

Ritual Iconographic Regeneration and Value Reconstruction: A Study on the Artistic Expression of JiaMa Symbols

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Abstract: The research background of this paper originates from personal interest. This study draws upon an extensive collection of Yunnan JiaMa imagery and an analysis of existing cultural and creative products incorporating JiaMa elements. It seeks to explore methods for applying JiaMa in artistic creation that move beyond its conventional use as a straightforward symbolic motif. JiaMa are called JiaMa, rather than woodblock prints, because they are visual expression products embodying culture, beliefs and folk customs. The core research question of this paper is how to interpret JiaMa talismans by applying the Art Semiotics proposed by Susanne Langer, and how to apply this theory to the author's own artistic creation practice. The core viewpoint of this paper is derived from the analysis of Yunnan JiaMa talismans based on the Art Semiotics: the essence of JiaMa talismans is not static images, but the core component of dynamic ritual behaviors. In the ritual process, the form and function of JiaMa talismans achieve absolute unity, forming an inseparable organic whole. Based on this viewpoint, the author attempts to restore the organic integrity of JiaMa talismans in the process of artistic creation and design. This practice promotes the regeneration and value reconstruction of JiaMa talismans, thus completing the relevant artistic creation practice. To address these questions, this study adopts a combined methodological approach centered on Visual Analysis and Research-creation. Visual Analysis is employed to deconstruct the formal composition, symbolic vocabulary, and contextual meanings of JiaMa talismans, providing the critical lens for theoretical interpretation. Complementing this, the Research-creation methodology integrates theoretical inquiry directly into the artistic process itself, positioning creative practice as a primary mode of investigation to explore

and materialize the contemporary regeneration of JiaMa's organic integrity.

Keywords: JiaMa; Art Symbol; Creative Practice; Visual Art

1. Introduction

JiaMa exists in many regions of China. Yet compared with other intangible cultural heritage like New Year paintings and paper cuttings, it remains distinctly niche in physical stock, popularity, public recognition and media coverage. Only a few books focus on JiaMa, with Wang Shucun's monographs being the most authoritative. Existing research falls into five categories: cultural and belief studies, folk custom research, artistic characteristic analysis, art semiotics interpretation, and product or graduation design applications. Scholars have explored JiaMa via diverse art semiotics frameworks. Lin Yi (2025) applied Peirce's Sign Trichotomy to categorize Bai JiaMa patterns into iconic, indexical and symbolic signs.^[1] Wang Xuening (2024) analyzed ethnic, shared Chinese and primitive numerical symbols in western Yunnan's JiaMa images from an ethnic integration perspective.^[2] Yan Lingying (2013) adopted Saussure's and Barthes' theories to examine its dual material and spiritual functions.^[3] These studies have advanced the understanding of JiaMa from the dimensions of semiotic typology, cultural integration theory, and semantics respectively.

This paper adopts Susanne Langer's core concept of Art Semiotics from *Problems of Art*, a novel theoretical framework unused in existing studies. First, it clarifies JiaMa's concept based on Wang Shucun's monographs and relevant literature, and distinguishes Langer's "art symbol" from "symbol in art". Second, it analyzes Yunnan JiaMa symbols as "art symbols", different from Peirce's, Saussure's and Barthes' theories. Third, it presents JiaMa's wholeness in creation to achieve symbol regeneration and value reconstruction.

2. Concept of JiaMa

JiaMa literally means “armored riding messengers”. It derives its name from the fact that in ancient times, a horse pattern was invariably attached as the mount of the worshipped when offering sacrifices to heaven, earth, deities and founding ancestors. Later, people collectively referred to all types of incinerated images of gods and Buddhas after sacrificial rituals as JiaMa. In folk art literature, it is more frequently termed ZhiMa, and its technical designation is woodblock-printed Ritual Iconographics. It constitutes a visual expression of folk beliefs and also ranks as an intangible cultural heritage across various regions of China^[4].

JiaMa are applied in folk sacrificial ceremonies or rituals. They are endowed with the ability to engage in spiritual communication through these rituals. Practices such as ritual burning, purification with water, pasting, hanging, scattering and ingestion are performed to ward off evil spirits, pray for good fortune, dispel pestilence and cure diseases. The content of JiaMa falls into three categories. First, written documents and certificates dominated by text. Second, talismans and incantations centered on graphic symbols. Third, images of gods, spirits and monsters based on visual depictions, which are referred to as Ritual Iconographics. The scope of this paper encompasses the third category, namely Ritual Iconographics^[5]. Most JiaMa were incinerated upon use. Thus, they were not subject to strict requirements for the sophistication of carving or the clarity of printing. Consequently, the JiaMa preserved to this day generally exhibit artistic characteristics such as simplicity, naivety, spontaneity, generalization and abstraction.

3. “Art Symbol” and “Symbol in Art” in Problems of Art by Susanne Langer

3.1 Art Symbol

An art symbol refers to the artwork as a whole in the form of an expressive configuration. It is not a symbolic system in the traditional sense, but an indivisible organic whole. Its core characteristics are as follows: a. Expressive configuration. The artwork directly presents the structure of human emotions and inner life. It constructs a non-real illusion, enabling emotions to acquire an objective form of existence. b. Meaning inheres

in form. The expressive connotation of an artistic symbol does not depend on external interpretation. It is directly embodied in the symbol’s own formal structure. No external approaches such as textual analysis or contextual research are required for perception. c. Organic unity. An artistic symbol is an integrated organic whole. Its internal components cannot carry meaning independently outside the overall framework. The spiritual implication and aesthetic value of the symbol are rooted entirely in the interconnected overall structure of its components. d. Direct effect on perception. An artistic symbol does not transmit conceptual information. It acts on human perceptual experience in an intuitively perceptible form. It aims to present subjective experiences that cannot be accurately described or paraphrased by linguistic symbols. e. Distinction from symbols in art. Symbols such as metaphors and symbols have clear external referents. An artistic symbol itself constitutes the complete presentation of its expressive content. The symbol’s form and its meaning are perfectly unified.

3.2 Symbols in Art

Symbols in art are specific signifying units within works of art. They are ordinary symbols with external referential meanings. These symbols serve as structural elements of artworks. They enhance the richness of the works. Yet they are essentially different from artistic symbols, which are holistic expressive forms. Their specific characteristics are as follows. a. Ordinary symbolic attribute: Symbols in art carry specific conceptual connotations. They have clear external referents and fall into the category of general linguistic symbols. b. Functional tool attribute. Symbols in art are metaphorical carriers or expressive materials employed by artists in creation. They are used to convey explicit or implicit meanings of works. But they are not the core of artistic expression. c. Specific forms of expression. Symbols in art mainly include cultural symbolic signs. They also cover metaphorical images and involve various traditional symbol systems as well. d. Roles and limitations in creation. In the process of artistic creation, these symbols can assist in meaning expression. They can enrich the layers of works. However, over-reliance on the application of such symbols. May lead to the loss of the emotional expressiveness that works

should possess^[6]

4. An Analysis of Yunnan JiaMa Symbols from the Perspective of Art Semiotics

To break through the limitations of static analysis of JiaMa images, Susanne Langer's Art Semiotics offers a more essential research perspective. Langer argues that a genuine artistic symbol is the "expressive form". It is presented by the artwork as an indivisible organic whole. Its inherent significance does not rely on external interpretation. It is directly embedded in its formal structure and serves as the objectified carrier of human emotions. This section draws on this theory. It analyzes two JiaMa works with distinctly different functions. They are *WENCHANGDIJUN* and *KUSHEN*. The analysis will clarify that in ritual contexts, JiaMa do not symbolize or state a certain meaning. Instead, they are a complete and core component of ritual acts themselves. In specific ritual contexts, the external form and internal function of JiaMa achieve a high degree of identity.

4.1 WENCHANGDIJUN: A Sacred Medium for Ritual Communication

The Yunnan JiaMa *WENCHANGDIJUN* is primarily used in folk rituals to pray for success in examinations and academic pursuits. From the perspective of Langer's Art Semiotics, it is not a simple portrait of a deity. Instead, it constitutes a holistic functional art symbol generated in rituals, serving as a medium to achieve communication between humans and gods.



Figure 1. Yunnan JiaMa "Wenchang Dijun", Photographed by the Author, No. 01.

First, its overall form constructs an illusion of "suppliable authority". Langer points out that art semiotics creates non-real illusions to objectify emotions. The centered composition, the towering deity image, the bold and emotionally charged lines, and the striking

black-red contrast of the *WENCHANGDIJUN* JiaMa jointly generate a stable and majestic visual impression. It is not a portrait of a historical figure. Instead, it forges the collective aspiration for exam success and the reverence for deities into an intuitively graspable illusion of the "ruler of academic fortune", which can be directly applied in rituals. This illusion is the perceptual condensation of collective emotions, providing a concrete projection target for abstract appeals.

Second, all meanings carried by this form are fully inherent in its core function as a ritual medium. Its core meaning points to conveying prayers to the deity. Specifically, it expresses the appeal of "passing every exam". The solemn expression, distinct costume form, and clear title "WENCHANGDIJUN" presented on the *WENCHANGDIJUN* JiaMa. Their primary role is to quickly and unambiguously establish the target of prayer communication in ritual scenarios. This ensures the accuracy of appeal transmission. More crucially, the material form of this thin JiaMa inherently presupposes its fate of being burned. The act of burning is the ultimate realization of the "significance" of this art symbol. The process of the JiaMa turning into smoke symbolizes the delivery of prayers in ritual logic. The disappearance of form is exactly the fulfillment of its function. Form and significance thus achieve absolute identity.

Third, this identity is rooted in the "organic unity" of the JiaMa as an art symbol. Isolated analysis of its lines or "halo" patterns cannot capture its complete essence. Its vitality resides in a dynamic chain of prayer rituals: from production, invocation of the deity, believers' gazing and silent prayer, to incineration and anticipation of a response. Images, texts, paper, incineration, actions and intentions together form an indivisible whole, a fully vitalized art symbol.

Finally, the power of this symbol lies in its direct effect on perception. Its highly generalized visual language with striking contrasts, through its raw impact, directly evokes a sense of majesty and sacredness in viewers. In rituals, believers do not need aesthetic analysis; the JiaMa directly serves as the carrier and transmitter of their emotions such as anxiety and longing.

4.2 KUSHEN: A Carrier of Negative Energy for Ritual Purification

Contrary to the communication-establishing

logic of *WENCHANGDIJUN*, the JiaMa *KUSHEN* embodies the ritual logic of expulsion and purification. It is also a complete functional art symbol, whose essence lies in the visually graspable and comprehensible “misfortune”. The overall form of *KUSHEN*, including its paper carrier, woodblock printing technique, female figure, and the combination of images and texts, jointly creates a non-real illusion of “misfortune”. It condenses negative emotions and life predicaments into a concrete visual object applicable to purification rituals. Its form directly corresponds to the folk perceptual structure of “misfortune”. In particular, the exaggerated teardrops are not symbols of sorrow, but represent excessive, abnormal negative energy that needs to be dispelled.



**Figure 2. Yunnan JiaMa "KUSHEN",
Photographed by the Author, No. 02.**

The significance of the *KUSHEN* JiaMa lies in collecting the negative emotions, or “misfortune”, within a household and dispelling them through incineration. With its rough, naive and striking woodblock form, the *KUSHEN* JiaMa carries a primitive, talismanic intuitiveness. Its significance is not derived from decoding, but directly perceived through gazing as something that must be cast away. Furthermore, the act of incineration is an indivisible part of this art symbol. The conclusion of the burning process signifies that “misfortune” has been dispelled, and the symbol’s significance is thus realized on both the visual and behavioral levels.

The JiaMa *The KUSHEN* embodies the organic unity of an art symbol. Tears, image, text, paper and the act of burning together form a complete ritual unit for dispelling misfortune. Any semiotic analysis that attempts to decompose *The KUSHEN* into female form with evil spirit and physical features” is in fact an analysis of “symbols in art”. As an art symbol, however,

The KUSHEN is an indivisible whole. Its vitality lies in its integral function as a ritual medium.

The power of the JiaMa *The KUSHEN* is strongly reflected in its direct effect on perception. *The KUSHEN* is a quite representative JiaMa of the Bai ethnic group in Yunnan. Even people unfamiliar with Bai folk culture have an immediate reaction of “needing to remove it” when seeing *The KUSHEN*. It is different from centrally positioned and front-facing JiaMa symbols such as *WENCHANGDIJUN*. Its main image is concentrated on the left side of the frame. The figure turns left. The composition conveys an implied sense of “about to leave”. The blank space on the figure’s body creates an uncomfortable visual and intuitive feeling. For ritual participants, visual perception, anxiety over domestic unrest and the act of burning are an integrated whole.

In short, it is not a statement about crying. Nor is it a symbolic system requiring interpretation. It is a ritual implement. It transforms negative emotions and life predicaments such as “misfortune” into a perceptible, operable and destructible perceptual form. Its visual, material and behavioral forms are absolutely identical with the “significance” of the purification ritual. The symbol achieves its ultimate realization in the ritual act of burning. This is exactly a “significant form”. Its significance is fully inherent in its entire life course.

4.3 Summary

A parallel analysis of *WENCHANGDIJUN* and *The KUSHEN* clearly reveals the common essence of Yunnan JiaMa as art symbols. They are sensory entities with function priority, embedded in specific ritual behaviors. One serves the purpose of “prayer”. The other serves that of “dispelling misfortune”. Yet both perfectly embody the core of Langer’s theory. As a whole, a work of art is an “expressive form”. Its “significance” does not exist outside the form. Instead, it is inseparable from and generated simultaneously with formal elements including visual images, physical carriers and usage behaviors. The artistic value and symbolic power of JiaMa lie precisely in the high identity of “form as function, medium as ritual”. This provides a perspective beyond traditional semiotic analysis for understanding JiaMa. It also lays a theoretical foundation for their regeneration and value reconstruction in visual

art creation. The key is to capture and transform this holistic “expressive form”. Rather than merely appropriating its isolated image elements as “symbols in art”.

5. Symbol Regeneration and Value Reconstruction: Artistic Creation Schemes

The transformation and application of JiaMa in cultural and creative product development and artistic creation can be mainly divided into three categories. The first category is cultural and creative products integrated with JiaMa elements (as shown in Figure 3). These products are designed by extracting JiaMa symbols, patterns and other elements, and have both practicality and cultural recognition. The second category is brand-new JiaMa image works created based on the cultural connotation of JiaMa (as shown in Figure 4). On the basis of inheriting their spiritual connotation, these works reconstruct visual expression from an innovative perspective. The third category is cultural and creative works that present JiaMa images by relying on different materials (as shown in Figure 3). With the help of the characteristics of materials, they expand the communication carriers and presentation forms of JiaMa culture. In contrast, the practice of applying JiaMa symbols to contemporary artistic creation is relatively rare. Meanwhile, there is a lack of cases that take JiaMa symbols as art semiotics for artistic creation.



Figure 3. Yunnan JiaMa Cultural and Creative Product, No. 03, [7]



Figure 4. Yunnan Dali Bai Ethnic JiaMa Creative Innovative Paintings - The 12 Chinese Zodiac Series JiaMa Prints, No.04,[8]



Figure 5. Yunnan JiaMa Cultural and Creative Product, No. 05, [9]

5.1 The Always-Available WENCHANGDIJUN: Regeneration of Art Symbols in the We-Media Context

The *Always-Available WENCHANGDIJUN* is a 6-second we-media video work. It aims to regenerate the traditional JiaMa *WENCHANGDIJUN* in the digital context. The core of this regeneration is to retain its essence as an art symbol. The video presents three core frames in sequence. First, it displays the traditional woodblock-printed JiaMa image of *WENCHANGDIJUN*. Second, the seal-script text “May I Ace Every Exam” overlays the screen. This design borrows the prayer talisman in Taoist blessing rituals. It replaces the shaman’s incantations in the traditional JiaMa ceremony. Finally, the entire frame bursts into a shower of brilliant sparks. Both the JiaMa image and the talisman text burn up and fade away simultaneously. The burning effect is realized through digital simulation.

This form design follows Susanne Langer’s Art Semiotics. First, it constructs a complete and non-realistic expressive form. The video integrates traditional deity symbols, handwritten personal prayers and digital visual effects. It creates an instantaneous illusion of a “prayer ritual”. The illusion is exclusive to today’s digital natives. Second, its core significance is realizing personal wishes for exam success. The significance is conveyed instantly. It is fully inherent in the form. The media attribute of short videos determines their function of instant viewing and sharing. This corresponds precisely to modern people’s desire for efficiency and immediate feedback. The digital reproduction of the key process of “incineration” is not a mere visual effect. It embodies the core logic of traditional JiaMa rituals. The logic is that the disappearance of form signifies the fulfillment of

function. Finally, images, text, dynamic flames and viewing behaviors together form an indivisible organic whole. Its vitality exists only in the 6-second process of playback and perception. The audience's viewing, concentration of prayer intentions and subsequent sharing transform the work. It is no longer a display of static symbols. It becomes a dynamic and personal practice of emotional objectification. It achieves the value reconstruction of JiaMa symbols. The reconstruction is from traditional folk rituals to contemporary personalized artistic expressions.

5.2 The KUSHEN for Daily Closure: Reconstruction of Performance Art in Daily Rituals

The goal of the creation plan of *The KUSHEN for Daily Closure* is to deeply integrate the ritual functions of Yunnan JiaMa *KUSHEN* into daily life. The plan is to realize the transformation of *the KUSHEN* from a one-time burning prop to a continuous sexual medium. The specific presentation form of the plan is to emboss the symbol of *the KUSHEN* on the cotton face towel used in daily use.

The core of this creation is not product design, but a continuous performance art. Each use is the completion of a purification ceremony. The "physical destruction" achieved through burning in the traditional armor and horse ceremony is transformed into functional removal in the behavior of washing the face, and at the same time into purification in the mind. What the washcloth carries is no longer the greasy dust on the face, but the collection of abstract "misfortune" illusions. The moment the face towel is thrown into the trash can, it completes a physical and psychological purification. It accurately corresponds to the core meaning of sending away the bad luck in JiaMa rituals.

The work follows the principle of organic unity and meaning of artistic symbols in form. The image of *The KUSHEN*, the carrier of the washcloth, the daily behavior of washing the face, and the physical and mental experience of the participants together constitute an inseparable ritual whole. The title of "Daily Closure" refers to the habit of washing your face every day. It is also the psychological appeal of modern people to deal with the accumulated negative emotions in time. It transforms the removal of sudden bad luck in the horse into a daily healing procedure for modern people. Thus,

the value reconstruction and functional regeneration of the JiaMa symbol have been completed.

6. Conclusion

This study interprets the artistic essence of Yunnan JiaMa symbols within the theoretical framework of Susanne Langer's Art Semiotics. JiaMa are not static images or isolated symbolic signs, but rather expressive forms where function and form achieve a high degree of unity in ritual behaviors. Through the case analysis of two Yunnan JiaMa, *WENCHANGDIJUN* and *The KUSHEN*, this study reveals the organic wholeness of JiaMa as ritual media. Their visual forms, physical carriers, usage behaviors and ritual significance are inseparable from one another, jointly forming an entity of emotional objectification that directly acts on human perception. On this basis, this paper further proposes creative designs for symbol regeneration and value reconstruction. Through two creative schemes *The Always-Available WENCHANGDIJUN* and *The KUSHEN for Daily Closure*, JiaMa are transformed from the context of traditional rituals into digital media and daily behaviors, thus realizing their functional transformation and meaning extension from folk ritual implements to contemporary artistic expressions. A limitation of this study is that the two works *The Always-Available WENCHANGDIJUN* and *The KUSHEN for Daily Closure* remain unfinished. The future research plan is to complete the creation of the two works. The formal exhibition of the finished works and collection of audience feedback will serve as the basis to refine and expand new creative ideas for the regeneration of Yunnan JiaMa symbols.

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