

# Comparative Analysis of Yi Lacquerware Ornamentation in Liangshan and Dafang

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doi:10.56397/SSSH.2024.02.05

## 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/>

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.