

Comparative Analysis of Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation in Liangshan and Dafang

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of lacquerware ornamentation from traditional to modern expression in two Yi lacquerware regions in China, Liangshan, Sichuan and Dafang, Guizhou, through comparative analysis. Elements from nature, plants, animals and productive life are extracted as the basis of traditional Yi lacquerware ornamentation, focusing on their ornamental nature. However, under the influence of modern civilisation, lacquerware ornamentation has gradually incorporated some creative or modified thematic images, marking a response to the evolving needs of contemporary society. Adopting the sense of order theory and formal analysis theory as theoretical guides, this paper compares the formal characteristics, organisational structure and stylistic expression of lacquerware ornamentation in Liangshan and Dafang, revealing their distinctive visual expressions influenced by culture, history and art.

Keywords: Yi lacquerware, ornamentation, traditional and modern, comparative analysis, Liangshan, Dafang

1. Introduction

Yi lacquerware, known for its rich ornamentation, is a testimony to the traditional ethnic art of the Liangshan and Dafang regions. These lacquerware ornamentations originate from the unique humanistic background of the region and have developed over time to provide unique insights into the cultural and artistic expressions of their respective regions. The unique visual elements of Yi lacquerware ornamentation serve as visual identifiers with deep ethnic and regional styles. Figures 1 and 2 below show scenes of lacquerware production in the Liangshan and Dafang regions, respectively, and it can be seen that there are differences in the visual representation of ornamentation features.



Figure 1. Liangshan, Sichuan Yi Lacquerware

Source: <http://www.yizuren.com/>



Figure 2. Dafang, Guizhou Yi Lacquerware

Source: [http:// www.china.org.cn/](http://www.china.org.cn/)

Wolfring (2012) emphasises that decoration is usually the main visual element that carries symbolic semantics and conveys the national aesthetic style outwards. Yi lacquerware, especially from Liangshan, is characterised by a variety of patterns and variations in ornamentation, reflecting the diversity of Yi culture. Traditional lacquerware from Liangshan and Dafang displays both abstract geometric forms and figurative realistic styles, each with its own evolution and cultural nuances (Minah, 2008). These ornamentations not only differentiate Yi lacquerware from that of other ethnic groups but also reflect the unique cultural traditions and aesthetic interests of the two regions.

This study aims to reveal the historical and cultural background of the formation of Yi lacquerware ornamentation in the two regions, to explore the evolution of Yi lacquerware ornamentation from tradition to modernity and its specific manifestations, and to provide a comparative analysis of the formal characteristics, organisational schemes and stylistic expressions of Yi lacquerware ornamentation in Liangshan and Dafang. This

study provides valuable insights for a broader understanding of Yi cultural heritage and a deeper understanding of the visual evolution of Yi lacquerware ornamentation in different regions.

2. Historical and Cultural Background of Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation Formation

In general, the origin of Yi lacquerware originated from the supply of lacquer tree resources and the daily needs of nomadic people, for example, harnesses and tableware were directly related to the nomadic habits and living environment of the Yi. Like other Yi groups, the Liangshan and Dafang regions are spatially separated, which is a key factor contributing to the significant differences in social systems, politics, language and ideology between different Yi regions (Wang, 2014). As the settlements of the Yi in the two regions were separated by mountains and water, this limited the adequate and necessary communication between the communities, thus hindering the formation of a unified community identity.

Before 1956, it was widely believed that slavery existed in the Liangshan Yi society. In addition, according to Wang (2007), the family branch (clans of the same bloodline) was the main form of social organisation in Liangshan Yi society. This resulted in the lacquerware craft being confined to a limited number of family clans for a long time in this region, which harmed the promotion and development of Yi lacquerware. The low level of civilisation limited public awareness and poor communication with the outside world have enabled Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation to develop stable and unchanging visual characteristics over time.

Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation is deeply integrated into the cultural traditions of the Yi people in the region. Drawing inspiration from the natural environment and daily life, the motifs depict mountains, rivers, plants, and animals, reflecting the spirit and aesthetic values of the Yi culture (Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture Museum, 1982). The symbolism embedded in these motifs conveys the rich cultural heritage and beliefs of the Liangshan Yi community. The orderly organisation, characterised by symmetry, repetition and hierarchy, further highlights the culture's emphasis on harmony and balance.

For a long time, Dafang has been regarded as the political centre of the Shuixian Yi clan, and during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the social system in the region was both slave and feudal (Guo, 2012). Due to differences in geography and forms of community settlement, the Yi communities in Dafang were more extensive and deeper in ethnic integration than in Liangshan, even earlier. Cultural exchanges and interactions between Yi and Han have never ceased, while the trend of assimilation has become more and more obvious (Li, 2015). Ethnic integration in the Da Fang region is characterised by the co-existence of pluralism openness and monolithic closure. Pluralism is manifested in the fact that there are several mixed-ethnic groups in the area, while openness is reflected in the compatibility of multi-ethnic cultural practices. However, once a certain trend of compatibility was formed, the Dafang region maintained stability over a long period (the Ming, Qing and Republican periods), no longer actively embracing other cultures and in no condition to integrate them. This is because the geography of the Dafang region remained relatively closed in general.

In addition, the lacquerware industry in Dafang mainly operated in the form of workshops, and the inheritance of lacquerware craftsmanship followed the master-apprentice system and thus began to flourish during the Qing Dynasty. Lacquerware ornamentation in Dafang was influenced by the multicultural landscape formed by the integration of ethnic groups. Although it shares some commonalities with Liangshan, Dafang shows unique influences, presenting a figurative, realistic style and drawing on a variety of artistic elements. Decorative patterns and paintings from traditional Han lacquerware contribute to the multifaceted artistic expression found in Dafang lacquerware (Lan, 1992). The integration of multicultural elements led to the development of ornamentation features with large visual differences in this region.

3. Evolution of Liangshan and Dafang Lacquerware Ornamentation

3.1 Traditional Ornamentation

Traditional Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation embodies the harmonious interaction of nature, plants, animals and elements of production and life. Originating from the rich culture of the Liangshan Yi region, these ornamentations draw inspiration from the natural ecology and life of the region. The motifs of unitary shapes often mimic natural objects with stable symbolic semantics and fascinating phenomena, i.e., a single motif carries multiple meanings (Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture Museum, 1982). These motifs cover natural landscapes, herbs and plants, and tools of life, and are skilfully woven through dots, lines and surfaces to form unit patterns, independent patterns and continuous patterns (Xing, 2015). Figure 3 below concentrates on analysing the content of the ornamentation motifs and their symbolic semantic expressions in the Liangshan region.





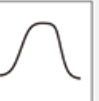

























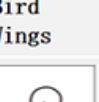












| classification | Ornamental Motifs and Symbolic Semantics | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|
| Natural |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Sunbeams | Sun | Moon | Stars | Mountain Range | Water Ripples | Spring Source |
| Plant |  |  |  |  |  |  | |
| | Sesame Seeds, Rapeseed | Garlic Clove | Eggplant | Pumpkin Seeds | Bud | Flower | |
| |  |  | | | | | |
| | Licorice Fern | Scroll Pattern | | | | | |
| Animal |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Insect | Snake | Chicken Eyes | Fish Eye | Bull's Eye | Comb (of a rooster) | Ram Horns |
| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Buffalo Horns | Fish Spine, Bird Wings | Chicken Beak | Horse Teeth | Chicken Intestine | Dragon Python | Yin Yang Fish |
| Things Releated to Life |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Fire Striker1 | Fire Striker2 | Fire Striker3 | Gold Chain | Fishing Net | Warp and Weft Threads (used in weaving) 线 | Fence |
| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Winding Frame | Spearhead 1 | Spearhead 2 | Window Grille | Embroidery Ball | Copper Coins | Fingernai 1 |

Figure 3. Liangshan Yi Traditional Lacquerware Ornamentation — Motifs and Symbolic Semantics Diagram
Source: Researcher's Illustration.

The organisational scheme of traditional Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation is characterised by orderly

arrangements, including symmetry, repetition, layering and grouping, creating a visual effect similar to that of a full painting. Various forms of symmetry, repetition techniques, and layering methods together contribute to the complexity of ornamentation forms, demonstrating diverse visual expressions deeply rooted in the cultural history of the Liangshan region. Figure 4 below illustrates the structural characteristics of common ornamentation organisation schemes in the Liangshan region.

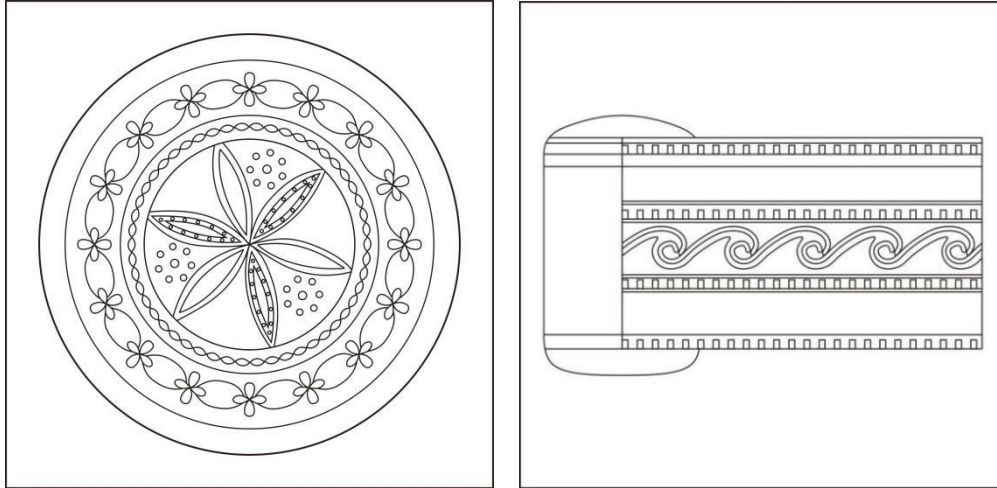


Figure 4. Liangshan Yi Traditional Lacquerware Ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

In Dafang, traditional lacquerware ornamentation also draws inspiration from natural ecology and living customs, albeit in more complex forms of expression. Figurative motifs based on landscape imagery, ornamental linear floral and tree elements, and symbolic representations of animals predominate (Lan, 1992). Figure 5 below concentrates on analysing the content of the ornamentation motifs and their symbolic semantic expressions in the Dafang region.































| classification | Ornamental Motifs and Symbolic Semantics | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|--|---|--|--|
| Natural |  |  |  |  |  |  | |
| | Cloud1 | Cloud2 | Water Ripples1 | Water Ripples2 | Mountain Range | Fire | |
| Plant |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Orchid | Peony | Plum Blossom | Chrysanthemum1 | Chrysanthemum2 | Chrysanthemum3 | Lotus |
| |  |  |  |  | | | |
| | Algae Pattern | Scroll Pattern1 | Scroll Pattern2 | Pine Needles | | | |
| Animal |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Bird Pattern | Rooster | Pheasant | Magpie | Crane | Dragon | Phoenix |
| |  |  |  | | | | |
| | Butterfly | Bat | Carp | | | | |
| Things Releated to Life |  |  |  | | | | |
| | Blessing Character | Longevity Character 1 | Longevity Character 2 | | | | |

Figure 5. Dafang Yi Traditional Lacquerware Ornamentation — Motifs and Symbolic Semantics Diagram
Source: Researcher's Illustration.

These motifs are often combined to convey layered symbolism, reflecting the multicultural context of the Dafang area and demonstrating the integration of various ethnic groups (Zhang, 2003). The organisational scheme of Dafang is varied and includes methods of symmetry, repetition and combination, demonstrating a marked difference from the ordered pattern organisational scheme found in Liangshan lacquerware. Figure 6 below illustrates the structural characteristics of common ornamentation organisation schemes in the Dafang region.

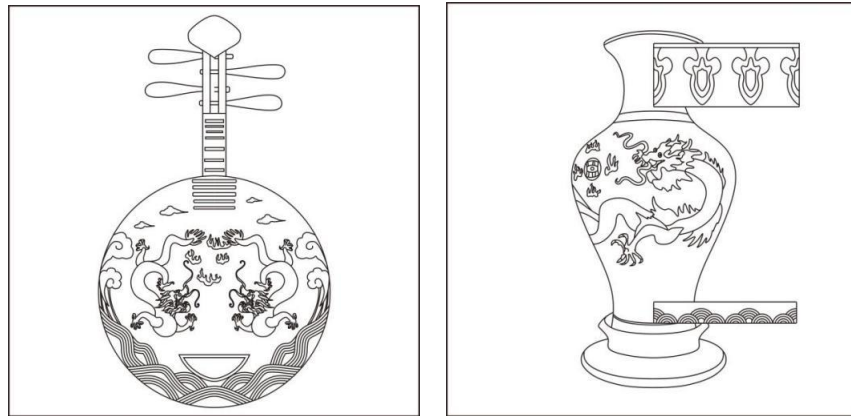


Figure 6. Dafang Yi Traditional Lacquerware Ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

In the Liangshan region, the abstract geometric forms of Yi lacquerware are often derived from elements of nature, such as mountains, rivers and plants, and express the Yi people's perception of their surroundings through simplification and abstraction. This abstract style emphasizes the aesthetic pursuit of form and structure while demonstrating the Yi people's reverence for nature.

In contrast, in the Dafang area, the figurative-realistic style of lacquerware is more pronounced, influenced by traditional Han lacquerware. This style focuses on detailed depictions, often expressing daily life, myths and legends, or folk tales through vivid images. The figurative and realistic features make Dafang lacquerware more storytelling, and the viewer can intuitively feel the cultural connotations contained therein.

3.2 Modern Ornamentation

As Yi lacquerware enters the modern era, its ornamentation motifs undergo some rather obvious transformations. Although still rooted in traditional motifs, modern Liangshan lacquerware introduces creative and borrowed motifs, signalling a shift from purely ornamentation-based elements. Firstly, the reproduction and redesign of traditional ornamentation has brought about innovative motifs, such as in Figure 7 below, the Mulong motifs (a sacred eagle in Yi legend) designed and produced by Jiwu Wuqie, which intermingle the theme of brand-new animal imagery with the rich storytelling of Yi legends (Jiwu, interview). In addition, the redesign of ornamentation shapes and organisational schemes introduced novel motifs, demonstrating a balance between tradition and modernity.



Figure 7. Liangshan Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Innovative Ornamentation with Eagle as the Motif

Source: Photographed by the Researcher.

Secondly, modern Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation also transformed through the introduction of figure motifs, moving away from purely decorative elements that are subjective. As Riegl (2016) points out, figure motif images in artworks often have an important expression of objectivity. For example, in Figure 7 below, the figure motifs of the decorative platters designed and produced by Jiwu Wuqie richly intertwine figurative themes with the folk culture of the Yi people (Jiwu, interview).



Figure 8: Liangshan Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Hand-painted Figure Lacquer Display Plate
Source: Photographed by the Researcher.

Finally, the purpose of the redesign is achieved through the creation of changes in the unit shape of traditional ornamentation, such as in Figure 9 below, Jiwu Wuga's way of dealing with the proportions of the ornamentation.



Figure 9. Liangshan Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Pattern Scale Change Design
Source: Photographed by the Researcher.

In Dafang, the modern evolution of lacquer ornamentation also encompasses creative and borrowed motifs that run parallel to traditional ornamentation motifs. Representative artists, including Xia Dexin, Wu Shizhong, Liu Keli and Yang Chenglong, specialise in the reproduction of traditional ornamentation using figurative painting motifs. Figure 10 below is a typical figurative painting of birds and flowers with auspicious and beautiful

symbolism.



Figure 10. Dafang Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Floral and Bird Painting Patterns

Source: Photographed by the Researcher.

The redesign of generous traditional ornamentation has taken a unique path that is highly creative in its innovative evolution. Firstly, the traditional ornamentation of Yi lacquerware is combined with innovative vessel types, such as in Figure 11 below, the introduction of unit motifs resembling bull's eyes and yin and yang fish into the symmetrical organisation scheme on the tasting wine pot, which is not common in Liangshan lacquerware (Chen, interview).



Figure 11. Dafang Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Innovative Ornamentation on the Tasting Wine Pot

Source: Photographed by the Researcher.

Secondly, there is also the modern generous lacquerware ornamentation recombined by combining Yi lacquerware and Han lacquerware traditional ornamentation for use in the decoration of cultural and creative

products' utensils, see Figure 12 below. As well as the use of patterns borrowed from flat decorative painting styles, see Figure 13 below (Gao, interview).



Figure 12. Dafang Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Combination with Han Lacquer Ornamentation
Source: Photographed by the Researcher.



Figure 13. Dafang Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Flat Decorative Painting style
Source: Photographed by the Researcher.

Finally, there is the development of new ornamentation, such as the direct use of Yi scripts as decorative ornamentation, see Figure 14 below. There is also the introduction of other decorative techniques to form texture ornamentation, see Figure 14 below.



Figure 14. Dafang Modern Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation — Lacquer Vase with Yi Scripts

Source: Photo Provided by Gao.



Figure 15. Hidden Pattern Craft of Dafang Yi Lacquerware — Texture Ornamentation

Source: https://www.163.com/dy/article/DSU5MFH305370WBN_pdya11y.html.

4. Comparative Analysis of Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation

4.1 Comparative Analysis of Formal Characteristics

The formal characteristics of Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation are deeply rooted in the natural ecology and life of the region. The unitary shapes of the motifs, imitating natural objects with stable symbolic meanings or production and living utensils, dominate the flat formal elements. These motifs are derived from mountains, rivers, herbs, plants, and household utensils, and are presented in the form of dots, lines, and surfaces in the form of unitary, independent, and continuous Patterns (Museum of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, 1982; Xing, 2015). Symmetry, repetition, hierarchy and grouping prompt formal features that present a visually engaging and orderly organisation. Figure 16 below shows a mountain and river pattern made up of a combination of individual ornamentation motifs with different semantic meanings, reflecting the formal characteristics of the ornamentation described above.

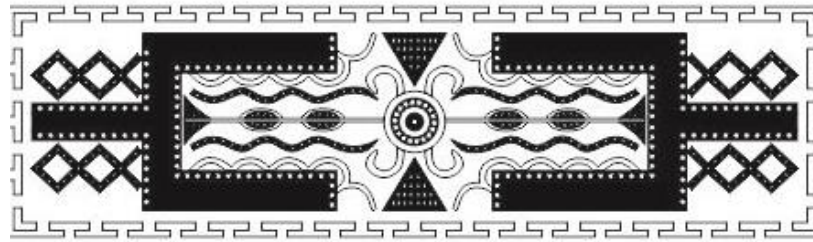


Figure 16. Formal Characteristics of Liangshan Lacquerware Ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

The formal features of Dafang lacquerware ornamentation have parts that overlap with those of Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation but have a unique complexity. Most of the ornamentations are figurative motifs dominated by landscape images, decorative linear flowers and birds, and realistic flower and bird motifs (Lan, 1992). The diverse organisational schemes of these motifs, including symmetry, repetition and combinatorial methods, create layered symbolism and demonstrate a generous multicultural background. The bird and flower pattern in Figure 17, below, demonstrates the formal characteristics of the ornamentation described above.

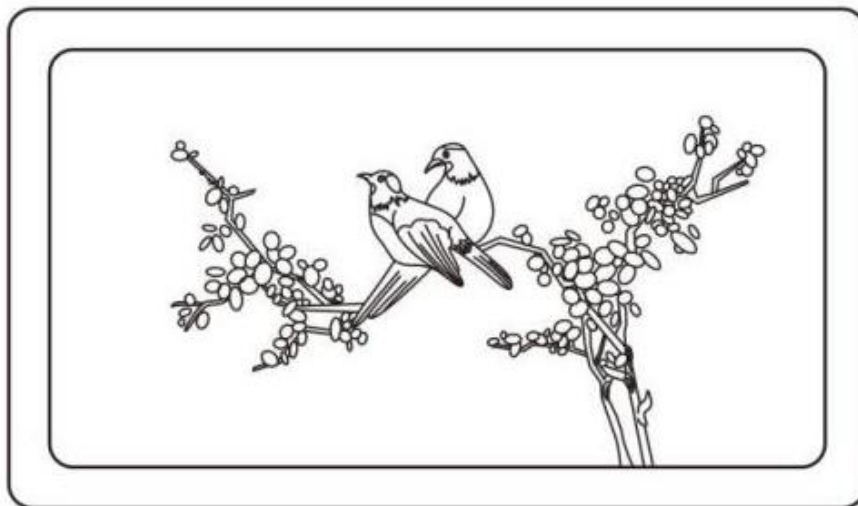


Figure 17. Formal Characteristics of Dafang Lacquerware Ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

4.2 Comparative Analysis of Organisational Structures

Wolfring (2012) emphasises that the most basic forms and compositions in works of art often reflect the spiritual characteristics of different eras.

The organisational structure of Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation is presented in an orderly manner, including symmetry, repetition, layering and grouping. Central symmetry and mid-axis symmetry are commonly employed, the former for flat object types and the latter for the outer surfaces of armour and cutlery. Repetition is prevalent, forming dichotomous and quadratic continuous patterns, and contributes to the hierarchical approach, arranging multiple patterns on profiles.

The organisational structure of Liangshan lacquerware emphasises orderly arrangement, using symmetry, repetition, hierarchy and grouping. Central symmetry and mid-axis symmetry are prevalent, contributing to a hierarchical approach and the formation of continuous motifs (Jiwu, interview). Figure 18 below shows the common organisational structure of Yi lacquerware ornamentation in the Liangshan region.

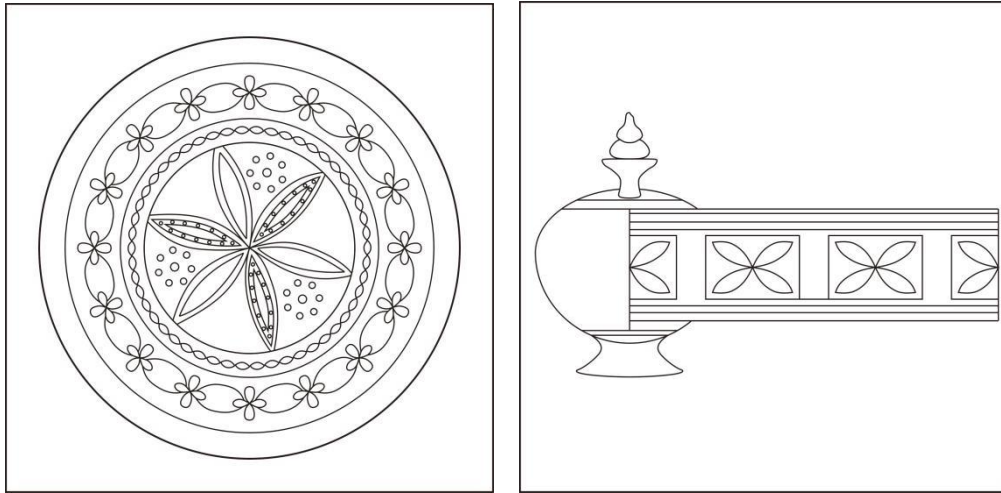


Figure 18. Organisational structure of Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

The Dafang lacquerware ornamentation exhibits diverse organisational structures that deviate from the orderly pattern organisation scheme that characterises the Liangshan region. However, symmetry, repetition and combination methods are also common, so forming the expression of a variety of pattern organisation. The repetition method involves unit-shaped patterns that form figurative images, while the combination method combines separate patterns to convey new semantic meanings. This diversity reflects the multicultural background and integration of ethnic groups in the Dafang area (Zhang, 2003). Figure 19 below illustrates the common organisational structures of Yi lacquerware ornamentation in the Dafang region.

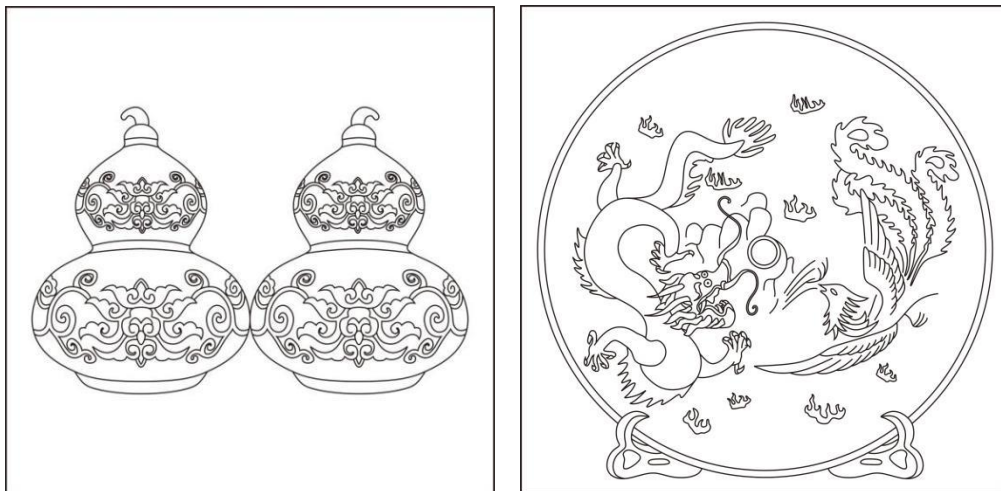


Figure 19. Organisational structure of Dafang lacquerware ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

4.3 Comparative Analysis of Stylistic Expressions

Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation presents a two-dimensional planar geometric style. Rooted in the unique natural and humanistic background of the region, these geometric patterns derive from basic formal laws such as symmetry and rhythm, reflecting an abstract aesthetic style. The evolution from natural forms to symbolic expressions highlights the cultural significance of these motifs (Riegl, 2016). Figure 20 below illustrates the abstract stylistic features of Yi lacquerware ornamentation in the Liangshan region.

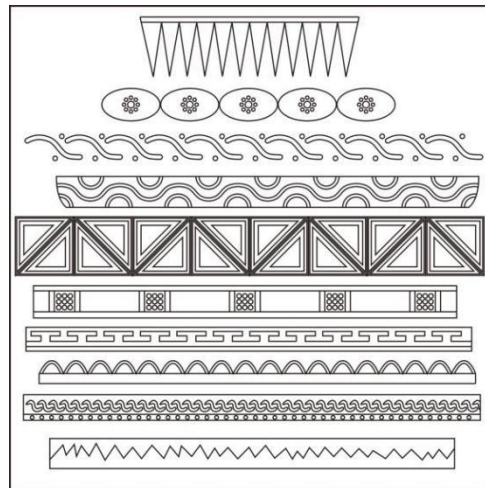


Figure 20. Planar Geometric Style of Liangshan lacquerware ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

The formal expression of Dafang Lacquerware is distinctly different from Liangshan, adopting a figurative and realistic style. The ornamentation is a compound species that combines traditional Yi ornamentation with other artistic elements. These figurative visual images, often borrowed from Chinese paintings, demonstrate an open and diverse artistic style that reflects the multicultural background and integration of ethnic groups in the Dafang region. (Xia, interview). Figure 21 below illustrates the figurative stylistic features of Yi lacquerware ornamentation in the Dafang region.

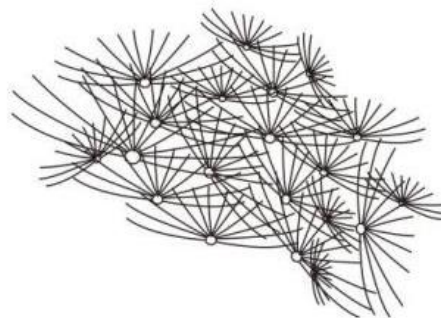


Figure 21. Figurative and Realistic Style of Dafang lacquerware ornamentation

Source: Researcher's Illustration.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this study delved into the artistic characteristics of Yi lacquerware ornamentation and explored its evolution from traditional to modern expression in the Liangshan and Dafang regions. Comparative analysis highlights the unique characteristics of Yi lacquerware ornamentation from these two regions in terms of formal features, organisational structure and stylistic expression. Deeply rooted in Yi lacquerware cultural traditions, Liangshan ornamentation exhibits a division between image and non-image, emphasising clear symbolism in its geometric style. On the contrary, because of the influence of multicultural elements, Dafang lacquerware ornamentation reflects a more diverse and figurative realistic style.

Although this study has elucidated the differences in Yi lacquerware ornamentation in different regions, there is still room for further exploration. Future research should explore in greater depth the influence of modern design on traditional artistic expression, especially the influence of cultural integration on Dafang lacquerware. In addition, studying the evolution of symbolism in contemporary lacquerware design could provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of this art form.

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