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The Road to Divine Land: Iconography, Deity, and Aesthetic Style

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Abstract: Dongba painting is an ancient art form created by the ancestors of the Naxi people. As a masterpiece of Dongba scroll painting, *The Road to Heaven*, exemplifies the simplicity and beauty of the primitive Dongba religion and stands as a unique treasure within Naxi painting, possessing significant value for both art and religious research. *The Road to Heaven* serves as an essential religious ritual artifact in the Dongba religion of the Naxi people. Utilizing the format of a long scroll painting, it depicts the Naxi people's reflections on the origins of life; the relationships between humans, nature, and society; and the exploration of life's ultimate destiny, thereby presenting a distinctive worldview. This article constructs a theoretical analysis framework based on an iconographic study of *The Road to Heaven*, exploring the unique artistic representation, aesthetic spirit, worldview, and religious origins of the Naxi people to gain a deeper understanding of the construction of their spiritual homeland. At the level of pre-iconographic description, this article primarily analyzes the subject matter and contents of *The Road to Heaven*, the materials employed in the painting, and its artistic features. The iconographic analysis examines the thematic elements of *The Road to Heaven*; the virtual world structure of the Dongba religion's imagined realms of gods, humans, and spirits; and its simple, natural, vivid, and imaginative aesthetic style. At the level of iconological interpretation, in this article, the characteristics of the religious beliefs shown in *The Road to Heaven* and the main factors influencing its aesthetic spirit are analyzed. We reveal that although the Dongba religion intersects and integrates with Tibetan Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism, and other ideologies and cultures, ancestor worship remains a dominant force guiding Naxi behavior. The unique natural environment, historical migrations, and multicultural exchanges of the Naxi people are the primary factors shaping their aesthetic spirit. By systematically analyzing *The Road to Heaven* from the perspective of iconology, this study provides evidence of its profound connections with Naxi social history, offering a more comprehensive view of the Naxi people's aesthetic spirit and cultural connotations while presenting new approaches for researching *The Road to Heaven*.

Keywords: Naxi ethnic; Dongba painting; *The Road to Heaven*; heterotopia; religious origins

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1. Introduction

The origins of life and its ultimate destination, namely, the question of human existence and mortality, represent an enduring theme explored by all of humanity. Different nations and ethnicities interpret this theme differently due to various factors such as geographical environments and historical customs. Throughout history, the answers to the mysteries of life and death have mainly been provided by religions, which have been

widely accepted by the majority of society and serve as the basis for the establishment of worldviews, ethics, and values. *The Road to Heaven* (Figure 1) is hailed as China's longest religious scroll painting. This painting is vast and rich in content—a crystallization of the wisdom and culture of the Naxi people. *The Road to Heaven* integrates native Naxi beliefs, traditional ethics, foreign religions, and other elements, conveying the Naxi people's understanding and contemplation of nature, the universe, life, and human destiny during their integration and communication with different ethnic groups. *The Road to Heaven* follows a sequential narrative format, beginning from the lower end and progressing step by step through the storyline, from hell and the underworld to the blissful realms of heaven. Similar divisions of heterogeneous spaces exist in ancient Chinese paintings. For example, *The Ritual Banner from Mawangdui* (馬王堆 T 形非衣帛畫)[1] and *The (silk) Banner Excavated in Jinqueshan* (金雀山西漢帛畫)[2], *Linyi* (臨沂), *Shandong Province* are both funerary items. They are rare cultural relics and treasures in Chinese history and have significant aesthetic value. Although the concepts of the "soul" and "afterlife world" and the spatial arrangement in *The Road to Heaven*, *The Mawangdui T-shaped Silk Painting*, and *The Jinque Mountain Silk Painting of the Xihan Dynasty* are similar, there are notable differences in their specific shapes, and each work expresses distinct regional characteristics. Some exquisite examples of *The Road to Heaven* have been showcased in top-tier museums and art galleries both domestically and abroad. However, it can only be displayed in segmented sections.

The Naxi people are primarily located in the northwestern part of Yunnan 雲南 province in China, bordering Sichuan (四川) and Xizang (西藏). They are concentrated in the ancient city area of Lijiang (麗江) and the Yulong (玉龍) Naxi Autonomous County in Yunnan. Despite having a population of only approximately 323,000 (NBS 2023, p. 866), they have a rich and distinctive culture. Historically, the Naxi people were referred to as Mosha Yi (麼沙夷) during the Han (漢) and Jin (晉) dynasties; and Moxie (麼些) during the Tang (唐), Song (宋), Yuan (元), Ming (明), and Qing (清) dynasties. Some Naxi people also identify themselves as Naxi (納西), Nari (納日), Nahan (納罕), and Nahuan (納桓), among others. The term Na (納) conveys meanings of greatness, magnificence, vastness, and darkness[3], while the terms xi (西), ri (日), han (罕), etc., all denote people. In 1954, the Chinese Central Ethnic Committee officially designated the name Naxi (G. Yang 2011, p. 147).

At the heart of Naxi culture lies Dongba (東巴) culture, a religious culture known as Dongbaism. It encompasses Dongba pictographic scriptures, Dongba paintings, Dongba dances, Dongba music, Dongba rituals, Dongba folklore, and ideology influenced by it. Dongbaism primarily venerates nature, ancestors, and spirits, with its activities centered around rituals and divination. Dongba priests, known as Dongba, translated as wise ones 智者, hold high status in traditional Naxi society. They possess extensive knowledge in various fields, including astronomy, geography, agriculture, animal husbandry, medicine, and ritual (J. Yang 2017, pp. 92–98). As the primary inheritors and propagators of Dongba culture, they play a crucial role in its preservation. Notably, Dongba pictographic scriptures are currently the only surviving pictographic scripts in the world.

During local Naxi rituals, Dongbas not only conduct customary religious rites such as divination and scripture recitation but also utilize painting to depict deities, spirits, worldly entities, landscapes, and rivers. As Naxi scholar Bai Gengsheng (白庚勝) points out, Dongba painting is an art form used by Dongbas for religious belief expression and achieving religious purposes. Its nature is shamanistic, and its function is belief-oriented. It is depicted on cloth, paper, and wooden boards, including hanging paintings, posted paintings, standing wooden panel paintings, and scroll paintings, portraying symbols of gods, spirits, animals, plants, figures, and treasures, and it is used for dispelling doubts, solving mysteries, worship, and averting disasters. It has strong symbolism, mysticism, and abstraction, serving reverence, consolation, and healing functions; and it has educa-

tional, and aesthetic functions. It has a system for color application, composition layout, modeling techniques, line handling, decoration, and mounting (Bai 2014, p. 2). Dongba painting thus refers to artworks used during Naxi Dongba religious rituals and other ceremonies (Huang 2018, pp. 103–5).



Figure 1. Panorama of *The Road to Heaven* (the work's production age is not quite clear; it is a long-volume painting collected in the Museum of Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, China (1133.5 cm × 26.5 cm)), beginning from the bottom left of the image. The scroll depicts over 360 different figures, including demons, humans, deities, and more than 70 species of rare birds and mythical creatures. The main content is divided into four parts: eighteen Hell Realms, the Mortal Realm, the Natural Realm, and thirty-three Divine Realms. At the top of the right section of the scroll, we find the highest divine realm of the Dongba religion (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

Dongba painting originated for religious purposes, with its primary goal being to serve religion. The rituals of Dongbaism are the premise of its existence and form the cultural context in which it serves religious and cultural functions. Due to its unique cultural connotations, painting styles, and other characteristics, Dongba painting was included in China's first batch of national-level intangible cultural-heritage-representative projects in 2006. *The Road to Heaven* is an outstanding representative work of Dongba painting. It should be noted that *The Road to Heaven* does not refer to a specific painting but to a category of artistic creations by the ancient Naxi people. Any Dongba possesses one or two scrolls of *The Road to Heaven* at home, while prominent Dongbas may even treasure three to five scrolls. As a common item in Dongbaism, *The Road to Heaven* is a religious prop (Zhao and He 2002, p. 131).

This article applies Panofsky's iconological research method to the study of *The Road to Heaven*, combining relevant background knowledge to analyze the image representations of *The Road to Heaven* from the perspective of pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation (Panofsky 1972, pp. 5–9), elucidating the worldview and religious origins implied by the images.

2. The Concept of Iconography

Panofsky regarded iconography as a manipulable research method. By describing the themes related to images (factual or expressive), researchers may elucidate the programmatic significance that constitutes the narrative and allegorical world of images, thereby emphasizing the intrinsic meaning of the work and establishing a symbolic value system. The first level of Panofsky's iconographic theory is the "pre-iconographical description", which studies and interprets "primary or natural subject matter". This level involves the description of the visual and physical foundations of the image, including composition, color, material, form, and other technical means. Only by recognizing these visual symbols can one analyze and discuss the image. The second level of Panofsky's theory is "iconographic analysis", which deals with artistic themes, subject matter, and conceptual domains, primarily seeking to explain the themes, stories, and allegories of images by referring to the documentations that underpin them. The third level is "iconological analysis", which interprets the "intrinsic" meaning of images by considering factors such as ethnicity, regional culture, and historical context, thereby uncovering the more profound significance the art seeks to convey. In the cognitive process of images, these three levels are parallel and interconnected, moving from direct visual perception to experience, culture, history, and ultimately to aesthetic and philosophical explanations. Compared to a linear, logical presentation, a concentric explanatory approach more effectively and intuitively demonstrates this mode of thinking (Figure 2).

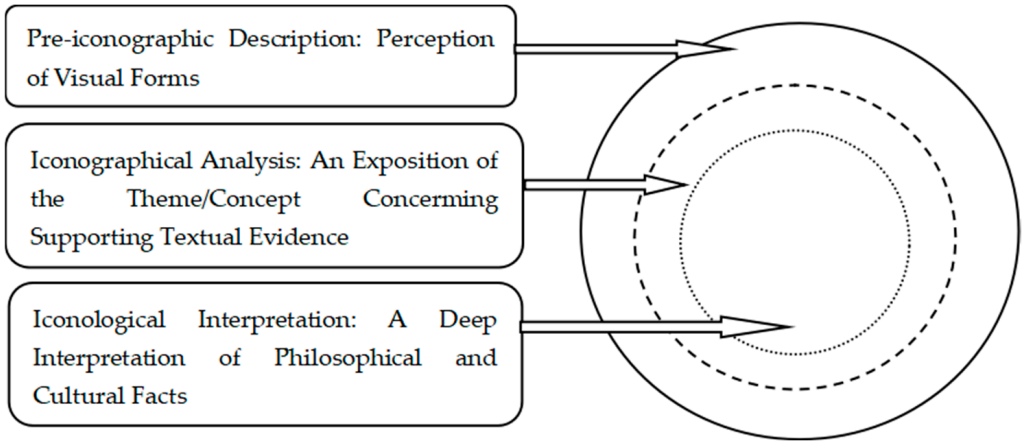


Figure 2. Analytical framework of *The Road to Heaven* based on iconographic theory.

This article establishes a theoretical analysis framework for studying *The Road to Heaven* based on the three-tiered theory of iconology. First, *The Road to Heaven* is described at the first level, and we explore its craftsmanship, composition, and color. Then, it is analyzed at the second level regarding its thematic origins, stories, and implications. Third, *The Road to Heaven* is interpreted from the perspectives of religious characteristics and the key factors that determine aesthetic spirit and cultural impact.

3. Description: Subject, Content, and Characteristics

The iconographic theory posits that form cannot be separated from content in a work of art, and that content possesses a visual significance equal to form. The pre-iconographical description focuses on the primary or natural subject's specific imagery, analyzing the distinct content of the image's performance. Consequently, the following content analysis examines *The Road to Heaven's* applications, contents, materials, and painting characteristics.

3.1. Subject Matter

The original Naxi name for *The Road to Heaven* is *Heiqripiq* (亨日皮), with a picture width ranging from approximately 20 to 40 cm, and a length between 15 and 25 m. In the Naxi language, Hei (亨) means divine (神), qri (日) means path (路), and piq (皮) means judgment, judicial decision, or verdict (Fang and He 1981, p. 152). *The Road to Heaven* is a scroll painting used by the Dongba to assist souls through the underworld, aid them in reincarnation, or guide them to the realm of the gods. The Dongba religion is characterized by its numerous rituals, with ceremonies conducted at every significant juncture of life. Death, as the culmination of life, receives particular reverence within Dongba rituals, with two key ceremonies, the Funeral (開喪) and the Liberation of the Soul (超度), held after a person's death. During these ceremonies, Dongba priests recite Dongba scriptures, arrange shrines for spirits, and perform Dongba dances. The most anticipated moment for participants in these rituals is when Dongba priests unfurl *The Road to Heaven*. The vibrant and intricate imagery of the scroll intertwines with the captivating ritual performance of the Dongba priests, elevating the ceremony to its climax (Figure 3). As this ritual's most crucial religious artifact, *The Road to Heaven* is irreplaceable in the funerary rite proceedings (Fang and He 1979, pp. 33–41).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 3. Ritual of transcendence. (**a**) When someone dies in a household, the Dongba performs a ritual to guide the departed soul to heaven. (**b**) The shaded area under the lush green trees on the Eight Immortals table in the image symbolizes the ancestral homeland (drawn from Zhao and He 2002, pp. 133, 134).

The scroll depicts three aspects from the bottom to the top: the realm of ghosts; the realm of humans; and the realm of gods. Among these three realms, only the realm of humans represents the real world, while the realms of hell and heaven are imagined and illusory. The lower part portrays the realm of ghosts, symbolizing a world of evil, which is eerie and terrifying. In the ghost realm, there are no flowers, there is no music, and there is no dance; there are only monstrous demons with ox heads and horse faces, venomous snakes and fierce beasts, trees with thorns growing from monster mouths, roaring flames, boiling pots that cook people, and various weapons, e.g., swords, knives, tongs, iron bars, and grinding stones. Those who committed sins in life will be punished after death. Liars and spreaders of rumors have their tongues stretched out with tongs by ghosts, allowing two oxen to plow over them; men who commit incest have their genitals pulled outward by ghosts as punishment; women who commit adultery with married men sit atop flaming peaks, subjected to fierce attacks from animals such as vultures, tigers, snakes, and yaks (see Figure 4). In short, the grotesque demons in the image inflict various tortures upon the souls of the deceased. Having endured torment through redemption, some souls eventually pass through the ordeal and ascend to heaven. Others are dismembered and devoured by fierce ghosts, never to be reborn.

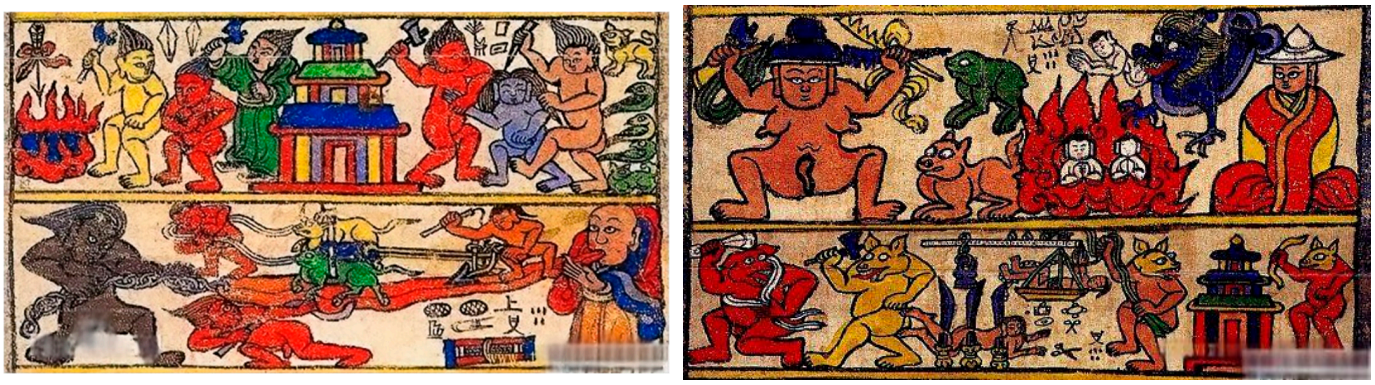


Figure 4. Partial depiction from *The Road to Heaven* of Hell's Punished Souls. Individuals undergoing punishment in Hell for slandering others (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

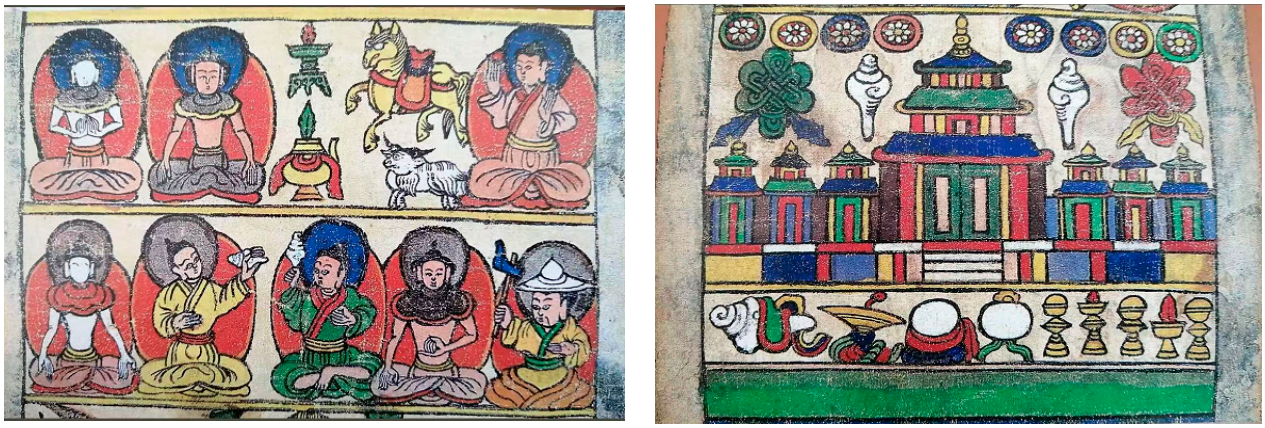
The human realm is an intermediary zone, communicating with and connecting Hell with Heaven. In the human realm, there are men carrying hoes, girls carting bamboo baskets, children playing, people basking in the sunlight, strolling among flowers, and birds and deer frolicking nearby. The earthly realm is filled with warmth. There are no fierce ghosts here; there are 13 butter lamps, 13 moons, 13 masks, 13 pine trees, 13 flowers[4], etc., as well as many goddesses holding fresh flowers, musical instruments, and other auspicious objects. Some goddesses hold bells, while others blow conches. Here, they guide departed souls to the land of rebirth. The founder of the Dongba religion, Master Dongbashiro (東巴什羅)[5], rides on a white horse, carries a war flag, and shakes a bell, under the escort of the king of birds, the Golden-winged Garuda; the king of beasts, the White Lion; and the Azure Dragon, riding a rainbow cloud ascending to the heavens. In the farewell procession, some blow horns, trumpets, and conches. Others shake bells, clap drums, carry knives, axes, flags, lamps, flowers, treasures, etc., chanting or dancing, just like in the actual scene of the Dongba religion's funeral ritual dance (Figure 5). Music and dance have emerged in the earthly realm. In Dongba religious culture, music is a beautiful symbol, reflecting the critical relationship between music and religion, namely, that music serves religion (L. Li 2003, pp. 32–36).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 5. Partial depiction from *The Road to Heaven* of the earthly realm: (**a**) human realm illustrated with auspicious elements, including thirteen lanterns, thirteen trees, thirteen flowers, thirteen moons, thirteen white cranes, and more; (**b**) Dongbashiro, the founder of Dongbaism (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

Ascending along *The Road to Heaven* leads to the celestial realm of 33 heavenly palaces, adorned with 33 moons, 33 divine lamps, 33 varieties of exotic flowers and plants, 33 species of colorful birds and rare fowls, and the thrones of 33 deities (Ma and He 2021, pp. 152–57). The tranquil countenances of the gods exude wisdom and spiritual radiance from their profound eyes. The celestial realm symbolizes the domain of the divine—a realm of beauty and significance, which also serves as the abode of the founder of the Dongba religion, Dongbashiro. Additionally, the celestial realm also features depictions of the principal deities revered by Dongba believers. Clouds of auspicious symbols adorn the heavens alongside majestic temples and towers, dancing goddesses, and Dongbas wielding sacred branches, eagle feathers, and swords. Buddhist religious symbols, such as lotus flowers, dharma wheels, auspicious knots, and more, are incorporated alongside depictions of divine creatures, including lions, dragons, elephants, red tigers, boars, and mythical birds (see Figure 6).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 6. Partial depiction from *The Road to Heaven* of the divine realm: (**a**) the gods of heaven; (**b**) Buddhist religious symbols (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

3.2. The Craft and Aesthetic Characteristics

3.2.1. Tools and Materials

The materials used for *The Road to Heaven* primarily include a canvas, brushes, and paint. These painting tools are sourced locally from the surrounding natural environment. *The Road to Heaven* is painted on homemade linen. Due to the narrow width of the linen, two pieces are stitched together, a process known among the Naxi people as "Peiji" (陪擠). The varying widths of the linen, handwoven by villagers, result in differences in the width and, naturally, the length of each version of *The Road to Heaven* (Ma and He 2021, pp. 152–57). The preparation of the linen canvas typically involves applying glue twice. This gluing process is critical as it seals the gaps in the weave of the linen.

The best glue for this process is made from animal hide. The glue is broken into pieces and soaked in cold water to expand and soften. It is subsequently heated in a water bath to maintain a temperature of 60 °C until it dissolves. After the first layer of glue dries, the canvas surface is repeatedly rubbed with a smooth stone to make it flexible and smooth before applying the second layer to enhance durability and improve painting efficiency. The painting brushes are primarily made from bamboo, sorghum stalks, reed branches, copper, bone, and charcoal (He and Zhao 2015, pp. 68–69). The lengths of bamboo, sorghum stalk, and reed brushes can be modified according to personal preference. After sharpening the tip, it is split down the middle to create a minor groove for holding and storing paint. The size of this groove directly affects the thickness of the lines produced. Copper and iron brushes, which emerged with metal tools, are crafted similarly to bamboo brushes but allow for more precise work, albeit with higher costs and more complex production processes.

The pigments are derived from minerals, plants, and animals. Mineral pigments are notable for their durability and resistance to fading over time, making them ideal for long-term preservation, though their application is time-consuming and labor-intensive. Plant-based pigments are convenient and easy to source locally, but seasonal changes limit their availability and color range. Animal-based pigments are made using blood, bile, and animal glue mixed with other materials. *The Road to Heaven* is created entirely using natural materials and traditional methods, giving it an inherently primitive and authentic character. Due to the variability in local resources, the pigment processing methods differ from place to place, resulting in significant differences between each version of *The Road to Heaven* (see Figure 7). Because the artist must gather, process, and prepare the canvas, pigments, and other materials, creating a single *The Road to Heaven* often takes two to three years (Ma and He 2021, pp. 152–57).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 7. (**a**) A Dongba draws *The Road to Heaven*. (**b**) Different versions of *The Road to Heaven* (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

3.2.2. Aesthetic Characteristics

The Road to Heaven is characterized by its complete composition, elegant lines, beautiful colors, and dynamic expressions.

The Road to Heaven emphasizes compositional integrity. The entire painting comprises a mysterious heterogeneous space. The painting is divided into numerous independent sections, each telling a complete story and forming a separate world. The figures in *The Road to Heaven* are typically presented in total frontal or side views, while animals are often depicted in profile with limbs extended. In the painting, various objects and images are arranged sequentially, fully conveying their completeness. For example, thirteen moons, thirteen sacred lamps, and thirteen flying birds might be listed distinctly without overlap. The picture creates a somewhat absurd and irrational scene but conveys a sense of rusticity.

The lines in *The Road to Heaven* are also distinctive. On a prepared linen, the Dongba artists draw grid lines with two horizontal lines separating each section. The distance between these lines varies; narrow spaces are filled with color, while more expansive spaces are decorated with patterns such as flowers or waves. Dongbas use lines to draw corresponding figures, animals, gods, ghosts, and other shapes in each grid, which are then colored. The lines in *The Road to Heaven* resemble iron wire, giving the painting a rugged, ancient texture. The depiction of deities and Buddhas shows them with serene expressions, often seated in a meditative pose with a halo enhancing their solemn and dignified appearance. The overall effect is tranquil and harmonious, yet humanly expressive. In contrast, depicting demons and beasts in hell feature exaggerated expressions, showing them with bared teeth, wide eyes, and frenzied movements, creating a grotesque and bizarre impression (see Figure 8).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 8. Partial depiction from *The Road to Heaven*: (**a**) the gods of heaven; (**b**) demons and beasts in hell (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

In terms of color application, Dongba artists utilize warm and cool colors to reflect specific environments and emotional states. Reds, oranges, and yellows create excitement and warmth, while blues and greens evoke calmness and coldness. *In The Road to Heaven*, darker colors such as black, blue, cyan, and dark green dominate the portrayal of hell, illustrating black rats, black sparrows, nine black mountains, nine black rivers, dark poison seas, and black demons. Conversely, the human realm is depicted with bright, contrasting colors like red, green, yellow, and blue, reflecting a vibrant aesthetic that symbolizes a longing for a better life. The depiction of the thirty-three layers of heaven primarily employs red, yellow, and white colors to establish a serene and desirable atmosphere. The

beauty of the colors in *The Road to Heaven* lies in their contrast and harmony, featuring complementary color pairings such as red and cyan, as well as yellow and purple, which create a vivid and stimulating effect. Using colors like gold, silver, black, white, and gray enhances the overall color effect, achieving a balanced and striking appearance. Additionally, the contrast in color purity accentuates the vivid primary colors, making the image more dynamic. The extensive use of gold unifies the high-purity contrasts within the painting. The lines and colors are harmonized to produce a visually pleasing effect (Ma and He 2021, pp. 152–57).

The Road to Heaven also showcases dynamic expression and characteristic representation. The dynamic expression refers to the Dongba artists' emphasis on the lively traits of objects, whether they are animals or plants. The subjects are typically depicted in dynamic movement, flight, or emotional expression states. Characteristic representation means that Dongba artists highlight the distinctive features of their subjects; animals are identified by unique head characteristics, plants by their distinct branches or leaves, and deities or spirits by their notable head features. For example, yaks are distinguished by their long, curved horns, which set them apart from water buffaloes, chickens are recognized by their combs, and ducks by their flat beaks (J. Yang 2021, pp. 127–32).

4. Analysis: Narratives, Metaphors, and Aesthetic Forms

The iconographic analysis relies on the corroboration of textual evidence, employing the visual elements within the artwork as a medium and providing essential documentary materials, including relevant mythological, literary, theological, and historical documents, to substantiate the complex themes, plots, characters, and symbols present. *The Road to Heaven* adopts the narrative method of story plot that highlights distinctive storytelling features and reflects the philosophical and aesthetic perspectives of the Naxi people.

4.1. Painting Theme Derives from the Ideology of the Dongba Religion

The Dongba paintings, exemplified by works such as *The Road to Heaven*, are integral to Dongba culture and the Dongba religion. The themes within *The Road to Heaven* are derived from Dongba religious myths, epics, and legends and are closely connected with Dongba sacrificial ceremonies. These paintings promote religious concepts such as animism, reverence for heaven and ancestors, the immortality of the soul, and karma. For instance, *The Road to Heaven* illustrates the various stages that souls traverse: hell, the human world, nature, and heaven, reflecting the Naxi people's beliefs in the soul's immortality. One illustration in *The Road to Heaven* depicts the origins of heaven and earth, titled "tian di si fang tu" (天地四方圖). In this diagram (Figure 9), the origins of humans are represented in various ways: on the right side (east), humans emerge from white eggs, symbolizing "egg-born" (蛋生); on the left side (west), humans are born from flowers, symbolizing "flower-born" (花生); on the upper side (north), humans originate from trees, symbolizing "tree-born" (樹生); and on the lower side (south), humans are born from women, symbolizing "women-born" (胎生). The central square cabinet represents Naxi's "Five Elements Charts" (精吾五行). The five colors depicted—white, green, mixed, red, and yellow—correspond to the five fundamental elements of life: wood, fire, earth, iron, and water. These colors and elements align with the five directions: east, south, central, west, and north, respectively.

The Road to Heaven reflects the Naxi people's understanding of the origins of life through the "Five Elements" and the mixed theories of egg-laying, viviparous, seed-bearing, and tree-born life forms. This understanding embodies the ancient Naxi ancestors' observations from long-term forest living, where they noticed that animal eggs could hatch life, flowers could bear seeds after blooming, and trees could bear fruit. This anal-

ogy and association led to their explanations of the origins of life, illustrating that how ancient humans understood and interpreted the world depended on their observations, experiences, and imagination. Regardless of the method of birth, in the Naxi perspective, the Five Elements, namely, egg-laying, seed-bearing, viviparous, and tree-born life forms, are all attributed to nature.

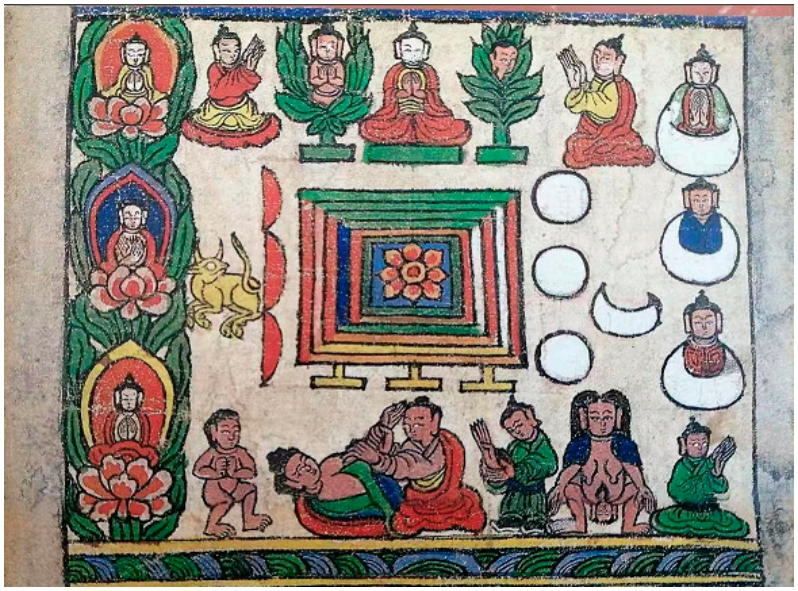


Figure 9. Partial depiction from *The Road to Heaven*: the human realm (the undead are reincarnated as humans in this realm) (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

In *The Road to Heaven*, various deities and demons are depicted, including anthropomorphic gods, animal-like war gods, nature spirits with human bodies and serpent tails, red tigers, white elephants, and green peacocks. Each deity and monster carries its own story and symbolism, showcasing the unique Dongba art of the Naxi people to the world.

4.2. Constructing a Virtual Cosmological Mode

The term "worldview" encapsulates individuals' foundational beliefs and viewpoints regarding the comprehensive environment in which they reside, encompassing both the natural and human spheres and the interconnection between human beings and the world. As illustrated by *The Road to Heaven*, the worldview of the Dongba religion is not predicated on empirical knowledge concerning the world and the events transpiring within it; instead, it is constructed through speculative reasoning and imagination, starting from presupposed concepts and principles (although these presuppositions ultimately stem from the real world). The cosmology of the Dongba religion does not seek to offer astronomical depictions of the universe but endeavors to impose order within human society (S. Tian 2007, pp. 334–51). The cosmological model forms a component of the metaphysical framework utilized by the Naxi people to comprehend the world.

In *The Road to Heaven*, the world of the Dongba religion, the primary subjects consist of gods, humans, and ghosts, which are categorized into three realms, thereby creating the world pattern of the divine realm (heaven), the human realm (the earth where humans and Shu (署) coexist), and the ghost realm. In the Naxi Pictographic Character Dictionary (納西象形文字譜) compiled by Fang Guoyu (方國瑜), the 1302nd character is described as follows: Shu represents the mountain god, who subsists on vegetarian cuisine and is mythologically a half-sibling to humans (Fang and He 1981, p. 356). Shu is a unique concept within the Dongba religion. By examining related Dongba scriptures, it can be discerned that Shu is a phonetic loan from the Naxi language, referring to elves. Shu neither

represents a human nor a deity nor a demon. The Naxi character for Shu is represented by a pictogram consisting of a frog's head, a human body, and a snake's tail. Other Shu characters are depicted as a horse head with a snake tail, a tiger head with a snake tail, a bull head with a snake tail, a yak head with a snake tail, a water buffalo head with a snake tail, a turtle head with a snake tail, a water monster head with a snake tail, an elephant head with a snake tail, and a stag head with a snake tail. It can be observed that the snake-like form is the most fundamental image attribute of Shu (Bai 2002, p. 342). In the section of *The Road to Heaven* of the Naxi ethnic group, the natural world is illustrated, wherein mountain deities reside, known as Shudui (署堆) in Naxi (see Figure 10). Shu is the snake king or dragon king, who serves as a mountain deity and governs the natural world (McKhann 1993, pp. 91–113). Since Shu resides in the same realm as humans, a distinct Shu realm is unnecessary. The Naxi ethnic group's three-realm world pattern is entirely derived from the main subjects (gods, humans, and ghosts) and can be considered a virtual depiction of the dwellings of the three categories of subjects. The Naxi people maintain that the boundaries established by the three realms are stringent and should not be blurred. Although the Dongba religion subscribes to stringent distinctions among the three realms, conversely, these realms are interconnected and collectively form a harmonious universe. This interconnectedness and unity are mediated and centered around humans, as humans establish connections with the deities, Shu, and ghosts, facilitating the interconnectedness and harmony of the three realms.

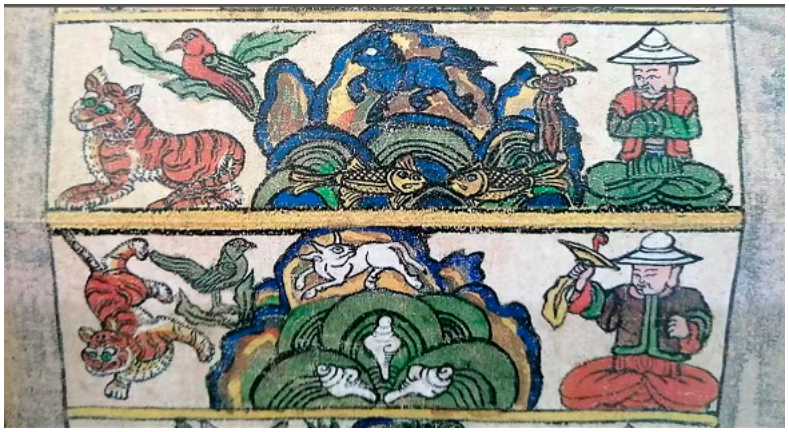


Figure 10. Partial depiction from *The Road to Heaven*: the Shu realm (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

Humans promote a connection with the divine. It is initially exemplified by the union of Congrenlien (從忍利恩)[6] (the Naxi people's ancestors) with the goddess Chenhongbaobai (褆恒褒白), which led to the emergence of Naxi humanity. Consequently, humans (or the Naxi people) are the progeny of the union between deity and man. It is essential to note that this union is the consequence of proactive and enterprising efforts by man (Congrenlien) and serves as an illustration of human agency. In the Naxi epic, also known as the *Chongban Tu* (崇搬圖)[7], the account presented in the Records of Human Migration recounts that Congrenlien ascended to the sky, unlocked the celestial gates, surmounted numerous challenges, and ultimately secured the approval of the Heavenly Parents to wed Chenhongbaobai. Subsequently, the couple descended from the heavens to the human realm, bringing numerous heavenly treasures (such as livestock, grains, and crop seeds) to the human world, thereby enriching the material wealth of humanity. Thus, humans and gods, the human and divine realms, are joined and interconnected through human initiative. Moreover, as a priest, the Dongba's role is to facilitate communication between gods and humans, acting as an intermediary between the two; the Dongba bridges the gap between

the divine world and the human realm, fostering unity. The Dongba's role and stature are notably embodied in the figure of Dongbashiro, the founder of the Dongba religion. According to Dongba scriptures, Dongbashiro is both human and divine. He is a human being, born to human parents, possessing human emotions and desires, who undergoing the experiences of human birth, aging, illness, and death, and who is subject to various human limitations. However, he is also a deity, the god of war reborn in the human realm. He is endowed with multiple divine magical powers and abilities, dwelling in the eighteenth heaven, and capable of descending to the human world to vanquish demons and monsters, ultimately retaining his divine status in the Dongba religion. The awe-inspiring divine status of Dongbashiro underscores the close connection and harmonious unity between humans and gods, as well as the human realm and the divine realm.

The realm where humans live is known as the human realm. The Dongba religion divides this world into human and Shu realms. Shu is said to reside near water sources or in forests, governing mountains, rivers, birds, beasts, flowers, and trees. At the same time, humans dwell in villages, engaging in tasks such as farming, livestock breeding, herding, and milk production. These two brothers coexist in harmony, each in their respective domains. In his extensive research on Naxi religion, Academic Robert McKhann notes in the Naxi Religion Overview: "In *The Road to Heaven*, Shu resides above the human realm (humans inhabit the low valleys, while Shu resides on the high mountains). The priest who provided me with information told me that the human and mountain deities, both of which are situated within the same region in the cosmic structure, actually represent two distinct spheres (natural and cultural) that are encompassed within that area" (McKhann 1993; McKhann et al. 2018, pp. 188–96). Therefore, from the perspective of the subjects, the human realm is divided into the human realm and the Shu realm. However, these two aspects are identical in space and time and in all related Dongba scriptures, which state that humans and Shu are brothers sharing the same father but different mothers. Each exists in its domain, yet they are interconnected, which is mostly to say that humans rely on Shu. Therefore, in Naxi culture, should humans fell trees, contaminate the environment, or harm animals, they will be punished, as illustrated in *The Road to Heaven*, through the insertion of iron spikes into their heads, indicating that humans should cherish nature as they do their siblings. It reflects the Naxi people's simplistic and harmonious view of man and nature as one, where they adore and venerate nature and coexist in tranquility with it (Wang 2018, pp. 32–34).

4.3. Showcased Unadorned Religious Artistic Styles

The artistic activities of the Naxi ethnic group, deeply intertwined with religious and production life, exude a vibrant blend of life and religion. Their unique expression techniques, primitive and natural, bear the hallmarks of primitive art. The Donbas did not draw *The Road to Heaven* under the guidance of some clear artistic rules. Instead, they followed their artistic and aesthetic rules, crafting in a free-living environment. The aesthetic characteristics of *The Road to Heaven* are mainly reflected in its image design, color, and verve.

The Road to Heaven diagram is simple and plain regarding image and line processing, without deliberate refinement or emphasis on additional decoration. The expression of the image is relatively free, especially when emphasizing the power of the image, often using tall figures and intuitively large weapons to express it. The main image is generally exaggerated, while other images are reduced more intuitively. If Dongba wants to express the painting object's strength, they use mighty animals or animal heads, horns, claws, or other body parts they know to convey it. This method of using simple and exaggerated techniques to convey meaning through images is the most commonly used method by Dongba.

It is a straightforward painting form. The creation of *The Road to Heaven* is not based on fine brushwork but on simple, natural, smooth, and even somewhat rough brushwork, using simple lines to depict the image.

The color scheme of *The Road to Heaven* is relatively simple, and even if multiple colors are used simultaneously in the work, the colors used are monochrome, with less use of complex or intermediate colors. Specifically, the first characteristic is that simple colors, such as black, white, red, yellow, blue, and green, are often used to fill patterns, with only some transitional colors used in the painting. The second characteristic is that the natural color of the represented object is directly used to depict the image, and flat coloring is often employed. From the color characteristics of *The Road to Heaven*, although images have a distinct religious utilitarianism, which means the images serve a practical purpose in religious rituals, they also present a strong sense of life, demonstrating the ancient and straightforward color aesthetic of the Naxi Dongba people. In addition, there are also images in Dongba paintings that are only drawn with lines without coloring, which makes the images appear simpler and more unadorned, reflecting the purity and simplicity of the Naxi Dongba people's aesthetic concepts.

The most critical and direct function of Naxi Dongba painting is its religious function. Therefore, images must first serve the religious activity itself. Dongbas must consider their primary function, suppressing ghosts and exorcising demons, when portraying these. Therefore, images must be imbued with vigor, and the methods used by Dongbas to imbue the image with charm are often achieved through majestic and ferocious rough faces, as well as thick and robust, magical and strange limbs. It makes their works present a rough and straightforward characteristic, evoking a sense of the raw power and energy in the art. However, Dongba culture is a comprehensive system that contains various religious, aesthetic, and material cultures. Thus, Dongba also employs imagery containing various cultural aspects. In addition to religious beliefs, these images embody the aesthetic concepts of the Naxi ancestors. Therefore, the ancestors endowed their ideals to the gods and created various personified statues or divine figures through the hands of Dongba to express their imaginations. Consequently, the straightforward, rough, and even strange and terrifying images created by Dongba, also reflect the aesthetic concept of the Naxi ancestors' simplicity, giving the audience a sense of the authenticity and purity, as well as spiritual significance, of their works.

5. Interpretation: Cultural Representation and Influential Factors

The creation of artworks is inevitably affected by their spatial environment and historical traditions. Iconographical interpretation involves understanding the underlying cultural and historical rules encapsulated within the artwork. *The Road to Heaven* shows the ongoing integration of Naxi and other ethnic cultures. Throughout its historical development, it has not only served as a prop for Naxi funerals but has also embodied the profound traditional culture of the Naxi people and the concept of folklore, which has a rich history.

5.1. Characteristics of Religious Beliefs

5.1.1. Polytheism

From its cultural context, the Dongba religion of the Naxi ethnic group can be identified as an ethnic faith with diverse religious components. Throughout its historical evolution, it has progressed from a simplistic form of natural religion to incorporate elements and ideologies from the Bon Religion (苯教)[8], Tibetan Buddhism (藏傳佛教)[9], Mahayana Buddhism(漢傳佛教)[10], and Taoism (道教)[11]. Ultimately, it has transformed into a religion

possessing various cultural traits and its own ethnic beliefs (Yan 2014, pp. 149–57). It has a distinct system of rituals, deities, and scriptures corresponding to diverse rites.

In the polytheistic religious culture of the Dongba religion, elements of the Bon religion from the Tibetans are particularly prominent, suggesting a unique historical origin between the two. Additionally, their harmonious coexistence led to the creation of the earliest Dongba culture. The Bon religion divides the universe into three parts, namely, heaven, earth, and the underworld, and it shares many similarities with the cosmology of the Dongba religion. This can be illustrated by the classic painting art of the Dongba religion, *The Road to Heaven*. It demonstrates a harmonious coexistence between the traditional cosmologies of the Bon and Dongba religions. The term Dongba was formerly known as Bobo (钵波), which is quite similar to the title of the Bon religion's priests, Bonpo (苯波) (S. He 1995, p. 12). The prominent animal worship consciousness depicted in *The Road to Heaven* painting reflects the religious, aesthetic consciousness of the Dongba religion. This belief system regards everything as having souls and worships nature, sharing similar philosophical and cosmological consciousness with the Bon religion (Yan and Liu 2008, pp. 10–14).

The Naxi holds that all natural things, like humans, possess a soul. They venerated various natural, animal, celestial, and earth gods. This veneration manifests in their practices of worshiping mountains, stones, trees, rivers, lakes, heavenly bodies, frogs, snakes, bears, monkeys, tigers, and more. Due to their unique natural conditions and surrounding social environment, the Naxi have maintained a close relationship with nature, a bond that has remained intact despite the progress of civilization. Consequently, anthropomorphized natural forms are significant in Naxi society's aesthetic consciousness. In other words, "anthropomorphized nature" has long proved to be the source of the Naxi people's aesthetic feelings, awareness, concepts, and ideals.

In *The Road to Heaven*, 33 deities portrayed within the divine realms are called great deities. These great deities are exclusively mentioned in *The Road to Heaven* and are absent from other Dongba classic literary works. No scriptures exist that detail their origins, births, or any other related information. Dongba can recite their names but cannot explain their backgrounds. This suggests that these deities are indeed foreign, originating from Buddhism, Bon, or Brahmanism, among other religions. Buddhist symbols such as lotus flowers, wish-fulfilling knots, wheels of law, and auspicious flowers are frequently integrated into the depictions of these great deities (F. Yang 2001, pp. 37–42). Nonetheless, numerous explicit descriptions of 33 divine realms within *The Road to Heaven* closely parallel those of the ancestral lands in Dongba scriptures. Although the deities depicted in *The Road to Heaven* are foreign, originating from diverse cultures, the Naxi people have comprehended and personalized many of the displayed contents based on their history, daily life, religious beliefs, and understanding of the afterlife.

5.1.2. The Return of Souls to the Ancestral Land

It is worth noting that after being influenced and integrated by Tibetan Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhist culture, the Naxi people's concept of life's ultimate destination was also influenced by Buddhism's concept of the "three realms" (三界) and the belief in rebirth after death. Consequently, in funeral rites, a coexistence of the Buddhist-influenced "divine land rebirth" concept and the Naxi traditional view of returning to the ancestral source land, *Günaruo Deity Mountain* (居那若羅神山)[12], can be observed. On the one hand, the Dongba performs funeral rites by unfolding *The Road to Heaven*, reciting scriptures concerning hell, the human realm, and the divine realm, and conducting a transcendent ceremony to assist the deceased's soul in reborn in the human or heavenly realm. On the other hand, the Dongba recites traditional scriptures for sending the soul and explicitly

specifies the exact road that the deceased's soul must travel through, guiding the soul to the ancestral source land. Therefore, in the eyes of the Naxi people, the concept of returning to the ancestral source land is deeply ingrained. Even though the Dongba guides the deceased's soul to the divine realm based on *The Road to Heaven*, the people still believe that the deceased follows the Dongba route, which leads back to the ancestral source land. The route for sending souls back to their ancestral homeland is explicitly designed for returning to the ancestral source land. That is to say, despite the appearance of polytheistic beliefs, ancestor worship continues to dominate the behavior of the Naxi people as the dominant force.

5.2. Main Influencing Factors of Aesthetics Spirit

With societal development, the Naxi have gradually formed their cultural and unique aesthetic spirit. This unique aesthetic spirit results from their natural environment, historical migrations, and intercultural exchanges.

5.2.1. Natural Environment

The geographic environment is crucial in maintaining a culture's unique spirit and external form. The Naxi predominantly reside in the area surrounding the Lancang River (瀾滄江), the Jinsha River (金沙江), and their tributaries, including the Yalong River (雅礱江), in the western Sichuan, northwest Yunnan, and eastern Xizang regions. Their production and lifestyle are closely tied to these unique geographical and climatic conditions, giving their culture a distinct mountainous character. Their deep reliance on nature has fostered intense emotions towards it, including fear, awe, sympathy, and a sense of debt to it, forming the basis of their natural ethical view. Under the influence of awe and repayment awareness, the Naxi have conceptualized nature as embodied in "Shu" deities to regulate human behavior and conduct solemn "Shu" ceremonies to appease these deities, preserving the divine awareness of "animism". This awareness has allowed the Naxi to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature over the long term. The natural elements depicted in *The Road to Heaven*, such as mountains, flowers, trees, and animals like cattle, goats, tigers, frogs, and snakes, originate from their daily lives. Nature worship profoundly influenced the artistic and aesthetic origins of the Naxi ancestors, laying the psychological foundation for imagination, empathy, and the anthropomorphization of natural forces.

5.2.2. Historical Memory of Naxi Ancestors' Migrations

Historical records show that the Naxi are descendants of ancient Qiang people who migrated south from the Hehuang (河惶) region, living a nomadic life. Since the Han Dynasty, the ancestors of the Naxi gradually migrated southwards from the northwest to the Dadu River region, then further southwest due to war or natural conditions to the area around today's Sichuan Yanyuan (鹽源), and then to the upper reaches of the Jinsha River and the current Lijiang region. The "Genesis" epic describes the Naxi ancestors' migration from the heavens to the Günaruo Deity Mountain and then to the "Yingu Dui" (英古堆) area, now Lijiang. The epic encompasses different eras' production methods, marriage systems, religious beliefs, ethical concepts, and aesthetic notions. This evolution is reflected in the shift from nature and animal worship to totem and ancestor worship into diverse forms such as painting, sculpture, literature, music, and dance. During funerary rituals, Dongba priests recite *The Road to Heaven* Sutra, performing dances to judge the deceased's path. This integrated ceremony of mythology, dance, and music is a treasure trove of Naxi aesthetic concepts and a crucible of the entire Naxi spiritual structure. The myths sung by Dongba priests, dances, and paintings convey the Naxi migration's cultural connotations.

5.2.3. The Communion of Multi-Cultures

The Naxi people have historically been an ethnicity with great openness and inclusiveness. They have consistently maintained frequent exchanges and interactions with neighboring ethnic groups. These interactions have changed their material lives and led to transformations in their spiritual lives. Within the complex spiritual life system, the aesthetic and spiritual structure of the Naxi naturally changes due to the exchanges and collisions with different ethnic cultures. As foreign cultures entered, Buddhism, Taoism, and Dongba religions developed concurrently and blended. For example, Lamaists and Dongba priests often cooperated in rituals and funerals. This profoundly changed the Naxi's views on life and souls. The traditional Naxi belief reflected by the Dongba religion is that after death, the soul can return to the ancestral land through rituals. However, the gradual infiltration of Buddhist culture has introduced a complex and diverse view of the soul's destination, including the concepts of hell, human realms, heaven, reincarnation, and the Buddhist "Fivefold Paths and Six Realms", which are evident in *The Road to Heaven*. The Naxi's aesthetic spirit retains traditional elements while embracing aesthetic and cultural factors from Tibetan, Bai, Han, and other ethnic groups, resulting in a fusion and independence in their ethnic aesthetic culture.

6. Functions and Current Status of Protection

The Road to Heaven showcases unique ethnic features, abundant religious undertones, and a unique artistic style. As a cultural emblem replete with ethnic essence, *The Road to Heaven* can be regarded as an icon representing the Naxi people's ethnic identity and ultimate concern; it is a potent tool to fortify group cohesion and the community's cultural memory. Therefore, the Divine Road Map has multiple social functions. Historically, *The Road to Heaven* has primarily been transmitted in Lijiang areas due to geographical constraints and limited transportation. In recent years, the development of the Naxi people's cultural industry has given unprecedented attention to *The Road to Heaven* and other Dongba paintings. In 2003, Dongba ancient documents were included in the "Memory of the World Register". In 2006, the Naxi Dongba painting was recognized by the State Council of the People's Republic of China as the first batch of ethnic intangible cultural heritage, designated with the serial number VII-13. In 2017, the ethnic touring exhibition of the State Art Fund project, "The Art of Naxi Dongba Painting: A Century of Masterpieces", was launched, displaying the magnificent and enigmatic art of Dongba painting across three sections: history, modernity, and the future. However, as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, the Dongba paintings, exemplified by *The Road to Heaven*, face a challenge common to all ethnic and folk cultures: the lack of inheritance and the threat of extinction. Consequently, the protection and revitalization of Dongba paintings are urgent priorities.

6.1. Functions of The Road to Heaven

As an exceptional embodiment of Dongba painting, *The Road to Heaven* artistically conveys the spiritual realm of the Naxi people, encapsulating the functions, intentions, and import of Dongba rituals as they transition from a materialistic to an ideological plane.

First, *The Road to Heaven* primarily serves a religious ritual function. It is a fact that the vitality of any religion may be compromised if its ritual procedures are simple, potentially leading to a decrease in its influence. Consequently, numerous religious traditions have endeavored to enhance their rituals by incorporating the emotional power of art. For instance, Western Christian churches' architecture and interior decoration, including sculptures and paintings, exemplify the integration of art into religious rituals. Similarly, ancient Egyptian carvings, Mayan stone tablets, and other such artifacts are evidence of religious art and serve as precedents for the utilization of art in religious ceremonies. In the context of

the Dongba religion, *The Road to Heaven* is a crucial object employed in religious rites to release souls from suffering. *The Road to Heaven* encapsulates the ancient Naxi people's religious beliefs in polytheism within the Dongba culture and various secular aspects of life. It occupies a tremendously significant position within Dongba culture, and its functional role in actual religious rituals is unparalleled by any other form.

Second, *The Road to Heaven* serves an educational and propaganda purpose. As an indispensable component of the Dongba culture, this form is intricately woven into the entire process of the formation and development of Dongba culture. It subtly shapes the thoughts, ideas, and behaviors of the Naxi people through a distinctive visual art form unique to the Naxi ethnicity, fulfilling a widespread promotional and educational role in the dissemination and evolution of the Dongba religion and its associated culture. For instance, *The Road to Heaven* vividly portrays the gruesome scenes of punishment in hell for those who have committed a variety of sins, serving as a stern warning to those attending the ceremony and having a deterrent effect on those who have already committed the sins depicted in the painting. In this way, it has profound social significance as it educates the public on the importance of accumulating virtues and engaging in virtuous actions. The portrayal of Shu embodies the dialectical concept of harmonious and balanced relations between humans and nature, stressing that only by preserving such a relationship can humans derive benefits from nature. Should humans excessively exploit nature, they will inevitably encounter natural retribution. This artistic depiction of the cycle of life, death, and cause and effect unquestionably imparts a profound and subtle educational influence on the thoughts, ideas, and behaviors of the Naxi people, demonstrating the vital function of artistic representation.

Third, *The Road to Heaven* also serves an aesthetic purpose. As a distinctive artistic form of the Naxi people, it has undoubtedly encapsulated the aesthetic tastes and sensibilities of the Naxi ethnic group and promoted a unified aesthetic concept that harmoniously blends the divine and human qualities of the Naxi people. The aesthetic implications of *The Road to Heaven* are shown in various aspects, whether it is the comprehensive, harmonious, and meticulous composition, the vibrant colors, or the sleek lines, all of which are replete with the unique features of the Naxi ethnicity. The colors employed in *The Road to Heaven* are derived from natural sources; for instance, black is derived from the combination of pot ash and animal bile, red from cinnabar, and white from white clay or the bones of young pigs (Zeng 2019, pp. 6–7). In terms of color expression, the contrast between light and dark, warm and cool colors is striking, with meticulous attention paid to balanced color distribution, interspersed color blocks, and the various colors enhancing the integrity and stability of the painting, demonstrating a primitive and natural beauty. In terms of line work, the lines are sparse yet elegant, curved, and diverse, possessing a tangible and intense sense of texture and movement. These static, graceful lines transcend spatial limitations, leading to an extension of meaning that moves the viewer and evokes emotion. In terms of style, *The Road to Heaven* embodies a rough, natural, and vividly imaginative aesthetic art style. For instance, the elephant with thirty-three heads, the Garuda (迦樓羅金翅鳥) biting the evil dragon's neck (refer to Figure 11), as well as the ghosts and animals with diverse expressions in hell, all reflect the Naxi ancestors' peculiar and exaggerated imaginations. It infuses the entire painting style with a unique, bizarre artistic style. When the Dongba priests crafted *The Road to Heaven*, they grounded their compositions in profound faith, endowing the deities and monsters they portrayed with vitality and organically incorporating them into their spiritual and physical realms, returning simplicity and authenticity, encapsulating human, poetic wisdom. Because of this, their artworks exude eternal artistic allure (J. Yang 2021, pp. 127–32).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 11. Partial depiction of *The Road to Heaven*. (**a**) The elephant with 33 heads: In *The Road to Heaven*, the elephant with thirty-three heads resides in a garden of 33 palaces that serve as residences for celestial beings. (**b**) Garuda: The conflict between the Garuda and the serpentine dragon originates from Naxi mythology. The nature deity Shu and humanity have the same father, thus being considered half-brothers. The Shu deity presides over rain, clear springs, forests, meadows, and wildlife. Humans and nature have traditionally coexisted in harmony, without contention. However, with the onset of indiscriminate deforestation, water pollution, and wildlife slaughter, the Shu deity dispatched the evil dragon to exact retribution in the form of torrential rain and floods. In response, humans called upon the Garuda to confront the dragon and alleviate the flooding. The depiction of the Garuda, bird-like in appearance with an eagle's beak, grasping the evil dragon between its talons, symbolizes the interdependence between humanity and nature (drawn from the Museum of Lijiang City).

6.2. The Current Situation of Protection

As an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, Dongba painting, represented by *The Road to Heaven*, faces the same issues as all ethnic folk cultures: the risk of loss and extinction due to a lack of transmission. Since the 1980s, in response to the gradual decline of Dongba culture, local governments have begun to establish Dongba ecological, cultural protection zones, and Dongba cultural inheritance bases. These initiatives are intended to enhance the grassroots protection of Dongba culture. In addition to Dongba training centers organized by grassroots and government organizations, colleges and universities have also actively joined in exploring and preserving Dongba culture.

In July 2009, the Lijiang Cultural Center and the Art Department of Lijiang Normal College held a Dongba cultural training class. The goal was to provide participants with a preliminary understanding of Naxi Dongba painting and a systematic appreciation of Dongba painting. Since Dongba culture was introduced, scholars from countries such as the United States, Germany, France, and Switzerland have also focused on Dongba cultural research. Collaborative efforts with relevant Chinese research organizations, such as the Dongba Culture Museum, Dongba Culture Research Institute, and Naxi Culture Research Society, have led to numerous large-scale academic exchanges and seminars. These activities have played a positive role in protecting Dongba culture.

In the 1990s, young artists established the "Modern Dongba Painting School", incorporating the ancient, simple Dongba painting style and Dongba script into contemporary art. Artists of this school not only create modern Dongba paintings but also produce Dongba-style wood carvings, prints, and other crafts. These Dongba art pieces, rich in Naxi ethnic characteristics, are also extensively used in Lijiang's tourism industry. By interpreting Dongba painting and combining historical perspectives, one can understand the aesthetic spirit of the Naxi ancestors and gain insights into their lives and culture. The preservation of Dongba painting should not only focus on its form but also its meaning. Only through the combined efforts of various sectors, such as government, research institutes, and universities, can Dongba painting be preserved and passed down effectively.

7. Conclusions

At present, research on iconography exhibits a diversified development trend. With the increasing availability of translations of original works on iconography, scholars in China have gradually shifted from initial methodological discussions of iconographic theories to the exploration of iconographic applications. There has been a notable rise in multifaceted discussions encompassing culture, history, folklore, and religion in the study of Chinese paintings. The systematic study of *The Road to Heaven* employs iconography as a theoretical framework, integrating multidisciplinary research methods such as formal analysis, literature reviews, and folklore studies. This approach facilitates comprehensive research, yielding a more nuanced, innovative, and exploratory interpretation in advancing the understanding of more profound iconographic theories.

The Naxi ethnic group is surrounded by the cultures of the Han, Tibetan, and Bai ethnic groups, which has furnished it with unique soil and nutrients. It has enabled Naxi culture to flourish in the interstices, ultimately creating a phenomenon often known as the miracle of a small ethnic group with a great culture in historical and contemporary contexts. Through the iconographic interpretation of *The Road to Heaven*, it becomes evident that the Naxi people have developed a unique life philosophy by exploring life's origin, contemplating the relationship between humans and nature, managing interpersonal dynamics, and pursuing the ultimate purpose in life. The Naxi people possess a deep love and reverence for nature, actively seeking to live in harmony with nature and society. Their ultimate goal is to return to their ancestral homeland and the original life space, articulating their aspirations for a long-lasting and eternal life view. By analyzing *The Road to Heaven*, it is clear that the Naxi ancestors have drawn upon, integrated, and further developed the positive elements of Bon religion, Tibetan Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism to enhance and enrich their cultural heritage. It is merely a glimpse into the Naxi people's capacity for learning and leveraging the strengths of other ethnic groups. Every culture must evolve, advance, and establish itself within the cultural landscape for an extended period. Therefore, it is imperative for cultures to constantly absorb and integrate the outstanding elements of other ethnic cultures. *The Road to Heaven* embodies cultural concepts, social perspectives, and the quest for the essence of the life of the Naxi people, emphasizing the profound interconnection between art and daily life, as well as the intellectual culture.

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Notes

[1] *The Mawangdui T-shaped Silk painting* (馬王堆 T 形非衣帛畫) is a painting work of the Xihan Dynasty in China. Examples were excavated between 1972 and 1974 from Han tombs No. 1 and No. 3 in Mawangdui, located in Changsha City, Hunan Province. There are five silk paintings, including one from Tomb 1 and four from Tomb 3. These artworks were created during the reign of Emperor Wen of Han and are the earliest known single paintings discovered from the Han Dynasty to date. The Tomb 1 painting measures 92 cm in width at the top, 47.7 cm at the bottom, and has a total length of 205 cm. It is T-shaped and features a complete and clear image. From top to bottom, the painting depicts scenes from the heavenly realm, the human realm, and the underworld. The silk painting interconnects gods, humans, and beasts, presenting a romantic and unrestrained vision that embodies the pursuit of eternal life (see Z. Tian 2007, pp. 1–57).

[2] *The Jinqueshan Xihan Painting* (金雀山西漢帛畫) was unearthed from Han Tomb No. 9 in Jinque Mountain, Linyi, Shandong 1974. This artwork served as a type of funeral banner. The upper section of the painting depicts the celestial realm, while the middle section portrays scenes of the tomb owner engaged in various activities. The lower section illustrates an underwater or oceanic realm featuring images of fish, dragons, and other aquatic creatures, symbolizing the underworld. The central portion of the painting is crucial to the overall narrative, showcasing the tomb owner and significant events from his life. The upper section represents the Heavenly Court, symbolized by the sun and moon. Above the sky, clouds are depicted, with mountains below that seem to touch the heavens. During the Han Dynasty, the belief in immortals was prevalent, and people often fantasized about flying to heaven to achieve immortality. The mountains illustrated in this painting suggest that the souls of the deceased can rise from the mountaintop to reach the Heavenly Court. This silk painting vividly expresses the aspirations of the Han people for the soul's transformation into immortality (see X. Li 2016, pp. 92–98).

[3] In the early days, the Naxi people mainly worshipped the color black; the original meaning of Naxi is "black people" and, by extension, "people who worship black", where "black" represents strong, great, invincible, and conquering power. This has an intrinsic relationship with the nature worship of the Naxi ancestors. Therefore, in the Dongba paintings, black signifies power and magnitude. For instance, a tree depicted with black dots represents a large forest, mountain pictograms marked with a black dot indicate a large mountain, and multiple black dots indicate multiple large mountains. In the later period, when it was separated from the ancient *Qiang* (羌族), white worship had already begun to sprout, and after migrating to the *Jinsha River* (金沙江) basin, it was influenced by the white worship of the surrounding Zang and the Bai nationality (白族), and white worship became the mainstream of the Naxi color worship, with white representing goodness and justice and black symbolizing evil and brutality (see J. Yang 2021, pp. 127–32).

[4] The numbers shown in the picture of *The Road to Heaven* are 33, 18, 13, 9, 7, etc. In the Dongba religion, these numbers are important auspicious numbers of the Dongba religion, and they also have some kind of mysterious power, reflecting the numerical aesthetic consciousness of the Naxi people. This unique aesthetic preference for numbers is not a simple coincidence but is deeply influenced by the worship of sacred symbolic numbers in the cosmic system of space and mysticism in Bon Religion (苯教) and Buddhism (see Yan and Liu 2008, pp. 10–14).

[5] Dongbashiro (東巴什羅), also known as Dingbashiro (丁巴什羅), was the founder and guru of the Naxi Dongba religion. He is worshipped as a guru and has a high status in the Dongba religion. The birth, preaching, and death of Dongbashiro are recorded in the Dongba sutras, and his deeds of subduing demons and devils are also widely circulated among the people (see J. Yang 2020, pp. 6–15).

[6] Congrenlien (從忍利恩) is the legendary ancestor of the Naxi people. According to the Naxi Dongba script "Chongban Tu" (崇搬圖), he survived the great flood in ancient times and endured various dangerous tests set by the sky god Zhilao Apu (知勞阿普). After passing these tests, he married Zhilao Apu's daughter, Chenhongbaobai (襯恒褒白), and together, they tilled the land and herded animals, struggling to make a living. They had three sons, who grew up speaking three different languages and eventually formed three ethnic groups: the Tibetan (藏族), the Naxi (納西族), and the Bai (白族) people. These groups settled in different places and prospered through generations. Nowadays, the Naxi people hold grand ceremonies to worship Congrenlien during the Chinese New Year and in July, expressing their reverence for this legendary figure (see X. He 2013, pp. 168, 170).

[7] The *Chongban Tu* (崇搬圖) is a Chinese phonetic translation of the Naxi language, which means *Records of Human Migration*. It is written in Naxi hieroglyphics and is a long epic poem of the Naxi people. It mainly narrates the origin, evolution, and development of the universe, all things, and humanity. The text posits that the universe and all things originated from chaos. In the chaotic era, the heaven and earth had not yet separated, and only the "shadows" and symbols of the heaven and earth, sun, moon, mountains, and other things could be seen. Later, through the evolution stages of various specific materials, such as sunlight, gemstones, air, sound, eggs, and chickens, the gods who created the heavens and the earth were born. After the

appearance of humans, conflicts with the gods occurred. The gods used floods to drown humans, and only Congrenlien, one of the human ancestors, survived. Congrenlien later married the daughter of the god, Chenhongbaobai. With the help of Chenhongbaobai, Congrenlien conquered the gods with his wisdom and labor skills and obtained the seeds of all things from the gods. Subsequently, they migrated to the human world together and gave birth to the various ethnic groups (see X. He 2013, pp. 168, 170).

[8] The Bon Religion (苯教), also known as the Bonpo Religion (苯波教), is an ancient and primitive religion originating from the region of ancient Xiangxiong (象雄) in Tibet. The history of this religion can be traced back to 1917 BCE, making it over 3800 years old. The Bon Religion was widely practiced in Tibetans before the introduction of Buddhism, and it is characterized by the worship of nature, including the sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, lakes, cattle, sheep, birds, and beasts, among other natural objects. The religion holds that these natural objects all possess divine qualities (see Meng 2013, pp. 25–30).

[9] Tibetan Buddhism (藏傳佛教) is a theological religion, commonly known as Lamaism (喇嘛教). It is prevalent in Tibet (西藏), Sichuan (四川), Yunnan (雲南), Gansu (甘肅), Qinghai (青海), Xinjiang (新疆), and Inner Mongolia (内蒙古) and has spread to Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia, the Mongolian People's Republic, and the Buryatia Republic of Russia. Tibetan Buddhism has been integrated with Zang traditional culture and combines Mahayana Buddhism with Esoteric Buddhism. Its scriptures are mainly in the Tibetan language system. Over time, various sects have emerged in Tibetan Buddhism, including the Nyingma (寧瑪派), Kagyu (噶舉派), Sakya (薩迦派,) and Gelug (格魯派) schools (see Zheng 2020, pp. 11–15).

[10] Mahayana Buddhism (漢傳佛教), also known as Northern Buddhism or Sinic Buddhism, pertains to the branch of Buddhism that was disseminated from ancient India to the inland regions of China, as well as Korea and Japan. The scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism are primarily categorized under the Han system, also known as Chinese language Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism has been integrated with local Chinese culture, giving rise to Buddhist sects with Chinese characteristics, such as the Pure Land Sect (淨土宗), the Zen Sect (禪宗), the Huayan Sect (華嚴宗), the Vinaya sect (律宗), etc. These sects further evolved and prospered during the Sui (隋) and Tang (唐) dynasties in China and are collectively referred to as the "Eight Sects of Han Buddhism (漢傳八宗). Emphasizing meditation and enlightenment, Mahayana Buddhism holds individual cultivation and enlightenment in high regard. The Chan Sect advocates for direct experience, while the Pure Land Sect emphasizes faith in Amitabha Buddha and aspires to achieve the blissful world of the afterlife (see Zheng 2020, pp. 11–15).

[11] Taoism 道教, a religious entity founded by the Chinese people, regards Tao (道) as its paramount belief. Tao, being formless and invisible, gives birth to the heavens, earth, and all things within them. The manifestation of Tao in human beings and various entities is referred to as Morality (德). Therefore, all things hold Tao in reverence and esteem Morality. As a religious entity, Taoism possesses not only its unique scriptures, doctrines, belief in immortal gods, and rituals but also its religious lineage, religious organizations, disciplinary system, and religious activity sites (see Yin and Nie 2023, pp. 30–36).

[12] The Günaruo Deity Mountain (居那若羅神山), also known as the Günashilo Mountain (居那什羅山) is an important mountain mentioned in the Dongba scriptures and is also called the mountain of the gods of the Dongba religion. It is the ancestral homeland of the Naxi people and the final destination of the soul-sending route. In addition, in the Dongba religion, Günaruo Mountain is also said to be the center of the universe, a bridge between heaven and earth. This mountain appears under different names in the belief systems of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Bon religion, such as Mount Sumeru (須彌山) and Mount Gangdisê (岡底斯山). This shows that the Naxi people's cosmology has been influenced by historical influences from India, Tibet, and Bon, especially by the spread of Bon culture (see McKhann et al. 2018, pp. 188–96).

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