

ภาพวัฒนธรรมทางน้ำของชาวบีร่ออบทะเลสาบэрhai:
ข้อค้นพบจากแผนที่ชีเอ่อเหอในพงศาวดารภาพวาดน่านเจ้า

Visualizing the Bai Water Culture around Erhai:
Insights from the Xi'er He Map of The Illustrated History of Nanzhao

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Abstract

The Xi'er He Map at the end of The Illustrated History of Nanzhao is one of the earliest visual records of how Bai communities around Erhai understood water and spiritual power. The map combines the lake, spatial directions, and water-deity figures, turning ideas about water, the water system and spatial order into a visible form. This study reads the map as a visual text and focuses on its main symbols: snakes, fish, and conch shells. The interpretation draws on the scroll's text and on Bai myths from the Erhai region. The analysis identifies a symbolic system in which snakes act as protectors of boundaries; fish represent growth and abundance and conch shells mark stability and order. These symbols show how Bai people linked water, life, and community. The study also highlights the use of visual texts to understand water culture, as images can carry memory and identity, and suggests that future work may compare this map with Naga imagery in the Mekong Basin to explore shared patterns in regional water beliefs.

Keywords: The Illustrated History of Nanzhao, Bai Water Culture, Xi'er He Map

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Introduction

In China, The Illustrated History of Nanzhao is sometimes called The Historical Painting of Nanzhao or The Historical Painting of the Restoration of Nanzhao. The work comprises two scrolls, an “Illustration Volume” with 13 sheets and a “Text Volume” with 9 sections. Together, these volumes combine visual and written narratives, representing an early form of pictorial documentation in Bai culture (Li, 1967). The scroll was created to record the history and cosmology of the Bai Kingdom in the Dali region. Originally preserved in the royal archives of the Nanzhao court, the scroll disappeared for several centuries. No records of its whereabouts exist from the Song, Yuan or Ming dynasties (960-1644). It resurfaced during the Qing period and is now housed at the Arashiyama Museum in Kyoto, Japan (Yang & Wang, 2018; Yang, 2022; Zhang, 2024). Today, it remains an invaluable source for understanding the early history and Bai culture formation of the Bai people around Erhai Lake. Scholarly study of The Illustrated History of Nanzhao began with Chapin (1944), who dated the scroll to the twelfth or thirteenth century based on its imagery. While scholars continue to debate whether the current illustrations are original or later reproductions, most agree the work dates to the Dali Kingdom period or earlier (Wen, 2001, p.2). Based on the painting’s themes and style, many attribute it to the reign of Emperor Shunchengzhen of Nanzhao(897-902), which gives the scroll its current title. The relationship between the illustrations and texts has puzzled researchers, as they do not fully align with existing historical records. Some scholars interpret the images as oral myths or legends, while others consider them “the most precious historical materials on the early religious history of Nanzhao” (Wang, 1992, pp. 186-204). Research has since expanded to include questions of textual authenticity, historical context, artistic features, iconography, and religious meaning.

The Illustration of the Xi'er He Map appears at the end of The Illustrated History of Nanzhao and serves as an essential component linking the scroll’s major themes. Scholars have interpreted this illustration in various ways. Yang (2002) argued that it confirms the Han-era tradition of snake worship in Yunnan. Hou (2002) focused on the text describing rituals involving fish and conch offerings to river gods, suggesting these were meant to “appease disasters” and may relate to Han cosmological beliefs about life and death. Yang and Wang (2018) identified the intertwined red snakes as the “ancestral serpent” still worshipped by the Bai people, linking the image to ancestor veneration. He (2019) saw the

illustration as evidence of aquatic deity worship in the Erhai region, representing primitive animal totems of local inhabitants. Yang (2022) connected the snakes to flood narratives, interpreting the image as twin deities calming the waters.

Earlier scholarship has focused mainly on artistic or religious interpretations of The Illustration of the Xi'er He Map, while few studies have examined it from the perspective of Bai water culture. This study is situated within the broader historical context of the Nanzhao and Dali periods, when the Tea-Horse Road connected Yunnan with Southeast and Central Asia, facilitating extensive cultural exchange (Zhang, 2024). As the earliest surviving paper record from Yunnan (Yang, 2022), The Illustrated History of Nanzhao offers crucial evidence for understanding how visual imagery functioned as a medium of cultural expression in this region. The discussion briefly mentions Naga water culture in Thailand as a reference point for possible future research, contributing to the broader understanding of water culture across the Mekong region.

Objective

1. To analyze how the Xi'er He Map visualizes Bai Water Culture around Erhai through the symbols of snakes, fish, and conch.
2. To interpret the cultural meanings of these symbols in relation to Bai identity, belief systems, and ecological worldview.
3. To examine the broader relevance of these symbols in the Mekong region and suggest directions for comparative cultural research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework starts from the research objectives. It brings together three methods: documentary analysis, non-participant observation, and semiotic analysis. These methods create a three-level pathway for reading The Xi'er He Map. Figure 1 shows how the research objectives link to the methods. It also shows how the semiotic framework guides the interpretation. Together, they help explain how the symbolic system of Bai Water Culture around Erhai is constructed.

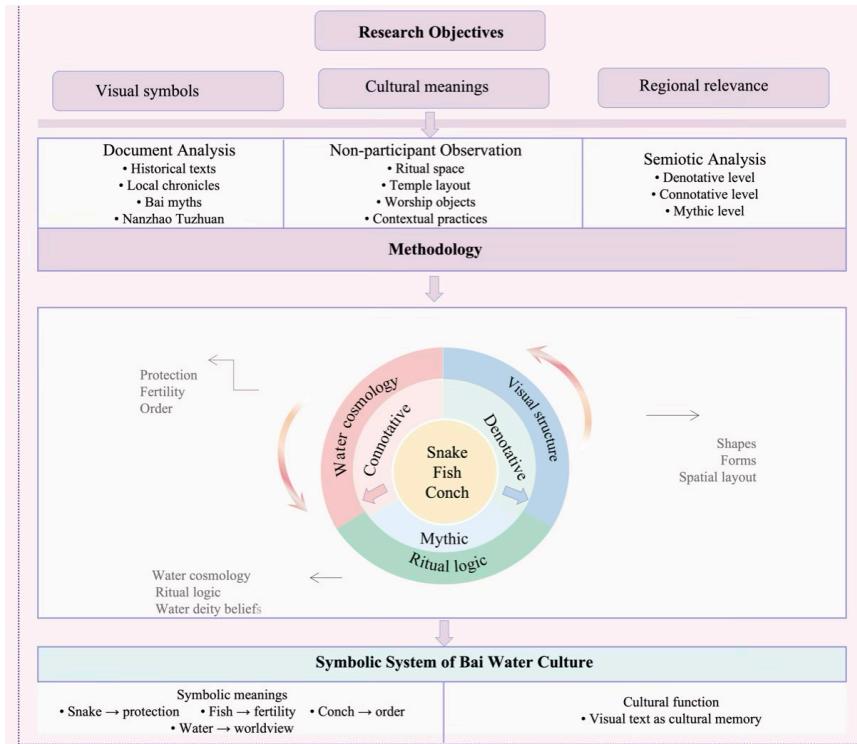


Figure 1 conceptual framework

(Owner, Rongqian Yang)

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, integrating documentary analysis, observational fieldwork, and semiotic analysis to examine how Bai Water Culture around Erhai is represented in the Xi'er He Map.

1. Documentary Analysis

This method involves reviewing historical texts, local gazetteers, mythological accounts, and existing scholarship related to Bai water-deity worship in the Erhai region. The Xi'er He Map in The Illustrated History of Nanzhao serves as the core visual text. Additional sources such as Nanzhao Yeshi, Bai Gu Tong Ji and Dali Zhi are examined to understand the historical background and cultural context of water-related symbolism. High-resolution reproductions of The Illustrated History of Nanzhao are used to identify visual elements and symbolic patterns relevant to Bai water culture.

2. Non-Participant Observation

To supplement the documentary analysis, this study employed non-participant observation at selected Bai water-deity worship spaces around Erhai, such as the Dragon King Temple in Gusheng Village. The observations focused on the ritual environment, spatial layout, symbolic objects, and the material setting of water-deity worship, rather than on human behavior. This method serves to contextualize the visual logic found in the Xi'er He Map and provides contemporary cultural references. The observational data are used only as background context and do not enter the visual comparison or the semiotic analysis, so as to maintain consistency with the study's focus on historical visual texts.

3. Semiotic Analysis

This study adopts a semiotic approach to interpret the visual symbols in the Xi'er He Map. The analysis proceeds on three interpretive levels. The first focuses on the denotative features of the images, including the forms, spatial positions, and compositional relationships of the snake, fish, and conch shells. The second level interprets their connotative meanings by linking these symbols with Bai myths, water-deity beliefs, and local cultural practices. The third level examines the broader symbolic structure shaped by mythic narratives, which helps reveal how early Bai communities conceptualized water, life, and communal order. This three-level structure provides a clear analytical foundation and aligns the visual reading of the map with established semiotic theory.

Research Results

3.1 Generation of Visual Texts: Overview of the Xi'er He Map

1.1 Extracting Bai Water Culture around Erhai from The Illustrated History of Nanzhao

To understand the water culture of the Bai communities around Erhai, it is necessary to look at the history and visual system behind the Illustrated History of Nanzhao. During the Nanzhao period, the people living in the Erhai basin were Bai (Fang, 2001), and their social and economic life had already moved beyond the stage of primitive society. Buddhism, Daoism, and various local religious traditions were also emerging or spreading across the region at that time (He, 2019). This context also shows why the Xi'er He Map is more than a simple illustration: it reflects how Bai communities used visual forms to make sense of water, ritual, and the world around them.

According to the preface of The Illustrated History of Nanzhao: "I hereby order that the holy teachings are promoted and practiced in this great nation, which came from above



... benefiting the present and later generations, eliminating disasters, and bringing blessings ... (Wang, 1992) . This suggests that the Illustrated History of Nanzhao was most likely created under official sponsorship. Its purpose was not only to present the Guanyin founding myth but also to use visual imagery to announce the unity of political and spiritual authority in the Nanzhao kingdom (He, 2019; Zhang & Yin, 2024). The scroll provided an important visual and symbolic foundation for the Bai people's worldview around Erhai, especially the formation of water culture and the integration of multiple religious traditions.

The scroll is organized into three main parts.

The first part (Figure 2) tells the story of Xinuoluo, a farmer who received help from Guanyin in the form of an Indian monk and later established the Nanzhao kingdom in Weishan :



Figure 2 Xinuluo establishes the Nanzhao Kingdom

Source: <https://www.yunnanexplorer.com/static/download/nanzhao/nanzhaotuzhuan.pdf>

(Owner, Ludwig M Brinckmann)

The second part (Figure 3) describes the ritual of worshipping the Iron Pillar and recounts how the pillar enabled the ruler of the Bai Kingdom, Zhang Lejin Qiu, to yield the throne to Xinuoluo.





Figure 3 The Bai ruler cedes the throne

Source: <https://www.yunnanexplorer.com/static/download/nanzhao/nanzhaotuzhuan.pdf>
(Owner, Ludwig M Brinckmann)

The third part (Figure 4) narrates the moment when Guanyin revealed her true form at the Xi'er River.



Figure 4 Avalokiteśvara manifests at the Xi'er River

Source: <https://www.yunnanexplorer.com/static/download/nanzhao/nanzhaotuzhuan.pdf>
(Owner, Ludwig M Brinckmann)

Throughout the scroll, both visual description and narrative description appear side by side. The presence of lotus flowers, Garuda-like golden birds, and cloud patterns, together with the local legend of the Garuda controlling the waters of Erhai, the cloud motifs in Benzhu temples, and the lotus offerings in religious spaces, shows that these images are



not only artistic decoration. They also symbolize sacred beings and forces associated with water. Guanyin's appearance at the Xi'er River, the ancient name of Erhai, further reflects a worldview centered on the lake itself. Through water as a medium and Buddhism and political power as sources of legitimacy, the scroll created a visual language that later shaped Bai beliefs about water deities, Benzhu worship, and ecological concepts.

Taken together, the Illustrated History of Nanzhao is not only a key historical document for understanding Nanzhao. It is also an early visual text for tracing how Bai Water Culture around Erhai formed around Erhai and may represent the foundational imagery through which the “water–human–deity” relationship was imagined in the region.

3.1.2 The Xi'er He Map as a Visual Text of Bai Water Culture

The Xi'er He Map appears at the end of the Illustrated History of Nanzhao. Some scholars have noted that it continues the symbolic language used throughout the scroll to express the sacred nature of Nanzhao's political power. This visual strategy further reinforced the legitimacy of the Nanzhao kingdom and presented an auspicious vision of the Erhai landscape (Zhang & Yin, 2024). During the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdom periods, Erhai was regarded as a “sacred lake” (Yang & Wang, 2018). For this reason, the prominent use of water imagery and water-deity symbols in the Xi'er He Map (Figure 5) highlights the sacred status of Erhai even more clearly.



Figure 5 “Xi'er He Map”

Source: <https://www.yunnanexplorer.com/static/download/nanzhao/nanzhaotuzhuan.pdf>
(Owner, Ludwig M Brinckmann)

The text volume of the Xi'er He Map recorded: "The Xi'er He , the western river looks like an ear, namely Erhai Lake. It rules the sound of wind and reflects the shadow of Mount Fusang, with many auspicious trees conforming to the Five Constants, which suppresses the sound of the ear. Secondly, the river god has a gold bell and a goldfish. The goldfish has a white forehead and wheels on its head, entwined by a venomous snake. Residing on its left and right, they form the two ears. Sacrifices are offered to them, which is believed to eliminate disasters." The textual section of the scroll clearly states that the water deity of Erhai was composed of the "Golden Conch" and the "Golden Fish." This provides a direct description of how the concept of the Erhai water deity was understood during the Nanzhao period.

Due to space constraints, the author does not elaborate extensively here but instead fully transcribes the content of the image, annotated with Chinese Pinyin.

北弥直怯江

North Mízhíqiè river

西东

West East

西洱河者西河如耳即

Xīěr Hé, the Xīhé is like an ear,
meaning the ear[-shaped] large lake.

大海之耳也河神有
金螺金鱼也金鱼白

There are river spirits: a golden conch and a golden fish.
The golden fish has a white head,
above the head is a wheel, poisonous snakes
wind around it, left and right are divided into two rivers.

头头上有轮爰，毒
蛇绕之居之左右分
为二河也

龙尾江

Lóngwěi river

矣辅江

Yǐfǔ river

南

South

The West Ear River, the western river looks like an ear, namely the ear of the great sea. The goldfish has a white forehead and wheels on its head, entwined by a venomous snake. Residing on its left and right, they form the two rivers.

The scroll explicitly marked the east, west and south. The bottom was east, the top was west, and left was south. There was a big seal in the south and wave patterns in the upper east. The scroll depicted two intertwined snakes. The left snake raised its head high and the right snake lowered its head slightly. Coiled by them there were a goldfish on the left and a gold snail on the right. Apart from the snakes, fish, Conch and three rivers, there



was also Erhai Lake. The water gods of Erhai Lake were the goldfish and gold snail. The painting reinforces this water-deity structure through a visual format. The directions of east, south, and west are marked to indicate spatial orientation. Two intertwined snakes form the visual focus and encircle the Golden Fish and the Golden Conch. The fish on the left and the conch on the right are not perfectly symmetrical, but their shapes and visual weight create a sense of complementarity and dynamic balance. The map also labels waterways such as Longwei River and Yifu River, which reflect how people at the time understood the symbolic structure of the Erhai water system. At the bottom of the image, layers of water lines with different thicknesses portray waves and flowing water, emphasizing the sacred and dynamic nature of the lake. Together, these elements create a visual structure centered on water.

There are many local stories around Erhai from the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdom periods in which Buddhist monks or Achali monks subdue giant serpents. These stories are recorded with relatively clear historical contexts (He, 2019) and form an important part of the belief system that shapes Bai Water Culture around Erhai. Wang (1996) Regarding the fish and Conch in The Xi'er He Map in The Illustrated History of Nanzhao, ancient books recorded: "The deepest and longest ones of the branches inserting into Erhai from Mount Cangshan were the eastern one towards the city and the one towards Xizhou. The god of the southern branch was shaped like a goldfish with gold coins on its head, while the god of the northern one was shaped like a jade snail. If the two creatures appeared, it would be an auspicious omen." These records align closely with the snakes, fish, and conch depicted in the Xi'er He Map. This suggests that the map was not simply a drawing of a natural water landscape, but a visual text that systematized the Erhai water-deity concept through symbolic imagery.

Taken together, the textual and pictorial sections show how the Xi'er He Map uses snakes, fish, conch shells, flowing water patterns, river names, and spatial orientation to make Bai Water Culture around Erhai more concrete and visually legible. It also demonstrates why the map serves as an important visual source for understanding how the Bai people conceptualized the water deity of Erhai.

3.2. Semiotic Analysis of Snakes, Fish, and Conch in The Xi'er He Map

3.2.1 Snakes as Water God Symbols

At the center of the Xi'er He Map, two serpents appear in curved, crossing lines. Their bodies rest above the water patterns and create a steady sense of movement. The

serpents surround the golden fish and the golden conch, forming an enclosed visual space. Their heads meet at the top, and their tails touch at the bottom. One serpent lifts its head slightly with its mouth closed, which gives it a firm and alert look. The other serpent lowers its head a little and opens its mouth, leaning toward the conch in a gentler pose.

The paired serpents serve three main visual roles. They create a boundary by shaping an inside and an outside within the composition. They act as protectors by enclosing the fish and the conch like guardians, turning the center of the painting into a symbolic home for the water deity. Their curved bodies also respond to the flow of the water lines. This connection highlights a larger idea about water, life, and cyclical movement within the visual structure.

Although the textual volume does not explicitly depict snake as water deities, their prominent presence in the pictorial scroll indicates that snakes functioned symbolically within the Bai water belief system. This discrepancy between visual representation and textual omission provides an important entry point for semiotic analysis. Mirzoeff (1999) notes that images can express ideas that written text often avoids. This helps explain why the written section of the scroll does not name serpents as water deities, yet the painting places them at the center. The serpents function as part of the visual power structure. Their bodies circle and enclose the golden fish and golden conch, creating a sense of protection. Within this visual logic, the serpents mark and guard the water deity's space. Studies on Bai Water Culture around Erhai also point out that serpents carry protective and boundary-keeping meanings in local belief.

Scholarly research on southern ethnic group reveals a long-standing tradition of snakes worship. From the Dian Kingdom's snake knob gold seal with to Han dynasty records identifying "Dian" as a snake worship community, snakes were widely regarded as water gods, rain gods, and protective spirits across the region (Huo, 2002). Studies show that people lived around Erhai Lake 3,000 years ago, practicing agriculture, fishing, hunting, and raising animals (Zhang, 1990). The area developed rice cultivation techniques early, becoming one of Asia's first rice-growing regions (Yang, 1986.). These communities were settled rice farmers whose dependence on water for agriculture strengthened the cultural link between water and serpent deities (Zhang, 1990). Since agriculture depends on water, the region's climate suited snakes and pythons, leading early residents to worship them as gods, making snakes the primary water deities of Erhai Lake before the Nanzhao period (Zhao, 1991).



Stories from the Erhai region further reinforce the sacred role of serpents. In the well-known tale of the Daheitian deity, a green serpent removes the poison from the deity's body and saves the people from a deadly plague. This gives the serpent an association with healing and purification. Another story from Lvtou Village tells of a child who first appeared as a serpent and later transformed into a small yellow dragon at the age of three. He defeated an evil black dragon that caused floods and was later honored as the Dragon King of Erhai. These narratives show that serpents are more than guardians of the water. They are linked to natural power, cosmic order, and even political legitimacy, making them a central symbol in the Bai people's understanding of water and life around Erhai.

3.2.2. Fish as Signs of Fertility and Water Abundance

On the left side of the Xi'er He Map, a full-bodied and clearly outlined fish can be seen. Its head is painted in white and faces the center of the composition. A round white mark is drawn on its forehead, with a coin-sized dot placed above it. This feature may suggest the auspicious "gold coin" or "gold wheel" motif described in early texts. The body is outlined with thick strokes, and the outer contour is slightly reinforced to separate the fish from the surrounding water lines and the bodies of the two snakes. The fish is positioned slightly higher than the conch on the right, and the two form a balanced left-right relationship across the image. Its solid outline and full shape convey vitality. The forehead symbol is the fish's only detailed feature and marks its sacred identity. Placed near the center of the map and surrounded by the snakes, the fish is presented as a core divine figure under their protection. The inscription above identifies it as a "golden fish," a form of the river deity.

In the Xi'er He Map, the golden fish symbolizes abundance and the vitality of life. Its full shape reflects the local expectation of good harvests in both farming and fishing around Erhai Lake. Because it occupies the central position and is encircled by the snakes, it becomes the "central water deity" in the composition. The meaning of the fish is closely tied to agricultural and fishing practices. During the Nanzhao period, people around Erhai relied on farming and fishing for their livelihood (Zhang, 1990; Yang, 1986). In this visual context, the fish points to plentiful water, prosperous resources, and the natural cycle of aquatic life.

In local mythology, the fish becomes a cultural symbol associated with water, life, and order. Early texts often describe fish as water gods, rain-bringing spirits, or signs of an abundant year. For example, the Classic of Mountains and Seas records that the appearance of a white-foreheaded fish foretells a great harvest (Yuan, 1980). In the Bai Water Culture

around Erhai, fish are not only food sources but also understood as manifestations of water deities. As the most common animal in water, fish was enshrined as water god (Zhang, 1982; Xiang, 1999). The Bai ancestors around Erhai Lake regarded fish as incarnations of water gods, as one of their main objects of worship. The image of the fish also appears widely in Bai ritual practices. It is used in ceremonies such as life-release offerings, weddings, and seasonal festivals. In weddings, it symbolizes blessings for fertility and prosperity. In rain-praying or harvest rituals, it represents water, renewal, and abundance. Over time, these practices formed a stable cultural pattern in which the fish became closely linked to the idea of water deities and the cycle of life.

3.2.3 Concha as Symbols of Protection and Water Order

The right side of the Xi'er He Map shows a clearly outlined conch. It is white and shaped like a spindle or a small tower, with fine, tightly curved lines. The tip bends slightly upward, creating a closed and stable form. Compared with the golden fish on the left, the conch has simpler lines and a more regular outer shape. It appears still and quiet, without any sense of movement. Because of its closed form, it suggests stability. The spiral pattern is clear and follows the natural structure of aquatic shells. Its position on the right balances the fish on the left, making it one of the visual centers of the composition. The conch is placed inside the two circling serpents, which gives it a sacred and protected status. In the text of the scroll, the “golden conch” is identified directly as the water deity of the Xi'er River.

The form of the conch carries strong symbolic meaning. Its enclosed shell, inward spiral, and calm posture make it a sign of protection and an emblem of water order. Within the composition, it works almost like an anchor point. The movement of the serpents and the flow of the water lines seem to settle around it, giving the conch the role of a stabilizing center in the visual structure.

Bai scholar Yang Qiong in Qing Dynasty recorded in *Miscellany of Yunnan*: “On the Red Island east of the sea there was a Buddhist temple. The rocks beside the temple were snail shaped. The rock Conch would cry at midnight, bringing about strong winds. When the monks in the temple heard the sounds, they would strike bells to warn boatmen. The boatmen made annual monetary offerings to the monks regularly. Thus, boats seldom capsized there.” (Fang, 2001) Here the rock Conch could predict storms. Through their sounds, they informed people whether they could sail or not. In effect, rock Conch functioned as water gods here, managing the waves to prevent disasters for Bai people, protecting their safety of life (Yang, 2021). In Heyicheng Village, there was once a “Snail God Temple”.



Every year during the Third Month Fair, Bai worshippers around Erhai Lake had to stay overnight at the Benzhu Temple Erhe Temple in Heyicheng Village and the “Snail God Temple”, where women would find some small Conch and shellfish, string them into necklaces and hang them on their chests, resembling pregnant bellies and implying the wish for women to reproduce offspring (Yang,2021).

3.3 The Symbolic System of Bai Water Culture around Erhai in the Xier River Map

The Xier River Map places the snake, the fish, and the conch in the same visual center. Their positions and the enclosed layout create a system of meaning shaped by water. Based on semiotic analysis, this study identifies three symbolic functions. They relate to protection, growth, and order. Together they show how Bai communities around Erhai understood water, life, and the structure of the world.

1. The snake as a symbol of protection

Two snakes' curve around the fish and the conch. Their bodies form a clear boundary between the inner and outer space. The flowing shape of the snakes matches the movement of the water lines in the background. This gives the snake the meaning of strength, protection, and the renewal of water. As the outer layer of the composition, the snakes act as a protective frame.

2. The fish as a symbol of growth

The fish appears at the center of the map. It is the only creature with clear details, including a round mark on its forehead. Its full shape and central position point to ideas of abundance, rainfall, and agricultural vitality. The visual emphasis placed on the fish makes it a symbol of life and nourishment.

3. The conch as a symbol of order

The conch has a steady form and clean lines. It creates a closed and balanced structure. Its quiet and stable appearance represents calm water, household peace, and social harmony. It serves as an inner point of stability within the composition.

The Xier River Map shows a layered symbolic structure. The snakes act as the outer guardians. The fish represents the center of growth. The conch stands for stability and inner order. This structure reflects the water culture shaped by farming and fishing around Erhai. Local people respected water, feared its force, and lived in close connection with it.

The map does not only present mythic figures. It shows a set of cultural ideas that were reinforced through daily life, rituals, and social values. The snake reflects the role of

water as a protective force. The fish expresses the cycle of rainfall and the idea of abundance. The conch represents the ability to sense changes in water and to maintain order. Together these symbols show how Bai communities perceived nature, organized production, and made ethical decisions. Bai Water Culture around Erhai therefore contains layers of identity, belief, cosmology, and ecological thought. This helps explain why the idea of a water deity was part of everyday life rather than an abstract concept.

Conclusion and Discussion

4.1 Symbolic Meanings and Cultural Implications: How Visual Motifs Shape Bai Identity, Belief, and Cosmology

The Xier River Map places snakes, fish, and conch shells within a water-centered structure. Through this arrangement, Bai understandings of nature, spirits, and social order are fixed in visual form. Mirzoeff argues that visual culture does not simply record reality but offers a way of organizing and interpreting the world. Seen in this light, the composition reflects Bai ideas about the connection between water, life, and order.

The snakes encircle the fish and the conch. Their flowing and enclosed shape strengthens the link between water, ancestral spirits, and protective forces. The fish stands for abundance and the life that water sustains. The conch, with its stable and regular form, represents calm water and the order of family and community. Following Mitchell's view of images, these figures are not literal depictions of animals. They are cultural images shaped by social meaning and made expressive through position, line, and combination.

Hall's theory of representation also helps explain this structure. The snake, fish, and conch do not reproduce an "actual" water deity. Instead, they take part in the ongoing construction of collective identity. The snake reflects ancestral power and the force of water. The fish carries the memory of agricultural cycles. The conch connects water to ideas of stability and social ethics. Through repeated visual use, these symbols create a shared framework of identity and belief.

For this reason, the symbolic system in the Xier River Map presents the natural world as an ordered and meaningful structure. It also reinforces ecological values that have long shaped Bai life, including respect for water, awareness of its danger, and the need to live in harmony with it.



4.2 Regional Comparison and Cultural Significance: Connections Between Bai Water Culture around Erhai and the Naga Traditions of Mainland Southeast Asia

From a regional perspective, the snake-shaped water deities of the Bai communities around Erhai share clear structural similarities with Naga traditions in the Mekong Basin. In both regions, the snake functions as a key symbol linked to water flow, rainfall, and the rhythm of life. It acts as a guardian, a regulator, and a bridge between humans and spiritual forces. This suggests that snake-shaped water deities are not isolated or local occurrences. Instead, they form part of a wider cultural pattern found across Southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia.

Mirzoeff's idea of visuality as a form of knowledge and power helps explain this shared structure. Images of water deities in both regions give shape to how communities understand natural forces. They help organize ideas about the world and how it works. This is also why the snake stands at the visual center in both traditions. It expresses the power of water and the order that water brings to social life.

There are also notable differences. The Bai snake deity is closely tied to local nature worship and later absorbed elements of Buddhism, indigenous religion, and regional beliefs during the Nanzhao and Dali periods. In contrast, Naga imagery in mainland Southeast Asia is shaped by Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. It often includes features such as multiple heads, jewels, and snake crowns. These differences show that water culture follows a shared logic across the region, but each society interprets and develops its symbols through its own religious traditions, social structures, and visual styles.

Recommendations

By interpreting the Xi'er He Map, we gain a clearer understanding of how Bai communities around Erhai expressed their ideas about nature, life, and social order through visual forms. The map also shows that water-related beliefs in the Erhai region and the Mekong Basin did not develop in isolation. Instead, they formed a cultural structure shaped by both local traditions and long-term regional exchanges. This structure reflects a shared continuity of belief and a set of common cultural ideas across these areas.

Future research can continue from a visual-culture perspective. Materials such as the Xi'er He Map, the Zhang Shengwen Buddhist Scroll, and Naga imagery from the Mekong region can be examined together. Such comparisons can help explain how local water

deities were reshaped during the spread of Buddhism and through regional interactions. They may also help trace a wider visual lineage of water culture that links Southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia.

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