

# Analyzing the Commodification of Naxi Language and Culture in Tourism

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**Abstract:** In the era of globalization, language and culture are increasingly constructed as marketable assets with symbolic and economic value. This paper examines the commodification of the Naxi language in ethnic tourism in Yunnan, China, focusing on how traditional linguistic elements, the Dongba script, are repurposed to attract tourists and generate economic benefits. Using content analysis and symbolic economy theory, this study investigates the artistic integration of traditional language into cultural and creative products, as well as the role of linguistic landscape in reshaping people's perception of language and amplifying the symbolic value of minority languages.

**Keywords:** Language commodification; Symbolic economy; Dongba script; Ethnic tourism; Cultural products; Linguistic landscape; Naxi language

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## 1. Introduction

China's linguistic diversity, particularly among its 55 ethnic minorities, is exemplified by Yunnan, where geographic isolation has preserved distinct languages and traditions. Historically reliant on agriculture, Yunnan's development surged with improved transportation, transforming it into a hub for ethnic tourism. This shift has turned local dialects into valuable cultural resources. Globalization further accelerates language commodification, as minority languages gain economic value in tourism and marketing (Heller, 1999, 2010). Ethnic groups like the Naxi leverage digital platforms to promote their culture, while linguistic heritage appears in tourism products, music, and fashion (Yang, Xue & Song, 2022).

## 2. Literature Review

### (1) Language commodification in Chinese ethnic minority group

Heller (1999, 2010) outlines two methods of language commodification: one is legitimizing a language to establish authenticity, and the other is transforming language into a commodity, as in the case of tourism. In China, there are 56 recognized ethnic groups, ranging from Tibetans and Uyghurs to Mongols and Manchus (and including the largest group of Han-Chinese). The densely forested, mountainous southwest of China is inhabited by a variety of smaller ethnic groups, of which the Naxi (also known as Nakhi in Wades-Giles spelling) is one. The commodification of languages like Naxi aligns with the latter. Just like the commodification of China Town analysed by Leeman and Modan, the Dongba Script also serves as pragmatic tools and symbols of cultural authenticity that enhance the tourist experience and drive economic value (Leeman & Modan, 2009).

### (2) Naxi community of lijiang town

The languages of the ethnic majority contribute to the linguistic diversity of China. Lijiang, a major tourism city in Yunnan, has experienced rapid growth in its tourism sector. Ethnic groups like the Bai and Yi focus on activities such as clothing rentals, photography, local food tasting, traditional performances, and handicrafts (Nie & Yao, 2024).

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The Naxi community, however, distinguishes itself by emphasizing the preservation and promotion of its unique Dongba script alongside similar tourism practices, making language commodification central to its development.

Figure1 is the rough sketch of the Dongba script, one of the few surviving pictographic writing systems, exemplifies linguistic commodification in Yunnan's ethnic tourism. Its cultural value and aesthetic appeal make it ideal for cultural products like souvenirs and packaging. Marketed as a symbol of authenticity, the Naxi language attracts tourists seeking unique experiences. New media platforms, such as short video apps, have further amplified its visibility, appealing to younger generations and tourists, despite its limited use in daily life.



Figure 1 Rough Sketch of Dongba script

### (3) Customers' preferences for cultural products

In the Lijiang area, although Naxi garments are available as souvenirs, their high price, large size, and limited practicality for tourists make them less popular (Rokpelnis et al., 2018). Instead, smaller, portable cultural products, which are more affordable and practical, have gained more popularity. Items such as notebooks, maps, bookmarks, and postcards often incorporate cultural elements like Dongba script, reimagined into patterns symbolizing good fortune and well-being. Despite most tourists' limited understanding of traditional culture (TK), they tend to favor purchasing cultural and creative products over similar market alternatives (Rokpelnis et al., 2018). This preference plays a significant role in the economic benefits derived from language commodification, demonstrating the symbolic and economic value that traditional linguistic elements, like Dongba script, can offer in the tourism market.

As consumer economies evolve and interest in traditional culture grows, tourists are increasingly motivated to preserve memories of their experiences through tangible products. Their motivations range from supporting the preservation of TK and its knowledge holders to consuming what they perceive as "authentic" items, often without a full understanding of their cultural significance (Rokpelnis et al., 2018). In partnership with tourism operators, businesses have developed a range of cultural products that blend cultural heritage with functional design, making these items both meaningful and practical. This integration not only enhances their commercial appeal but also contributes significantly to local tourism revenue.

While some studies analyze tourists' attitudes toward traditional souvenirs, such as Dongba paper (Rokpelnis et al., 2018), the rapid growth of the consumer economy has led to the creation of a wider variety of cultural and creative products. Items such as notebooks, maps, bookmarks, and postcards have become popular, featuring elements like Dongba script, symbolizing good fortune and well-being. Even products that do not strictly adhere

to traditional craftsmanship now incorporate cultural elements, reflecting the expanding commercialization of traditional culture. This paper posits that these newly emerged products, which incorporate traditional language in creative ways, are a key aspect of language commodification and warrant deeper investigation.

#### **(4) Research gaps and focus of this study**

Existing research on the Naxi community often focuses on the linguistic landscape, examining how signage and public displays reflect cultural identity and authenticity (Nie & Yao, 2024). Some studies, such as those by Yang, Xue, & Song (2022), explore interviews with cultural tourism pioneers, analyzing how their cultural performances, such as singing and dancing, are transformed into products that generate authenticity and foster tourism development. While these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between culture and tourism, they tend to focus on traditional forms of cultural expression and the role of language in public spaces.

However, as Heller (2010) argues, language commodification involves transforming language into a commodity, particularly in the context of tourism, where language is used not just for communication but as a marketable asset. This essay extends the analysis of linguistic landscapes by incorporating the growing market of cultural and creative products. It explores how traditional linguistic elements, such as the Dongba script, are artistically integrated into product designs to promote traditional culture and attract tourists. By applying content analysis and symbolic economy theory, this study examines how cultural heritage is revitalized through innovative product designs, shifting from traditional representations to consumer-oriented cultural products.

This study shifts the focus to more contemporary cultural products, examining how the integration of linguistic elements into modern designs—such as souvenirs, fashion items, and artwork—responds to tourist preferences. To illustrate this process, the study will analyze tourist evaluations of these products and linguistic landscapes through images, providing a visual representation of how these products influence consumer behavior and tourism revenue.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **(1) Language as capital and its role in tourism**

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital explains how individuals or communities accumulate and convert resources—economic, cultural, or social—to maintain or improve their position in a social structure. Language, as a form of cultural capital, holds particular value in tourism, where ethnic language like Naxi is commodified for its symbolic value as authentic representations of cultural identity. These languages become cultural commodities consumed by tourists seeking unique experiences, transforming linguistic competence into symbolic capital. This symbolic capital can then be exchanged for economic profit, enabling communities to attract material benefits by promoting cultural authenticity.

#### **(2) The symbolic economy**

Heller (1999, 2010) discusses how language is transformed into an economic resource, particularly in tourism. As noted by Cameron (2001) and Coupland (2003), languages' symbolic value lies in representing cultural authenticity, connecting cultural identity with economic gain. This highlights how minority languages, such as the Naxi, have been commodified through tourism. Zukin (1995) and Hannigan (2005) argue that culture, including language, has become a tool for economic gain. In areas like Chinatown in Washington, D.C., language is marketed as a symbol of authenticity that generates economic value (Leeman & Modan, 2009), and a similar situation exists in Yunnan. Within this framework, this study examines how the language and cultural heritage of the Naxi people are commodified in tourism and analyzes how cultural heritage is transformed into commodifiable assets in tourism.

## 4. Methodology

### (1) Data collection methods

Data collection involved gathering images and posts from Baidu, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu by searching relevant keywords such as "Naxi cultural products," "linguistic landscape," "Dongba Script," and "Lijiang Naxi Community." These keywords were selected to ensure relevance to the study's focus on Naxi language commodification. Additionally, user comments and ratings on these platforms were examined to capture public perceptions. The collected data were then qualitatively analyzed to identify the presentation of Naxi language commodification in cultural attractions and products, as well as people's attitudes toward this phenomenon.

### (2) Data analysis methods

This study employs content analysis, defined as a research technique for making valid inferences from texts to their usage contexts" (Ford, 2004, p. 1111). It examines written texts, images, and symbols to identify recurring themes and communication patterns (Weber, 1990). The collected data were categorized to uncover themes related to the symbolic role of the Naxi language, the commodification of Naxi cultural resources, and public perceptions within tourism contexts.

Using symbolic economy theory, this analysis also investigates how designers incorporate Dongba Script into product designs to enhance cultural appeal. By linking these findings to language commodification, the study highlights how Naxi linguistic elements are transformed into marketable assets.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### (1) Cultural products in tourist attractions

The images below are sourced from Baidu and Chinese social media platforms like Xiaohongshu and Weibo. They represent commonly found cultural products from the Naxi community that are popular among tourists.



Figure 2 Display of Naxi Cultural and Creative Products



Figure 3 Display of Naxi Cultural and Creative Products



Figure 4 Display of Naxi Cultural and Creative Products

The following images are sourced from Baidu and Chinese social media platforms like Xiaohongshu and Weibo, showcasing commonly found cultural products from the Naxi community that are popular among tourists.

Through content analysis, these images illustrate how the Dongba script is commodified as a symbol of Naxi culture, linking visual language with the consumer market. The products, including ceramic mugs, bookmarks, cloth bags, and clothing, are clearly designed for the tourist market, featuring characteristics of typical souvenirs such as portability, practicality, and simplicity. The Dongba script is stylized into vibrant, decorative patterns with colors like red, yellow, blue, and green, and some products include Chinese explanations beneath the symbols to make them more accessible to tourists. These modernized visual representations not only enhance the recognizability of Naxi culture but also appeal to the aesthetic preferences of tourists.

From the symbolic economy perspective, these products are examples of how culture is transformed into a commodity. The use of the Dongba script gives the products symbolic value, allowing them to evoke cultural authenticity and emotional connection without requiring a deep understanding of the script's meaning. As noted by Heller (1999, 2010), language and culture are increasingly commodified, especially in tourism, where they are leveraged as economic assets. The Dongba script, as a symbol of Naxi culture, becomes a tool for economic gain, tapping into tourists' desires for authenticity while simultaneously contributing to the commercialization of cultural heritage. Zukin (1995) and Hannigan (2005) argue that cultural elements, including language, are turned into resources that can generate profit, and this applies to Naxi culture in the tourism context.

The symbolic economy framework also helps explain how these products cater to tourists' emotional needs. The Dongba script not only generates curiosity but also facilitates cultural engagement through simplified and playful designs. This approach broadens the appeal of Naxi culture, offering tourists both a tangible product and an emotional connection to the local culture. In doing so, these products embody the commodification of culture—transforming cultural symbols into marketable goods that align with both the tourists' quest for authenticity and the economic imperatives of the tourism industry. This dual function of cultural symbols highlights the tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting it to meet the demands of the globalized tourism market.

## **(2) Linguistic landscape in tourist attractions**

The linguistic landscape, comprising visible linguistic and semiotic materials in the physical environment, plays a pivotal role in shaping tourists' experiences by creating a sense of cultural immersion and authenticity (Jaworski, 2014). Dongba characters, prominently displayed in various tourist attractions, reinforce this immersive effect. For instance, Figure 5 highlights the use of Dongba script on a highway sign, signaling the entry into a region rich in Naxi cultural heritage. Such signs imbue even mundane aspects of travel with symbolic meaning, making the environment feel uniquely connected to the local culture.

Figures 6 and 7 illustrate the evolving integration of Dongba script into cultural commodification through visual design. Figure 6 compares two "Smoking Area" signs from different periods, showing a shift from the simpler earlier design (top) with Dongba characters alongside Chinese and English text, to the later version (bottom) which features a more ornamental style with vibrant colors. This transition highlights a growing emphasis on aesthetic appeal and cultural symbolism. Similarly, Figure 7 examines two versions of a shop sign for "The Yak Meat of Naxi Girl," demonstrating how Dongba script has been incorporated into local business branding. The earlier design (left) features mostly Chinese and English text with minimal embellishment, while the updated version (right) prominently displays Dongba characters, emphasizing cultural uniqueness and enhancing the store's appeal by leveraging the symbolic value of the script to convey authenticity and cultural richness.

These examples highlight how the linguistic landscape—encompassing highway signs, smoking areas, and storefronts—transforms Dongba script into a symbolic cultural asset. By embedding this script into public spaces, it allows visitors to engage with the idea of Naxi culture visually and symbolically, even without understanding the



language. Such symbolic meanings, including notions of authenticity and heritage, serve as powerful marketing tools, underscoring the role of language in the commodification of culture within tourism.



Figure 5 Dongba Script on Highway Sign



Figure 6 "Smoking Area" sign of a local ethnic hotel in 2016 (top) and 2021 (bottom) [Chinese text: 吸烟区 Dongba script: 吸烟区 English text: SMOKING AREA], adapted from Nie & Yao (2024, p. 831)



Figure 7 Chain store signs in 2016 (left) and 2021 (right) [Dongba script: 胖金妹牦牛肉 Chinese text: 胖金妹牦牛肉 English text: THE YAK MEAT OF NAXI GIRL], adapted from Nie & Yao (2024, p. 832).

### (3) Public perception and feedback

The public's reaction to Dongba script reflects a deepening interest in and appreciation for Naxi culture. For example, Figure 9 showcases a restaurant signboard featuring Dongba characters, which has captivated users on Xiaohongshu. Many expressed curiosity about the script's meaning and shared their admiration for its aesthetic appeal. This interest demonstrates how Dongba script resonates with individuals, sparking discussions and fostering a sense of connection with Naxi traditions.

Similarly, Figure 10 highlights Sina Weibo users actively sharing their enthusiasm for the Dongba language. Comments often express awe at the uniqueness of the script and a desire to learn more about its cultural significance. This widespread appreciation reveals how the public views Dongba script as a symbol of heritage and identity, even among those unfamiliar with its linguistic intricacies.

These public reactions underline how Dongba script has become more than a cultural artifact—it serves as a bridge connecting diverse audiences to Naxi heritage, inspiring curiosity and cultural pride.



Figure 9 People expressing strong interest in the Dongba language on a restaurant signboard featured on Xiaohongshu and the translation

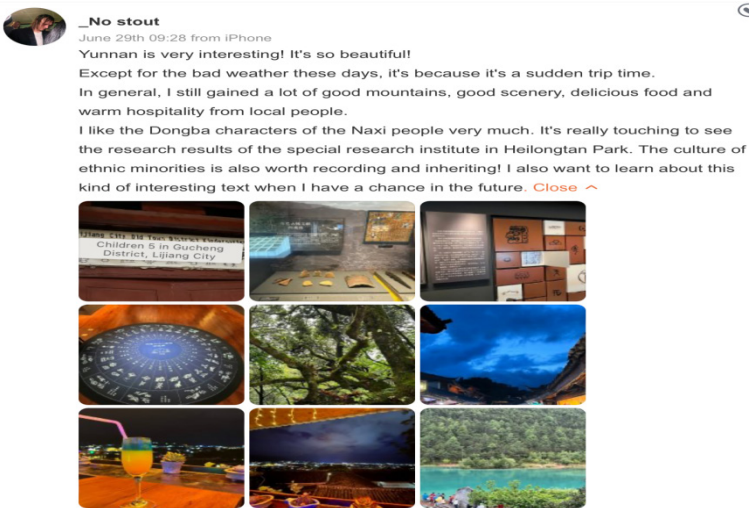


Figure 10 Sina Weibo Users Sharing Their Enthusiasm and Appreciation for the Dongba Language

6. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of cultural products and linguistic landscapes on the commodification of the Naxi Dongba script within the context of an emerging symbolic economy. Through an analysis of the design of cultural and creative products and the application of symbolic economy theory, the study demonstrated how the originally utilitarian script has been transformed into diverse, aesthetically pleasing patterns imbued with auspicious meanings. By contrasting it with Chinese characters and enhancing it with vibrant colors, these designs significantly increased the appeal of the products, integrating the script into the commodity economy and creating economic value.

On this basis, the Dongba script fully leveraged its symbolic value, attracting tourists who, despite lacking prior knowledge of the script, were willing to purchase related cultural products. The study also explored the role of linguistic landscapes in creating authentic cultural experiences and collected public feedback through mainstream social media, emphasizing the positive reception generated by the commodification of Dongba script.

A limitation of this study is the absence of interviews with tourists and members of the Dongba community, which could provide deeper insights into their perspectives on language commodification and its associated challenges.

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