

The Art of Yangasha in Jianhe County: Symbolic Meaning, Cultural Representation, and Miao Ethnic Minority Developments in the Process of Modernization

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the cultural representation and symbolic significance of yangasha art in Jianhe County, Guizhou Province, China, in the framework of ethnic minority modernization. Researchers utilized Terence Hawkes's symbolic theory and Stuart Hall's notion of cultural representation to examine yangasha art, leveraging data from literature review and field research conducted in Jianhe County. Results indicate that the symbolic significance of Yang'asha art facilitates multifaceted cultural expression across various media. Its symbolic importance illustrates an evolutionary rationale across three dimensions: symbolic construction, narrative reconstruction, and value reconstruction. Yang'asha's cultural representation system went through four stages of change: "explanation of natural phenomena → vehicle of ethical values → marker of ethnic identity → modern cultural capital." This study shows how, in the context of modernization, local traditional culture changes and grows artistically through many different forces, including modern media and mass consumption. This research offers theoretical validation for symbolic studies and cultural representation theory, while also contributing academic significance and inspiration for the transition of national intangible cultural heritage from "preservation and conservation" to "regeneration and development."

Keywords: Miao ethnic group; yangasha; contemporary; modernization; cultural representation; symbolic meaning

INTRODUCTION

Yang'asha was originally a long story that people in Jianhe County, Guizhou Province, China, and the areas around it told out loud. The epic poem has more than 7,000 lines and is about a woman named Yang'asha, who is worshipped by the people of Jianhe County as the goddess of beauty for the Miao ethnic group. The long story "Yang'asha" is about the fight between the Sun and the Moon for Yang'asha's hand. Yang'asha art includes the literary version of the epic story and a whole artistic system that grew out of it. This system includes festivals, fine art, huge sculptures, artifacts, costumes, stage plays, cartoon characters, emojis, and online games.

There are four stages in the growth of Yang'asha art, based on its different styles. According to scholarly research, the first stage of oral art began in the early Miao ethnic society and was established during the Ming Dynasty in China, where it was practiced from 1368 to 1948. The second phase began after the People's Republic of China was founded, and Yang'asha was shown in printed books from 1949 to 1977. After China opened up and reformed, the third phase began as Jianhe County modernized. Yang'asha art took many forms, such as cartoon drawings, huge sculptures, oil paintings, and the Yang'asha Cultural Festival, which ran from 1978 to 2022. The fourth phase, which runs from 2023 to 2024, marks Jianhe County's entry into the internet age. Yang'asha art now works online

through digital games and art forms. It brings together people from different cultures by letting them create and rebuild its value system together.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic Meaning

Symbolism is what gives things meaning. Yang'asha art is made up of many different symbolic forms, starting with oral traditions and moving on to different kinds of visual art, then to festivals and online games. These symbols are all connected in some way, and they all come together to make up the full, rich meaning of Yang'asha. This interconnected symbolic system demonstrates structuralist traits, akin to the structuralist symbolism articulated by British scholar Terence Hawkes. Saussure asserted that language encompasses both “diachrony” and “synchrony,” promoting its examination as a holistic form (Gestalt-Einheit)—a cohesive “domain” and autonomous system. (Piaget, 1987, p. 41) These theories provide the theoretical basis for a systematic comprehension of the composition of Yang'asha art.

Cultural Representation

Yang'asha art has played a role in building Jianhe County's social structures over time, creating a unique cultural landscape and a system of meaning. British anthropologist Stuart Hall's theory of Cultural Representation significantly enhances the comprehension of artistic phenomena. His research clarifies the ways in which art articulates and communicates meaning via language, symbolism, and practice. This shows how Yang'asha art represents and creates meaning in culture, as well as how it affects local society, culture, and economy.

Research Gaps and Innovation

Current scholarly inquiry into Yang'asha art predominantly examines it through the lenses of art studies, literature, linguistics, and mythology. The findings reveal a deficiency of coherence in academic research regarding the evolution of Yang'asha art. Current research primarily examines the artistic attributes of Yang'asha within particular historical contexts (e.g., oral literature, sculpture, or cultural festival performances), yet it does not create a continuous comparative framework from oral myths to printed texts — visual art — and digital media, nor does it elucidate the overarching evolutionary mechanism of its representation logic.

Scholars presently regard Yang A Sha as a static ethnic symbol, neglecting the continual reconfiguration of its symbolic signifier (images, texts, rituals) and signified (values, meanings, ideologies) as power structures, media forms, and social contexts transform.

Scholarly examination has not thoroughly investigated the influence of the IP-driven commodification of Yang'asha art and culture on its fundamental spiritual essence. Investigations into Yang'asha as a cultural intellectual property, local brand, and tourism emblem have predominantly focused on promotion and cultural industries, with insufficient analysis of the fundamental mechanisms and societal ramifications of its cultural essence being "flattened" and "entertained."

A salient characteristic of Yang'asha art during the modernization era is its cross-cultural amalgamation and value reconfiguration. Present academic inquiry is deficient in theoretical synthesis regarding meaning reproduction in cross-cultural communication. As Yang'asha experiences secondary creation and recoding on digital platforms, academia is deficient in comprehensive studies of online derivative narratives employing theoretical frameworks such as Cultural Representation Theory, communication studies, or media archaeology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes qualitative research methodologies, encompassing literature review, fieldwork, in-depth interviews, structured interviews, and data analysis to guarantee thoroughness and reliability. It systematically examines the symbolic evolution and cultural representation of Yang'asha art within the modernization process of Jianhe County

Literature Review

This study follows the growth of Yang'asha art while looking at theories of cultural representation and symbolic studies. It concentrates on the evolution of Yang'asha within the framework of modernization in Jianhe County, analyzing its symbolic transformations, artistic expressions, cultural dissemination techniques, and representations across various media platforms.

Research Scope

The study area is Jianhe County in China, which is the main place where Yang'asha art has grown. The author also looked into Wubao Village in Jianhe County, which is thought to be the birthplace of Yang'asha culture.

This study looks at Yang'asha's oral traditions, physical arts, language, visual artifacts, festivals, paintings, monumental sculptures, cartoon illustrations, and online games.

In-Depth Interviews

This study uses qualitative research methods to find two separate groups that make up the research population. It does this by reviewing literature and doing fieldwork. The first group included people who made Yang'asha art, people who studied it, people who worked for the government, and people who ran Yang'asha art since 1978. This group included project leaders like Mr. Wu Xinfeng, who designed the Yang'asha sculptures, Mr. Li Wenming, who is the Chairman of the Guizhou Qiandongnan Prefecture Literary and Art Association, scholars, and people who work on heritage projects. The second group was made up of people who lived in Jianhe County and tourists who had been there since 1978.

This study utilized interview questionnaires, observation logs, and audiovisual recording devices for fieldwork, in addition to interviewee information forms as the principal data collection instruments during interviews. Research subjects participated in semi-structured, comprehensive interviews.

Interviews included government agencies, departments of intangible cultural heritage, artists' associations, news outlets in Jianhe County, cultural and tourism departments, and rural development and administrative groups in the county. The last group is in charge of keeping and managing Yang'asha art. Researchers also did more research at the Kaili University Library, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the Guizhou Provincial Digital Library, the China Founder Library, and the Mahasarakham University Library in Thailand.

RESULTS OF RESEARCH

The Oral Literature Stage of Yang'asha (1368–1948)

The Yang'asha art form started in the early days of Miao ethnic society as a way to tell stories about gods and goddesses to explain natural events to the people. It shows how the group sees the world and how they think about nature. Yang'asha storytelling helped the tribe stay stable and alive by getting rid of their fears of the natural world. The tribe's ritual priests were in charge of how people understood Yang'asha art during this time.

The oral version of Yang'asha myths, which talked about natural events, also introduced the female character Yang'asha. It tells the story of her love for the sun during the day and the moon at night. The story suggests that human marriage should be monogamous by showing how the sun and moon can only show up in the sky at different times. At the same time, this oral tradition gave a simple answer to the question of what causes solar and lunar eclipses.

Yang'asha subtly told the tribe that they should have orderly marriages throughout this story, stressing that monogamy is in line with moral standards.

As Miao society transitioned into the feudal era, a legal consciousness began to develop. The story of Yang'asha, which is a classic case called "The Sun and Moon's Dispute Over a Wife," was told in the Jiali, which is the Miao legal and educational system's folk legal code. The story outline is similar to the epic poem Yang'asha, which is a big part of the Jiali and has 120 pages and about 3,600 lines. In this situation, Yang'asha makes up with her husband, the Sun, and the Moon, as the third party, faces legal punishment. This story is what the Jia Shi, who is in charge of the Jiali, uses to settle marriage disputes in the Miao ethnic community. It embodies the matrimonial ideals and concepts of the Miao ethnic group. Wu Dahua, in his examination of marital perspectives within the Jiali, contends that bigamy is unethical (Wang Yonglun, 2018, p.6). The epic also promotes, from a standpoint of human emancipation, that women should have the right to marry freely, reflecting the Miao people's beliefs about love and marriage. The Jashi is in charge of the Jiali and has the power to interpret things for the Miao ethnic group, which is why the community accepts it. Everyone in the community follows this authority.

In this context, the Yang'asha art form serves as a societal "rule." If someone breaks these "rules," it means they are breaking the Miao ethnic group's traditional law.

At this point, Yang'asha mostly shares its artistic essence through oral transmission, lyrics, melodies, body language, and symbolic objects.

Yang'asha Art After the People's Republic of China Was Founded (1949–1977)

The People's Republic of China was formed in October 1949. Starting in 1958, the government started a "project to preserve three types of cultural arts" (Selections of Folk Tales, Selections of Folk Epic Narratives, and Selections of Folk Songs) to show the full range of China's folk literature and classic texts. In February 1958, Guizhou scholars Tang Chunfang, Wu Lue, and others built on this by gathering and putting together the Miao ethnic oral version of Yang'asha. This was published in the well-known academic journal Shan Hua (Mountain

Flowers), which was the first time Yang'asha was printed. Since 1958, a number of scholars have gathered and published oral versions of "Yang'asha" from Jianhe County and nearby areas.

The story of Yang'asha was spread through print media, which made it possible to make many copies of it. This broke the limits of traditional oral transmission, expanded its reach, and helped standardize narrative content while also protecting copyright. (Wu Jiani, 2018) Yang'asha in print literature became the privilege of literate intellectuals who understood Chinese characters. People who didn't know how to spell Chinese characters couldn't understand the deeper meanings in printed works.

Yang'asha Art During the Modernization Process (1978–2022)

China started its policy of reform and opening up in 1978. During this social change, Jianhe County's economy grew quickly, speeding up urbanization and slowly moving into the modernization phase. At this time, Yang'asha art mixed with modern art styles and changed from being a way to express oneself in writing to being a way to express oneself in many different ways, such as monumental sculptures, cartoon illustrations, oil paintings, and the start of Yang'asha festivals. People who took part in Yang'asha art and its caretakers became more diverse over time, moving beyond the ethnic group.

The Yang'asha Cultural Festival's Symbolic Meaning and Cultural Representation

The administrative center of Jianhe County moved completely to Gedong Town in 2007. The government officially named the folk song festival that takes place every year on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month the "Yang'asha Cultural Festival" to celebrate the new county seat's completion. The festival was held in the new county seat.

The Yang'asha Cultural Festival has grown into a major platform for Jianhe's ethnic arts. It is the county's most representative cultural festival. The Jianhe County Government and merchants from other regions put on the event. People from different ethnic groups and tourists from other areas come to take part as outsiders.



Figure 1: The Jianhe County Water Drum Dance

Source: <https://image.baidu.com/> [Accessed on August 1, 2025]

There are two types of performances at the Yang'asha Cultural Festival, based on where the art comes from. The first category is based on Jianhe County's traditional arts and combines elements of the Miao ethnic group's culture with modern art forms. For example, the Water Drum Dance, embroidery shows, and folk song contests are all very important to Miao culture and have been around for a long time. Local farmers and people who move from rural areas to cities are the main people who do these arts. They keep the most traditional forms of them. The performances include modern musical rhythms and group choreography, which are both modern elements.

These art forms are the basic building blocks of Miao society. They serve as the "foundational structure" of the cultural system and play important roles in the construction of Miao society by telling stories about different ethnic groups, remembering the past, and reproducing rituals. They are the most important part of the Yang'asha Cultural Festival's cultural representation. The ritualized physical artistry displayed in these performances strengthens the cultural memory and local identity of the Miao ethnic group, establishing the festival as a crucial venue for the internal reproduction of cultural significance within the community.

The second type of program at the Yang'asha Cultural Festival is the introduction of new cultural forms from outside the area. Some of these are the Ice Spring Carnival, the Beer Festival, electronic music shows, and water sports demonstrations. These kinds of programs are a mix of modern ways of having fun, shopping, and relaxing

with traditional festival rituals. They are a part of modern consumer culture that is built into local celebrations, and they are a new addition to the symbolic system of Yang'asha culture. They also show how local festivals are changing on their own in the context of globalization and marketization.

Adding these modern artistic symbols makes the Yang'asha Cultural Festival more interesting, attracts more people, and gets more people involved. This improved festival directly encourages people to buy things in the area and helps the economy grow. So, the festival goes beyond just being a "cultural display" and becomes a "cultural tourism industry event," which is a part of the global consumer culture system. These things represent the cultural ideas of "openness" and "modernity" within the festival's framework.

These artistic expressions can be seen as separate symbolic elements that come together to make a very meaningful structural system at the Yang'asha Cultural Festival. They show a cultural landscape that is shaped by both traditional art and modern consumerism, which makes the festival more important socially, economically, and culturally. The combination of old and new symbolic elements in the display shows a change in value. This shows how the Yang'asha Cultural Festival is actively adapting to globalization and marketization in the context of modernization.

The Yang'asha Sculpture's Symbolic Meaning

In 2016, to enhance Jianhe County's cultural brand, the Jianhe County government listened to advice from Miao ethnic cultural experts and hired someone to make a huge sculpture of Yang'asha. The goal was to make local cultural symbols more visually powerful and influential, which would help the regional cultural brand. The statue is 88 meters tall and was made by Miao artist Wu Xinfeng. It holds the Guinness World Record for being the tallest Yang'asha sculpture in the world.

The sculpture combines three types of symbols: numbers from Miao ethnic festivals, pictures from Miao ethnic costumes, and symbolic representation. These things come together to make a single symbolic thing that is represented by the sculpture's shape.

Eight sets of stainless steel wave patterns surround the base of the giant Yang'asha statue. These patterns are based on the story of Yang'asha's birth in a well, her bathing in hot springs, and her swimming in lakes. The sculpture shows Yang'asha dressed in Miao ethnic ceremonial clothing, with her clothes covered in lucky Miao ethnic patterns (Wu Xinfeng, 2017, pp. 93–96). She is tall in Jianhe County, where she holds a butterfly, which is a symbol of the Miao ethnic ancestors. The pedestal is 2200 cm tall. The number 22 comes from combining the month number 2 (February in the local Miao lunar calendar) and the date number 2 (the 2nd day) of the annual Bridge Worship Festival. The statue is 66 meters tall, which comes from the month (6) and date (6) of Jianhe County's Folk Song Festival, which takes place every year on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month. The height of the Yang'asha sculpture is 88 meters, which is the sum of 22 and 66. This gives it more cultural meaning. This artistic and symbolic arrangement of numbers adds to the sculpture's meaning. The sculpture also uses several classic patterns from Jianhe County's silver ornaments, which gives it more meaning.



Figure 2: The Yang'asha Beer Festival

Source: Given by the author [Accessed on July 31, 2025]

From a symbolic studies standpoint, the sculpture of Yang'asha actualizes and codifies a virtual entity formerly restricted to oral tradition, thereby reinforcing the Miao ethnic group's collective conception of Yang'asha's visage. Miao aesthetic and cultural symbolism can be seen in things like clothing, silver jewelry, and hairstyles. The sculpture changes "image-symbol-meaning" to show the body image of local women, turning it into a cultural

symbol for the whole Miao ethnic group. It is a visual, spatial, and socialized cultural representation of local symbols.

What Yang Asha Cartoon Means Symbolically

In December 2017, the Jianhe County Government released an animated picture of the Miao ethnic goddess of beauty "Yang Asha" in Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou Province. Yang Asha's image changed from a linguistic symbol in writing to a colorful two-dimensional iconographic symbol. It was presented in an artistic style that young people liked, and it appealed to people of all ethnicities.



Figure 3: Source of the Yang Asha cartoon image
https://www.sohu.com/a/208981300_99981682 [Date: June 2, 2025]

In the digital age, the "Yang Asha cartoon" is a very important way to show culture. It represents the re-recording of traditional symbolic figures for the modern digital age and comes up with new ways to spread information. From a semiotic point of view, it makes new signifiers and signifieds. The Yang Asha cartoon is the signifier (the visual image), and the signified is the modern way that Miao ethnic culture is represented and shared, which has become an art form that young people from different ethnic groups love. From a cultural representation standpoint, Yang'asha cartoon art elevates Yang'asha from a local mythological symbol to a contemporary mode of communication.

But this change in meaning also comes with two risks: losing meaning and making cultural depth easier to understand. This very modern artistic presentation has made the original deep meaning less clear. People now see her as just a cute girl, not as someone who embodies the true meanings of the Miao ethnicity or Yang'asha herself.

During this time, the book Yang'asha was turned into modern songs, musicals, fashion designs, and other types of art. Yang'asha used these modern media channels to show herself in different art forms, which helped her reach more people and made Yang'asha art more well-known.

Yang'asha Art in the Age of the Internet (2023–2024)

Jianhe County is in a remote area where internet and digital art didn't show up until later. In 2023, China's NetEase made the online game *Moonfall over Miao Land*, which is based on its *Egg Party* series. The game takes ideas from the Miao epic story Yangsha and combines them with parts of Miao traditional literature and the symbolic geography of Jianhe County. It includes experiences of making bean-dyeing, wax printing, and silver crafts from the intangible cultural heritage of Southeast Guizhou. This design gives the game both educational and cultural experiences. The story is about the mythical love story of Yepo and Chili, who look at each other across four lifetimes of reincarnation before getting back together. They go through a lot of hard times, but their love for each other and faith in each other never wavers. In the end, they get back together and are seen by the Miao ethnic homeland.

The game mixes Miao ethnic culture with modern aesthetics to create a unique cultural landscape. It does this by carefully planning the characters' looks, the scenes, and the plot. The story's mix of old and new ideas not only makes it more artistic, but it also helps people learn more about Miao ethnic culture while they enjoy the story.

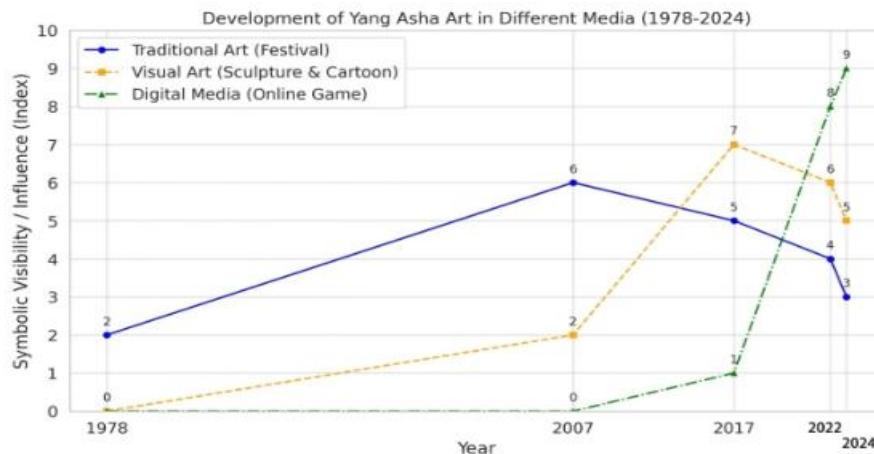


Figure 4: Yang Asha's look in online games

Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/724814801_804985[August 12, 2024]

The growth of Yang Asha art on the internet has changed how traditional Yang Asha art is shown and shared. In the digital world, Yang Asha-related art, information, rituals, structures, spaces, orders, and bodily expressions all exist. Even though they don't have physical features, they have the same relational and symbolic meaning as real objects. This change has made Yang Asha's symbolism more abstract.

At the same time, gamers from different cultures edit, add to, and share this online game all over the internet. The game's message boards, forums, ongoing media coverage, and players' online derivative works all add to the artistic scope of Yang'asha. On one hand, it keeps ethnic stories alive and changes their symbolic meaning through a wide range of practices in literature, visual arts, and digital media. Conversely, amid the interplay of modernization discourse, digital technology, and consumer culture, it represents the revitalization and enhanced social roles of traditional culture's symbolism in a globalized framework.



Note: *Development of Yang Asha Art in Different Media (1978-2024)*

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, SUGGESTIONS

Summary of Research Results

Yang'asha art has been influenced by different groups throughout history, shaping its meaning and defining the cultural landscape of the Miao ethnic society in Jianhe County. Its evolutionary path shows how Miao society changed from an agricultural civilization to a modern one. It went through four stages of evolution in its representational system: "explanation of natural phenomena—vehicle of ethical values—ethnic identity marker—modern cultural capital." Cultural representation changed from being useful to being artistic and reconstructing values.

As Jianhe County transitioned into the modernist era, the evolution of Yang'asha art progressively transcended its ethnic limitations, transforming into an art form available to individuals from various cultural backgrounds. At first, only the upper class knew how to do it, but it soon became an art form that people from different cultures

worked on and shared. Yang'asha's symbolic expressions showed a tendency to re-symbolize, with its cultural representations creating bigger meanings.

Yang'asha's growth in modern society combines cutting-edge scientific technology with modern artistic expression to make new art forms that a wider audience loves, values, and shares. This process has an indirect effect on the culture of Jianhe County.

Discussion of the Results

Prior investigations into Yang'asha art, limited by the researchers' academic disciplines, have predominantly emerged through folklore studies, linguistics, and textual analysis. Although these studies possess academic significance, they are constrained in their ability to convey the intricacies of Yang'asha as an evolving, generative, and dynamically developing artistic-cultural system. Consequently, this study utilizes symbolic theory and cultural representation as cognitive instruments, employing both diachronic and synchronic frameworks to offer a more thorough interpretation of Yang'asha. This comprehensive methodology facilitates a more profound analysis of how Yang'asha's significations arise, shift, and develop across various historical contexts.

Scholarly discourse regarding the evolution of traditional art in small locales frequently emphasizes preservation strategies through the lens of intangible cultural heritage. The evolution and regeneration of Yang'asha art exemplify a process wherein symbolic meanings are perpetually assigned, recoded, and newly generated—serving as a mechanism of development and renewal, as well as a form of creative expression. This study illustrates Yang'asha's adaptation to modernization, digital media, and cross-cultural exchange, showcasing the potential for traditional ethnic art to transform into novel cultural forms with renewed social significance and practical utility.

Research Recommendations

This study investigates the evolution of Yang'asha art in Jianhe County within the context of modernization, emphasizing narrative reconstruction, symbolic regeneration, and cultural integration. The research is important, but it also has some flaws. First, during fieldwork, some interviewees provided subjective or selective interpretations of Yang'asha, which may have impacted the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the collected data. Moreover, the development of modern Yang'asha cultural festivals encompasses intricate dynamics, including cross-media narratives, intertextuality, and cultural ripple effects—elements that extend beyond the purview of this study and necessitate further systematic examination.

Second, the recent rise in Yang A Sha-inspired works of art poses new problems. Some modern reinterpretations put too much focus on visual fragments like images, patterns, or aesthetic motifs and not enough on the deeper symbolic meanings and spiritual aspects that were part of the original cultural system. This inclination towards superficial recoding engenders apprehensions regarding cultural fragmentation, misinterpretation, and the possible erosion of cultural essence. Due to the methodological and structural constraints of this study, these emerging issues cannot be comprehensively addressed and require further investigation in subsequent research. Future research could gain from interdisciplinary methodologies, integrating multi-sited ethnographic studies, and investigating the preservation of symbolic integrity in the context of cultural commodification, digital dissemination, and global reinterpretation.

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