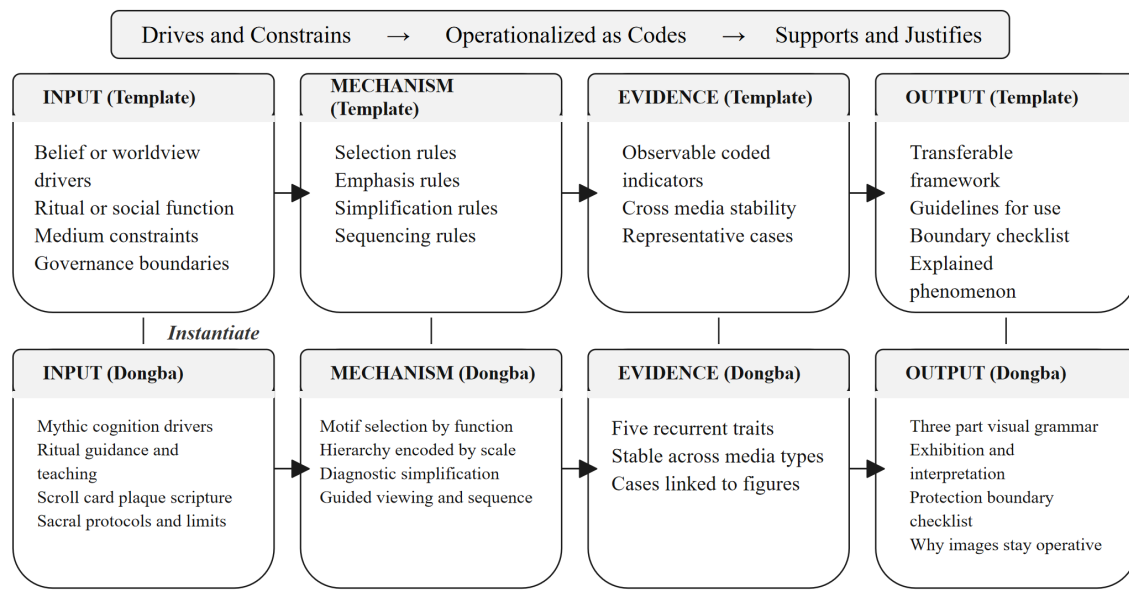


Figure 8 Reusable Visual Knowledge Map Template: Dongba instantiation

Source: Researcher

6.1 Recommendations

Safeguarding policies for Dongba painting should prioritize the procedural coupling of medium, function, and layout that makes images operative in ritual, rather than treating paintings as isolated objects. In practice, this implies support for on-site documentation of ritual use, transmission practices (including priest training and repertoires), and museum or cultural-centre guidelines that respect both legibility needs and sacral limits (He, 2008; Ma & He, 2021). A concise “display standard” can specify basic parameters for bilingual labeling, procession-like sequencing where relevant, and clear boundaries for what may be shown or reproduced, while digital surrogates record not only images but also use-wear and performance notes. Locally led workshops in Lijiang that pair dongba priests with art and design educators can produce teaching kits for schools and visitor centres, and small grant mechanisms can support youth apprenticeships and skilled work related to ritual paraphernalia.

Future work can extend the design-grammar approach to other operative image systems, integrate close material study with performance ethnography, and use audience-based tests (including bilingual contexts) to examine the relationship between legibility and ritual efficacy. An open, versioned repository structured by a controlled vocabulary for motifs and layout functions would support comparative research and evidence-based conservation decisions.

6.2 Knowledge Contribution

Following Lévi-Strauss, mythological (or “wild”) thinking is not irrational but differently rational—a mode that composes the world through concrete analogies and participatory classifications with rigor comparable to empirical reasoning (Lévi-Strauss, 1989). Read in this light, Dongba paintings demonstrate how emotion, image, and action can be integrated into a coherent cognitive–ritual system. Their iconic concreteness, calibrated emphasis, and codified stylization translate cosmological relations into legible, actionable forms, showing that myth can function as a valid logic of representation and practice (Cassirer, 1997; Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

These findings imply, first, that Dongba painting offers a tested repertoire for symbolic compression in visual communication and design: minimal diagnostic features and stable schemas can convey complex roles and procedures with immediate readability. Second, Dongba images exemplify the operative image—pictures that do not only signify but also organize and stabilize collective action—inviting artistic practice to treat affect, material, and environment as co-agents rather than backdrops. Third, for heritage safeguarding, aligning material supports (wooden/plank, cardboard/bamboo-pen, scroll, scripture) with their ritual functions clarifies what must be preserved to maintain the link between intangible knowledge and tangible media (Ma & He, 2021; He, 2008).

Finally, the animistic substrate of Dongba painting—its insistence on a nature–human continuum—speaks to present concerns in environmental aesthetics and ethics. By rendering non-human agencies as addressable interlocutors, the corpus models a visual ethics of attention and reciprocity, suggesting pathways for design and art to engage ecological relations without collapsing into abstraction or mere illustration. In sum, Dongba painting demonstrates how mythic cognition can sustain contemporary meaning-making, providing formal tools and affective orientations that remain viable for both creative practice and cultural stewardship (Lévi-Strauss, 1989; Cassirer, 1997; Jackson, 1979; Rock, 1963).

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