

# Case Study of Developing Visual Derivatives of Dong Community's Mo Shi Wen Culture in Guangxi Province

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**Abstract:** *The Dong culture is constantly being eroded in the process of integrating with other cultures, and the sustainability of the traditional Dong culture has become an issue that cannot be ignored. The trend of global integration has accelerated the cross-influence between groups, and the integration of products, services, and cultures between different regions is not surprising, as Peng (2018) described. Peng (2018) pointed out that the language, traditional clothing, architectural style, and way of life of the Dong people are being influenced by modern life, and the Chinese language, trendy clothing, storied building architectural style, and thinking have gradually penetrated the life of the Dong people and became an important part. Dong students who have received higher education and young people who go out to work have gradually weakened their enthusiasm for "hometown" and "hometown culture," and their willingness to return to their hometown is low (Peng, 2018). Importantly, the wooden construction craftsmanship of the Dong ethnicity is an indispensable part of China's intangible cultural heritage. The "Mo Shi Wen," a directive textual system employed in the traditional wooden architecture building process, is gradually fading. This research focuses on achieving better Mo Shi Wen culture sustainability and dissemination by design practice.*

**Keywords:** Visual design, Dong culture, Mo Shi Wen, Building, Carpenter

## 1. Introduction

The preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, encompassing both intangible and tangible aspects, is increasingly recognized as crucial within global academic and policy discussions. Defined as "an inheritance from the past that is valued and utilized today" (Timothy, 2018), heritage encompasses historical, social, and artistic value passed across generations. Within this discourse, the Dong ethnic group of China, known for its unique and complex cultural practices, holds significant yet underexplored traditions. Central to Dong culture is the "Mo Shi Wen," a symbolic system employed in traditional wooden architecture that embodies both functional and cultural importance. Despite the rich heritage, the integration of Dong culture into modern contexts faces challenges due to globalization, changing local attitudes, and limited practical application beyond architecture.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the meanings and potential modern adaptations of the 13 symbols in "Mo Shi Wen," aiming to enhance their relevance and application in contemporary design and cultural preservation. The research extends to examining how these symbols can be transformed into visual elements for new cultural products, thereby promoting the sustainability of Dong cultural heritage and contributing to regional socio-economic

development. By situating the "Mo Shi Wen" within both historical and modern frameworks, this study aspires to bridge the traditional and contemporary, ensuring the survival and evolution of Dong culture in the 21st century.

### Study Scope

The Dong ethnic group, one of China's 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities, possesses a rich cultural heritage that reflects a deep connection with its natural and social environment. With a population of approximately 3 million, the Dong people primarily inhabit the mountainous regions of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi provinces. Their history, tracing back to records from the Qin and Han periods (221 BC to 220 AD) and more prominently recognized during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), is marked by a unique blend of traditions, languages, and art forms (Zhang, 2001; Tong, 2015; Britannica, 2022).

Central to Dong culture is their exceptional wooden architecture, characterized by intricate designs and sophisticated construction techniques that embody both practical and symbolic meanings. Among these architectural elements, the "Mo Shi Wen" stands out as a significant cultural feature. "Mo Shi Wen" refers to the symbols used by skilled Dong artisans, known as "Zhang Mo Shi," during the construction process. These symbols, numbering 13 distinct characters, are typically inscribed on a unique measuring tool called "Jiang gan" and on various wooden parts of buildings (Zhong, 2018). The primary purpose of these symbols is to convey essential information about the placement, use, and connection methods of the construction materials, effectively serving as a visual guide for the artisans.

The origin of "Mo Shi Wen" is deeply rooted in the Dong's historical reliance on oral traditions and craftsmanship, as the Dong language, while spoken, lacks a formal written system (Tan, 2010). The symbolic system of "Mo Shi Wen" functions not only as a practical tool for construction but also as a cultural artifact that encapsulates the community's knowledge and heritage. This unique form of symbolic communication illustrates the Dong people's ingenuity and the importance they place on preserving their identity through generational knowledge transfer (Cai et al., 2022).

Despite its historical significance, "Mo Shi Wen" faces challenges in contemporary society. The pressures of modernization, global integration, and shifting social values have contributed to a decline in traditional practices, including architectural craftsmanship. Many younger members of the Dong community, influenced by urbanization and modern education, show decreasing interest in mastering these traditional skills (Peng, 2018; Yue, 2022). Additionally, the lack of formal documentation and limited research on "Mo Shi Wen" further jeopardizes its continuity as an essential part of Dong cultural heritage (Yao, 2018).

Efforts to preserve and revitalize "Mo Shi Wen" and other aspects of Dong heritage require innovative approaches that integrate traditional symbols into modern contexts. Research and development of new applications, such as incorporating these symbols into contemporary product designs, have the potential to enhance their relevance and accessibility, fostering a deeper appreciation of Dong culture both within and beyond the community (Fan, 2020).

## 2. Literature Review

In Chinese records regarding the Dong ethnic group, it has been observed that this ethnic community did not develop a complete system of written language. Therefore, when recording significant events, the Dong people utilized symbols with practical meanings. "Moshiwen" is

a set of symbols employed by the "Zhang Mo Shi" (master of Dong building), who is responsible for the construction of houses within the Dong community. The Zhangmoshi is in charge of designing construction plans, estimating materials, guiding preparations, crafting and installing large wooden components, coordinating collaboration, and supervising the quality and progress of the construction project. Prior to each construction project, they visit the site to measure and, based on topographical features and functional requirements, determine the shape and basic framework of the building. Then, through precise measurements and calculations, they manually create a proportionally scaled-down architectural model. Consequently, after designing each phase of the construction, they use "Moshiwen" to label materials, aiding other construction workers in understanding the specific architectural plans (Qiu, 2021).

The Mo Shi Wen refers to the written scripts created by Dong carpenters in the past. During the carpenter's construction process, Mo Shi Wen was exclusively used as a text to document the placement of wooden components. Specifically, it indicated where holes should be cut, and where tenons and mortises were to be made, detailing their exact locations (Mao, Li & Mao, 2020).



Figure 1: Mo Shi Wen Symbols are Practically Applied by Zhang Mo Shi

𠂇(前)	𠂇(后)	𠂇(左)	𠂇(右)
𠂇(上)	𠂇(下)	𠂇(中)	𠂇(天)
𠂇(土)	𠂇(挂)	𠂇(梁)	𠂇(枋)
𠂇(柱)			

Figure 2: Translations of Mo Shi Wen Symbols (from Mo Shi Wen to Mandarin)

Sadly, they have been fading away these days. Since the Zhang Mo Shi who are the leader carpenters of Dong buildings have no longer been needed nowadays. To be specific, a Dong

building typically requires the collaboration of multiple carpenters, led by the head carpenter known as Zhang Mo Shi. This lead carpenter oversees the structural planning of the building, the procurement of materials, and other related tasks. Proficient in Mo Shi Wen, Zhang Mo Shi uses this specialized script to pre-mark each pillar, guiding other carpenters on where to drill holes and how to proceed with construction. Mo Shi Wen, uniquely created to assist in constructing Dong buildings, is understood exclusively by Zhang Mo Shi and Dong carpenters. Accordingly, the dramatic decline in the number of Zhang Mo Shi due to reduced market demand has left Mo Shi Wen with no platform to function, leading to its inevitable fading into obscurity (Mao, Li & Mao, 2020).

Firstly, the Influence of Traditional Cultural Hierarchies. Historical records seldom mention the heir of Mo Shi Wen carpenters. Chinese traditional occupational hierarchy, which prioritized scholars over craftsmen, contributed to the neglect of heir of Dong carpenters in cultural documentation. Heirs of Mo Shi Wen, mostly villagers and manual laborers with limited formal education were viewed as less esteemed than scholars. Despite their remarkable skills and contributions, Dong remained largely overlooked by academia, and their names rarely appeared in historical records, even though their craftsmanship was passed down through generations (Cheng, 1997).

Secondly, the Abandonment of the Modern Architectural System. The introduction of the Western architectural system elevated the status of architects but excluded the traditional heir of Dong carpenters. Lacking modern construction education and professional qualifications, these heirs of Mo Shi Wen carpenters, who had long been responsible for design and construction, were no longer recognized by the new system. As a result, they were forced to abandon large-scale urban projects and retreat to rural areas for small-scale residential work. Over time, the influence of urban construction led to the near disappearance of heir of Mo Shi Wen carpenters (Mao, Li & Mao, 2020).

Beyond that, the Impact of the Urban Modern Construction Model is another factor. China's unique urbanization process has led urban construction to overshadow rural areas. With reinforced concrete and glass curtain walls dominating cities, they have lost their regional characteristics, creating a "universal" urban landscape. Influenced by urban culture and economy, rural villagers began to favor Western-style homes, imitating city buildings. As their construction needs shifted, traditional heir of Dong carpenters, despite their exceptional craftsmanship, could no longer meet the demand for modern aesthetics, Western-style houses. The traditional construction model and culture were left without a foothold (Cheng, 1997).

Lastly, the Collapse of the Traditional Rural Cultural System led to the Extinction of Mo Shi Wen culture. Clan leaders and local gentry were key to maintaining rural order and culture. However, the economic growth of cities created a siphon effect, drawing skilled rural laborers, including clan leaders and gentry, to urban areas. As these figures, who upheld family histories and local traditions, left, the traditional rural cultural system disintegrated. With the loss of clan records and local anecdotes, the heirs of Dong carpenters also lost the documentation of their family histories and cultural stories.

## Azimuth Symbols

### a. Up



**Figure 3: The Up symbol in Mo Shiwen**

The symbols depicted in Figure 3 represent the meaning of "Up," indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the top.

### b. Down



**Figure 4: The Down symbol in Mo Shiwen**

The symbols depicted in Figure 4 represent the meaning of "Down," indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the bottom.

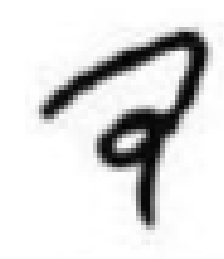
### c. Left



**Figure 5: The Left symbol in Mo Shiwen**

The symbols depicted in Figure 5 represent the meaning of "Left," indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the Left.

### d. Right



**Figure 6: The Right symbol in Mo Shiwen**

The symbols depicted in Figure 6 represent the meaning of "Right," indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the Right.

### 3. Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interviews in this study included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. A total of 10 respondents participated (see Table 1), comprising 2 ordinary members of the Dong community and 8 officials employed in the Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County. The nearest settlement to the county administration was Doujiang Township, where the researcher resided. The first author visited three townships—Doujiang, Guyi, and Zhouping—conducting interviews with the chairpersons of each. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, ensuring that those chosen met specific criteria, which enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2005). The selection criteria included: local leaders, officials, and culturally knowledgeable practitioners with more ethnic knowledge than the average community member.

As noted by McIntosh and Morse (2015), the aim of semi-structured data analysis is to provide "a comprehensive and accurate descriptive conclusion of participants' points of view." To reach this goal, the research employed thematic analysis with an inductive approach. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent, enabling the researcher to transcribe, code, and analyze the responses thematically.

**Table 1: Demographic Information of The Respondents**

No	Name	Age	Education	Job
1	Muke Yang	29	Bachelor	Official in Doujiang Township government
2	Ge Wu	28	Tertiary	Official in Doujiang Township government
3	Yu Yang	32	Middle School	Average Person in Doujiang Township government
4	Ping Liu	30	Tertiary	Official in Guyi Township government
5	Xun Zhang	28	High School	Official in Guyi Township government
6	Jianguo Wu	37	High school	Average Person in Guyi Township government
7	Guoyi Yang	36	Bachelor	Official in Zhouping Township government
8	Wanbo Yang	44	Bachelor	Official in Zhouping Township government
9	Guangyao Wu	29	Tertiary	Official in Zhouping Township government
10	Mei Liu	27	Tertiary	Official in Zhouping Township government

### 4. Findings and the Discussion

#### The importance to create new cultural derivatives for the Mo Shi Wen of Dong community

Individual semi-structured interviews exploring the importance of developing new cultural derivatives for the Dong community. For this research, two aspects of this subject must be investigated in the field: first, the significance of preserving Dong culture; second, the significance of using derivatives as a form. The questions are organised around these two dimensions, which are regarded as significant drivers to designing new derivatives for the Dong community: reasons for extinction, personal attitude towards culture, and personal attitude towards culturally specific derivatives. Individual interviews were interspersed with thematic analysis, transcript analysis and synthesis cycles to reveal themes. The qualitative analysis's main themes and sub-themes are shown in the table below.

**Table 2: Summary of Major Themes and Sub-themes of the Qualitative Analysis.**

		Themes	Sub-themes
Culture dimension		Dying reasons	No originated written text A wide range of interests
	Attitude towards their own culture	Whether or not give importance of culture & Why	Culture meritocracy Nostalgia Uniqueness
Derivatives dimension		Whether or not wish culture to be better-preserved and revived & Why	Positive Neutral
	Attitude towards cultural derivatives	Whether or not support to create derivatives stand for Mo Shi Wen culture & Why	A high-efficient shortcut to longer cultural lifespan Potential economic benefit
		Whether or not cultural derivatives as a new pattern is significant for Mo Shi Wen culture & Why	Internality Externality Both internality and externality

The findings identified multiple factors contributing to the decline of Dong culture, including sinicization, limited economic returns, political interventions, poor cultural inheritance practices, and the absence of traditionally handed-down written texts. Just as explained by Muke Yang who is the official in Doujiang Township Government and one of the interviewee,

‘The written record on this subject is sparse, almost like trying to piece together a puzzle with only a few scattered pieces. Even when rare documents surface, they tend to read more like a collection of fragmented folk tales than a coherent account of history.’

Beyond the reliance on oral tradition, where stories and knowledge were handed down verbally without any written trace, there was another aspect of a significant factor at play: the drive for profit. With the powerful economic and cultural pull of the city, suburban villagers began embracing urban life by pursuing Western-style homes, often replicating or copying city architecture down to the smallest detail. Scattered throughout the countryside, you can now find a blend of ancient European styles, American aesthetics, and neo-classical buildings, a stark contrast to the past. Buildings with regional traits and indigenous roots are becoming a rare sight, fighting for survival in an environment where modern Western-style designs and industrial construction methods dominate. Let alone those Mo Shi Wen patterns on buildings, most of which have been replaced by modern patterns. Beyond that, the difficulty in earning enough to support a family pushed potential successors away, leading to the gradual fading of this once-vibrant tradition. The dawn of a new system in China abruptly marginalized these skilled artisans, who had been designing, constructing, and organizing architectural works for millennia. Lacking formal academic credentials or industry certifications, the inheritors of Mo Shi Wen found themselves in a harsh reality where their expertise was dismissed by modern construction authorities. They were neither acknowledged as builders nor could they claim the title of architect in this transformed landscape. Without the necessary qualifications to navigate the new system, these once-revered figures were forced to abandon urban construction and retreat to rural areas, where they could only manage small-scale residential projects. Over time, even these opportunities dwindled as the influence of urban construction trends seeped into the countryside, gradually eroding the traditional practices. Today, the echoes of Mo Shi Wen's legacy are faint, with scarcely any inheritors left to carry the torch.

As regards the aspect of the Dong community's members' attitudes toward their own culture, the findings revealed a strong sense of cultural value and nostalgia for Mo Shi Wen. While

some participants expressed a desire to preserve their unique precious culture. Jianguo Wu who is the official in Guyi Township government once said,

‘We do love and miss Mo Shi Wen culture, it is the treasure left by our ancestors. But lagging areas like ours have no technicians to create cultural derivatives...if someone can help us make it, that would be wonderful’

Wanbo Yang Who is the official in Zhouping Township government expressed the shared expectation of Dong people,

‘As Mo Shi Wen's cultural derivatives continue to grow, they will inevitably enrich the cultural landscape of our area. Incorporating Zhuang cultural elements into designs for signs, posters, map books, and packaging for scenic spot gifts will elevate the travel experience, making it more immersive and meaningful for visitors. At the same time, offering culturally inspired souvenirs like backpacks, notebooks, keychains, and phone cases at tourist spots adds a layer of charm and practicality to their purchases. These thoughtfully designed products not only enhance the cultural appeal of our region but also hold great potential to attract more tourists and stimulate the local economy, creating a win-win for both visitors and the community.’

Besides building upon the context of modernization, this study investigated the potential significance of culturally specific derivatives for the Dong community. The findings unmasked that the aboriginals overwhelmingly supported the creation of Mo Shi Wen derivatives, citing benefits such as cultural preservation, attracting more outsiders, and enriching tourists' experiences to enhance opportunities to generate income in tourism. Importantly, the finding which uncovers Dong aboriginals' expectation of leveraging Mo Shi Wen derivatives to innovatively integrate into modern life, cultivate a positive impression to viewers, and spark especially ethnic youngsters' interest, attract more tourists here ties nicely with prior studies in 2022, regarding the tourism marketing dimension, emojis can also foster a more favorable impression towards a place, it is called destination marketing (Distel et al., 2022).

## Mo Shi Wen Font Design and Derivatives

### a. ‘Middle’ Symbol in Mo Shi Wen

The author designed the ‘Middle’, ‘Front’, and ‘Back’ symbol in Mo Shi Wen (see Fig.2 Fig.3 Fig. 4) based on below this true photo of Mo Shi Wen, which was illustrated by using the professional drawing software Procreate on IPAD.

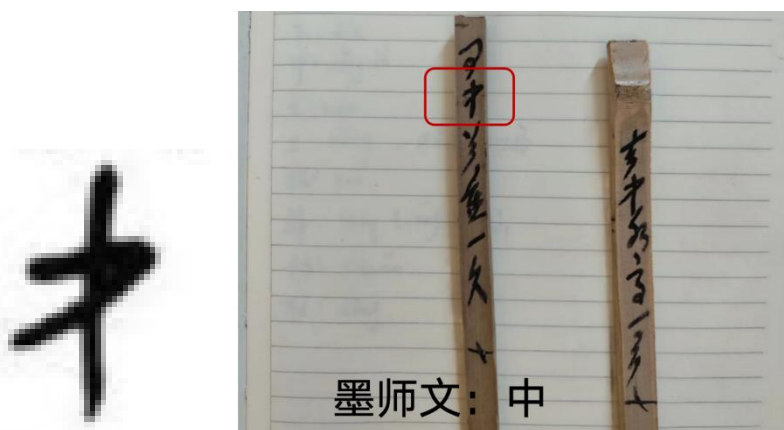


Figure 7: The ‘Middle’ Symbol in Mo Shi Wen

The symbols depicted in Figure 7 represent the meaning of "Middle," indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the Middle.



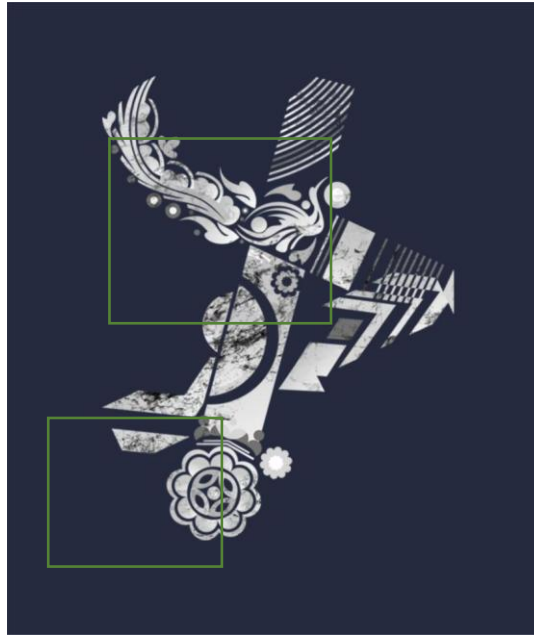
**Figure 8: Display of The Phoenix Motif in Dong Embroidery**



**Figure 9: Display of Coin Flower Motif in Dong Embroidery**

The phoenix motif in Dong embroidery symbolizes auspiciousness and harmony, representing the ideas of bringing fortune and welcoming good luck, as well as warding off evil and preventing disasters. It is also characterized by its graceful form.

The coin flower motif in Dong embroidery signifies the continuous flow of wealth and the attraction of prosperity. It also embodies the harmony of heaven, earth, and humanity, bringing peace and hope to the people.



**Figure 10: The Visual Representation of the ‘Middle’ symbol of Mo Shi Wen by the First Author**

Considering the visual structural arrangement, the first author combined the phoenix and coin flower motifs from Dong embroidery to form the font design of the Mo Shi Wen 'Middle' character. As shown in the red box in the Fig 10, these two motifs have been distilled into their symbolic forms in this design practice. It can be said that this design interconnects the cultural elements of the Dong ethnic group, creating a unique visual representation that is exclusive to Dong culture. Below in Fig 11 this visual font representation can be leveraged in cultural dissemination work, especially in local tourism. Therefore, a Derivative product like the poster is viable.



**Figure 11: Applicable Derivative**

## b. 'Front' Symbol in Mo Shi Wen



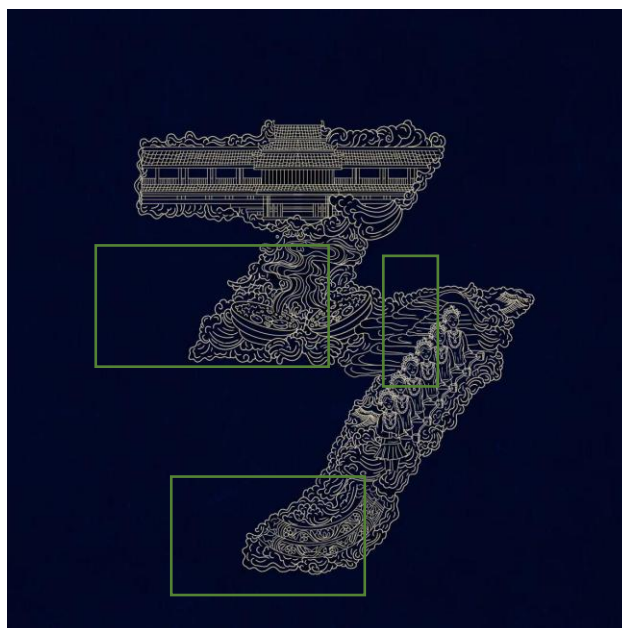
**Figure 12: The 'Front' Symbol in Mo Shi Wen**

The symbols depicted in Figure 12 represent the meaning of " Front," indicating that the engraved material should be placed in Front.



**Figure 13: The Dong Building named the 'Wind and Rain' Bridge and the Dong Women.**

Figure 13 shows two Dong cultural elements: one is the distinct roof eaves of the Dong Building named the 'Wind and Rain' Bridge, and the other one is the Dong Women with Dong Featured attire. The shape of a stroke of the 'Front' symbol in Mo Shi Wen is consistent with a Dong Building named 'Wind and Rain' Bridge.



**Figure 14: The Visual Representation of The 'Front' symbol of Mo Shi Wen by the Author**

The above symbol (Fig 14) designed by the first author is mainly consist of four Dong cultural parts. The first author designed the broad pattern of the Dong wind and rain bridge. Considering the structural coherence of the design, this pattern is more suitably placed at the top of the 'Front' Mo Shi Wen character. The two bowl motifs in the central red box represent the distinctive Dong ethnic cuisine, particularly the dish "oil tea." The pattern in the lower red box symbolizes the traditional clothing worn by Dong women. The pattern at the bottom is taken from the silver necklaces worn by Dong women. All of these motifs have been distilled and designed by the first author. Below in Fig 15, this visual font representation can be leveraged in the package design, especially in souvenir stores in local attractions for tourists. This can, to some extent, better exhibit the Dong culture to outsiders and better achieve the goal of cultural spreading.



**Figure 15: Applicable Derivative**

### c. 'Back' Symbol in Mo Shi Wen



**Figure 16: The 'Back' Symbol in Mo Shi Wen**

The symbols depicted in Figure 16 represent the meaning of " Back," indicating that the engraved material should be placed at the Back.



**Figure 17: The Wooden Constructive Structure of the Dong Building**

The wooden constructive structure of the classic Dong building is shown in Fig 17, which inspires the first author. Its three-dimensional structure served as a model for the design of the 'Back' of Mo Shi Wen character.



**Figure 18: The Visual Representation of the 'Back' symbol of Mo Shi Wen and Applicable Derivative by the Author**

Ultimately, the design of the 'Back' character in Mo Shi Wen is based on the three-dimensional wooden framework constructed by Dong carpenters in reality. The integration of the Mo Shi Wen font with Dong architectural structures highlights the traditional practical function of the

Mo Shi Wen script. Specifically, it was exclusively employed as a symbolic writing system used by Dong carpenters in the construction of Dong architecture. The figure on the right is the derivative also developed by the first author, which more comprehensively restores the wooden architectural structures built by the Dong carpenters, integrating the Mo Shi Wen 'Back' character within. This serves as a poster specifically designed to showcase the connection between Dong architecture and Mo Shi Wen characters. It can be used at local tourist sites featuring Dong wooden architecture to educate visitors, and also placed in relevant textbooks to teach future offspring of the Dong people, thereby better achieving cultural sustainability and dissemination.

## 5. Conclusion

Due to the Dong culture's specialty, rarity, and irreproducibility, it should be better preserved. This study used interview research to assess why it is important to create new Mo Shi Wen derivatives for the Dong community.

Thematic analysis was used in the interview research to record cultural facts that are disappearing, the real causes behind them, and the attitudes that Dong community members have towards their own Mo Shi Wen culture and culturally specific derivatives.

Most of the reasons why these Dong cultures are in danger of becoming extinct are evident throughout the descriptive process of studying the causes of dying civilizations, with the remaining percentage attributable to the lack of text. This research discovered that Margaret Mead's "Prefigurative culture" was responsible for insufficient cultural inheritance work. The Dong community's artistic legacy, especially the Mo Shi Wen culture, was typically inverted; this is the current state of the Dong culture. They are on the brink of forming a new kind of culture specifically because of the change to Prefigurative culture, which is future-oriented, and cultural transmission is primarily from the young to their elders (Mead 1970), which deviates from culture preservation.

In addition, the theme analysis demonstrates that in light of the realities of vanishing cultures, Dong community members' hopes for cultural derivatives go beyond just preserving their cultures and are more inclined toward the financial benefits it brings. Simply put, the research also reveals four key functions of Mo Shi Wen derivatives as a trustworthy method that can be used to supplement or replace text, cultural sustainability and dissemination, foster outsiders' positive perceptions of a location, and enrich local tourism. This research first created derivatives for Mo Shi Wen culture in response to supportive commands from Dong participants.

Above all, findings describing the current state of Mo Shi Wen cultural facts in the Dong community, an in-depth introduction of culture extinction reasons, significantly more comprehensive measures of preservation work on the culture of indigenous areas, and an overall presentation of the level of consciousness of the Dong locals would be extremely beneficial for future research.

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