Study on the Variant Pictograph of Dongba Script in Lijiang Area

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Abstract

Dongba script is an important pictograph, and the study of dongba script helps to study the origin and development of writing. Through Lijiang dongba script, we find there is a special way to create new script by the change of the script’s shape, called variant pictographs. This article researches on the variant pictograph.

Keywords

Dongba Script, Variant Pictograph, Lijiang Area

1. Introduction

The Dongba script is the script used in religious activities by naxi’s priest—dongba. Because dongba script is pictograph and is still in use, it is called the living fossil of human script. Lijiang is the main settlement of Naxi, located in northwest of Yunnan province. Lijiang dongba culture is prosperous on the history, and there have been many famous dongba, leaving a lot of beautifully decorated, elegant dongba manuscript [1]. See Figure 1. The American scholar Joseph Charles Francis Rock has been collecting Dongba manuscript in Lijiang region and is mainly kept in the Harvard-Yenching Institute [2].

Figure 1. Dongba manuscript.
Pictograph is the most important feature of Dongba script and the most important script-making method. We find there is a special way to create new script by the change of the script’s shape, and we call it the variant pictogram [3]. This thesis will study on the variant pictogram.

The materials we use are from “An Annotated Collection of Naxi Dongba Manuscripts” [4] and “An Annotated Collection of Naxi Dongba Manuscripts” [5]. “An Annotated Collection of Naxi Dongba Manuscripts” is the biggest collection of Dongba manuscripts until now, covering almost all areas of Lijiang Dongba manuscripts. And the materials quoted from the “An Annotated Collection of Naxi Dongba Manuscripts” will be marked the volume and the page, and “26.131” means the material comes from volume 26, page 131. The materials quoted from the “Naxi Dongba manuscripts collected by Harvard-Yenching Institute” will be marked the volume and the page, and “H4.476” means the material comes from volume 4, p. 476.

2. Pictograph and Variant Pictograph

2.1. Pictograph

Pictograph is the most important method of creating font in Dongba script. Dongba script records the language of Naxi, and in Naxi, Dongba script is known as \[\text{sə} \text{ʨə} \text{lv} \text{ʨə}\]. \[\text{sə}\] is “wood” in Naxi language, \[\text{ʨə}\] is “mark”, and \[\text{lv}\] is “stone”. It means dongba script is the mark of the wood and the stone. They consider that the user of dongba script writes wood when he sees the wood, and writes stone when he sees the stone. Dongba script mainly created the script through writing the shape of the object.

2.2. Variant Pictograph

Variant pictograph is named according to the regular pictograph. There are many pictographs in dongba scripts, which can change into another scripts by change the shape of the scripts, and the meaning it representing has the connection with the original ones. Variant pictograph is an important kind of script in dongba script.

3. Lijiang Region Region Variant Pictograph Examples

We investigate the Dongba manuscripts in the Lijiang area. Find that the dongba pictograph in Lijiang can express the meaning though the change of the shape of donga script. For example, the change of fonts’ direction, the break of the fonts, black color, and the variety of the movement.

3.1. The Change of Fonts’ Direction

3.1.1. Village \[\text{M} \text{K} \cdot \text{K}\] 26.113

Figure 2. 26.113.
The meaning of the scripture in Figure 2 is “Village god’s mark on the slope of the enemy’s residence is broken, and red barn at the end of the slope is collapsed. The big backing tree is broken, and the big backing stone cracks.”

Font \( \text{ Vill } \) means “village”, and can be used to express the meaning of the “village god”, or “the mark of the village”. And we can see in Figure 2, \( \text{ Vill } \) is used to express the meaning that “village god’s mark is broken”, through changing the direction of \( \text{ Vill } \) and forming a new font “ \( \text{ Vill } \) ”.

3.1.2. Fall Down

1) People fall down

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 3 is “He dreams of falling down from the red hills. Dreaming that hairs scatter on the head, tears fill the eyes, and the white teeth in the mouth come off.”

Font \( \text{ Peo } \) means “people”, and in Figure 3 the direction of font \( \text{ Peo } \) changes. The head of the \( \text{ Peo } \) “people” changing the direction and turning downward, forms a new font \( \text{ Peo } \). The new font \( \text{ Peo } \) is used here to express the meaning that people fall down.

2) Ghost falls down

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 4 is “The deer on the top of the cliff falls to death, becoming the ‘ben’ ghost.”

Font \( \text{ Geo } \) means “ghost”, and in Figure 4, the direction of \( \text{ Geo } \) changes. The head turns downward and forms a new font \( \text{ Geo } \), expressing the meaning of “fall down”.

3.1.3. Torch
The meaning of the scripture in Figure 5 is “Light the torch at night, but the torch quenches.”

Font  means “torch”, but in Figure 5, it changes the direction, forming a new font . Here using  to express the meaning of “the torch quenches”. When the direction of the font  is towards the upside, it means the torch. When the direction is towards the downside, it means the torch quench.

From the examples we analyzed, changing the direction in dongba script sometimes plays an important role in expressing the meaning.

3.2. The Break of the Fonts

3.2.1. Village  26.110

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 6 is “village god’s mark on the slope of the ‘duan’ ghost and ‘xu’ ghost is broken, and red barn at the back of slope is collapsing. There is no sound of the dog around ‘duan’ ghost’s residence, and there is no sound of chicken around ‘xu’ ghost’s residence."

The font  means “village” or “the mark of the village”. The font  twists here, and forms a new font , expressing “the village god’s mark is broken”.

3.2.2. Cypress  85.48— 37.26

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 7 is “The hand touches the boiling oil. Cypress incense breaks. The wind blows the oil lamp.” The font  means “cypress”.

Naxi people will use the cypress to make incense materials, called cypress incense. Here the body of the font  twists, expressing the cypress incense is broken.

3.2.3. Knife  H4.236— 23.14

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 8 is “knife”. The body of the font  twists, expressing the knife is broken.
The meaning of the scripture in Figure 8 is “The man has a nightmare. He dreams that the white iron knife in his hand is broken, Knee is bloody blurred, and the dark hat on his head is blown away by the wind.

The font \(\text{刀} \) means “knife”. In Figure 8, the font \(\text{刀} \) is twisted, and forms a new font \(\text{断刀} \), expressing “the broken knife.”

3.2.4. Bone \(\text{骨} \) 59.68—\(\text{骨} \) H4.476

![Figure 9. H4.476.](image)

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 9 is “The flying ghost interrupted the ghost bone. Praying for such a great power.”

The font \(\text{骨} \) means “bone”. In Figure 9, the font \(\text{骨} \) is twisted, and forms a new font \(\text{断骨} \), expressing “the broken bone.”

3.3. Remove One Part

3.3.1. Pig \(\text{猪} \) — \(\text{猪} \) 37.23

![Figure 10. 37.23.](image)

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 10 is “du-sha-ao-tu” is killing the dog for doing witchcraft, and shu-mei-dong-pan is killing the pig for curse.”

The font \(\text{猪} \) means “pig”, writing exactly the shape of the pig’s head. In Figure 8, the eyeball of the font \(\text{猪} \) is removed, and forms a new font \(\text{断猪} \), expressing the meaning of “dead pig”.

3.3.2. Goat \(\text{羊} \) — \(\text{羊} \) 37.23; Dog \(\text{狗} \) — \(\text{狗} \) 37.23

![Figure 11. 37.6.](image)

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 11 is “Dry goat head, dry yak horn and dry dog head.”

The font \(\text{羊} \) means “goat”, and font \(\text{狗} \) means “dog”, writing the shapes of the goat’s head and dog’s head. In Figure 11, the eyeballs of the font
and font is removed, forming new fonts and expressing “dead goat” and “dead dog” respectively.

In dongba manuscript, in order to express the meaning needed, the priest dongba removes one part of the font of animal, forming a new font. is the pig’s head being removed the eyeball, is the goat’s head being removed the eyeball, and is the dog’s head being removed the eyeball, expressing the meaning that the animal is killed or dead.

3.4 Scribble the Black Color

3.4.1. Hawk

![Figure 12. 88.185.](image)

The meaning of the scripture in Figure is “The bird and black hawk quarrels, fight, and got hatred.”

Hawk usually writes like , give prominence to its beak. In Figure, dongba scribbles the hawk body black, expressing the meaning of “black hawk”.

3.4.2. Bone

![Figure 13. H1.380.](image)

The meaning of the scripture in Figure is “black sound and black air change, turning a black bone ghost. Black bone ghost changes, turning out mi-ma-shen-deng.”

Font means bone. In Figure, dongba scribbles the bone, and forms a new font, expressing the black bone.

3.5. Variety of the Movement

Dongba script is pictograph, and the font of “people” is just created by writing out the shape of people, forming the font . And after that, a series of fonts related to the movement of people created by changing of the shape of the font.

3.5.1. People

![Figure 14. 23.41.](image)
The meaning of the scripture in Figure 14 is “the left side is yellow door, and the right side is green door.”

In order to express the meaning “right” and “left”, dongba creates the fonts  left  “left” and  right  “right”, by change the shape of font  left  express the left, and  right  express the right.

3.5.2. People  Jump  23.39

Figure 15. 23.39.

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 15 is “Water does not flow. It swings, jumps, and backwards.”

The font  jump  forms though the change of the font  .

3.5.3. People  Stand up  37.13

Figure 16. 37.13.

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 16 is “In the east, hatred fire of ge-lo have not burned up, and have already taken the hatred soul.”

The font  stand up  forms though the change of the font  . And it means “light up, burn up”.

3.5.4. People  Shiver  37.27

Figure 17. 37.27.

The meaning of the scripture in Figure 17 is “Don’t let the ‘wa’ ghost touch the face. The eyes don’t look at the ‘wa’ ghost, and the hands don’t touch the ‘wa’ ghost, the legs don’t kick the ‘wa’ ghost.”

The font  shiver  , forms though the change of font  . For the pronunciation of “shiver” is similar with “touch” in Naxi language, it is borrowed to represent the “touch”.

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4. The Significance and Importance of Variant Pictograph

Variant pictograph is a special phenomenon existing in Dongba script. Through the study of the variant pictograph, we can understand the feature of Dongba script more comprehensive, and can help comprehend Dongba scripture deeper.

The study of the variant pictograph can also give a new point to study the creating of script. For example, the same phenomenon of variant pictograph is existing in Chinese ancient character. The font “片” comes from the font “木”. The ancient font of “木” is 具, created according to the shape of the tree. The ancient font of “片” is 之, just like the half part of the font 具, meaning cut the wood into two halves.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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