



# Tourist Souvenir Design Based on The Dong Grand Song of Sanjiang, Guangxi

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## Research Article

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**Abstract** The world-class intangible cultural asset Dong Grand Song features polyphonic, conductor-less choral singing and represents appreciation for nature, strong familial ethics, distinctive labor wisdom, and complex epic storytelling. To address the current issues of insufficient cultural depth, low recognizability, and weak market competitiveness in Dong Grand Song tourism souvenirs, this study will build a design model of cultural elements and propose design strategies to create tourism souvenirs. In this work, tourism souvenirs are designed using the Dong Grand Song of Sanjiang, Guangxi. This sequential mixed-methods study combines qualitative and quantitative research. 1. Created a "Dong Grand Song Cultural Memes Database" using memetics theory to collect cultural knowledge on Sanjiang, Guangxi's Dong Grand Song. Each meme's hierarchical relationships and visual anchors are explained by this database. 2. Semiotic design ideas were used to extract Dong Grand Song-cultural visual translation strategies. 3. Based on the meme database, designed at least 10 Dong Grand Song-themed tourism souvenirs that mix cultural distinctiveness with market flexibility.

"Building a Meme Database" goal found 6 key domains and 30 secondary memes via field research (22 hours of audio/video footage, 1,110 photos), literature analysis (89 academic publications, 262 song lyrics), and expert interviews (12 cross-disciplinary specialists). The database construction fulfills "academic reliability + design usability." The purpose of "extracting visual translation strategies": The three-tier technique of meme-driven symbol extraction, modern style integration, and narrative-based distribution is based on meme theory and the four-dimensional semiotic model (syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and context). Simple ethnic motifs are avoided using this method. Phone covers, canvas bags, puzzles, and more from the "Dong Melody, Dong Colors" product range meet the "souvenir design practice" goal. Cultural recognition and visual novelty scores on Likert scales by 15 tourists and 9 intangible cultural heritage inheritors topped 4.2/5, proving design feasibility.

## Introduction

The Dong people are one of the major ethnic minorities in southern China, and the Dong-inhabited areas such as Sanjiang in Guangxi preserve a rich and vibrant tradition of Dong grand songs. Dong grand songs are a unique form of folk choral art among the Dong people, characterized by polyphony, no conductor, no accompaniment, natural harmony, and widespread public participation. Their essence is deeply rooted in Dong society. It embodies reverence for nature, carries familial ethics, labor wisdom, and epic ethnic narratives, and holds immense value in terms of auditory aesthetics, social rituals, and ecological culture. From a memetics standpoint, Dong Grand Song can be viewed as a "memeplex" consisting of diverse cultural information units (memes), including vocal structure, lyrical semantics, performance protocols, ritual contexts, and costume design symbols. Through imitation, repetition, and variation in village interactions, intergenerational oral transmission, and festival performances, it continuously undergoes replication, mutation, selection, and dissemination in a cultural cycle (Cerisola, 2019).

However, in the current context of cultural tourism development, the cultural and creative market, and the digital media environment, its dissemination still faces three major challenges: (1) Acoustic-based intangible cultural heritage is difficult to "visualize" and translate into commercial products; (2) the market is flooded with "surface-level ethnic-style" souvenirs that are overly symbolic and disconnected from authentic cultural memes; (3) there is a lack of systematic research pathways for cultural element extraction, design translation, and user evaluation and validation (Tucker, 1996; Richards, 2018).

This research topic stems from two driving forces. First, on a personal level: the researcher hails from Guangxi and has participated in numerous festive events in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County since childhood (such as the Dong Grand Song Festival), personally experiencing the spiritual value of the Dong Grand Song within the local community. The researcher noted that souvenirs in the tourism market primarily exhibit "generic ethnic motifs" (e.g., simplistic embroidered ornaments), which do not adequately represent the essential cultural aspects of the Grand Song, such as its polyphonic characteristics and nature worship. This observation sparked the initial research motivation: "to visualize auditory intangible cultural heritage." Second, academic and practical needs: As a researcher in cultural and creative design, I have long focused on the modern transformation of intangible cultural heritage. Existing studies predominantly concentrate on visual forms (e.g., wood carving, paper cutting), with limited research on design methodologies for auditory forms (e.g., Dong Grand Song). Moreover, there is a lack of a closed-loop pathway

“from cultural elements to market products.” Therefore, by constructing a cultural meme library for the Dong Grand Song, we aim to establish a systematic design pathway encompassing element extraction, meme annotation, visual encoding, and user feedback iteration to create tourism souvenirs inspired by the Dong Grand Song.

### Research Objectives

1. To construct a design model of Dong Grand Song cultural elements based
2. To propose design strategies and create tourism souvenirs of Dong Grand Song

### Literature Review

#### 1. Current State of Research on Dong Grand Songs

Scholars generally agree that the early production and lifestyle of the Dong people closely relate to the Dong Grand Song. Its musical origins can be traced back to the primitive labor chants known as “ye songs,” which evolved through oral transmission into a more complex polyphonic choral system. This evolution reflects a historical shift from functional labor vocalizations to aesthetic and ritualistic singing (Liu, 2015).

The Dong ethnic group's folk proverb, “Food nourishes the body, song nourishes the soul,” vividly illustrates the central role of singing in the daily life and spiritual world of the Dong people. Dong grand songs serve multiple cultural functions: narrating the historical memory of the ethnic group, praising nature and labor, and expressing friendship, love, and familial ethics. They are an important medium for conveying the emotions and values of Dong society. (Peng, 2024) notes that, in terms of musical form and aesthetic dimensions, the natural polyphonic soundscapes of Dong Grand Songs are often interpreted as a sensory reenactment of the Dong people's relationship with the landscape and the ecological harmony of all things, and they also carry mimetic or symbolic implications regarding natural soundscapes.

(Long, 2008) further proposes that the “harmonious beauty of the grand song” is its most prominent artistic feature: it not only embodies the ecological harmony between humans and nature but also reinforces the interactive bonds between people and society through collective choral performance, thereby generating emotional resonance at the community level. This provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the comprehensive cultural system of the Dong grand song.

In the context of new media, the cross-sensory representation of Dong folk songs has become a research hotspot. (Zhang, 2022), with the theme “Dong Listening to Nature,” employed virtual digital imaging technology to construct a multisensory immersive installation.

By abstracting the core values of the performance scene, they established a synesthesia between musical information and visual form, exploring the digital translation of intangible vocal heritage. This direction suggests that the sonic elements, performance formations, and ritual spaces of Dong folk songs can all serve as resources for visual encoding and design development, providing a multimodal material foundation for subsequent cultural and creative products.

## 2. Application of Meme Theory in Intangible Cultural Heritage Design Research

Meme theory focuses on the processes of replication, variation, and selection of cultural information within society, providing an analytical framework for the selection of intangible cultural heritage elements and cross-media design. In the context of tourist souvenir design, if musical tones, performance routines, clothing patterns, and ritual symbols are regarded as “cultural memes,” then the cultural distinctiveness and user resonance of products can be enhanced through the processes of extraction, encoding, and re-transmission. (Xie, 2017) Using Dongyang wood carving as an example, researchers proposed new pathways for the protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage through meme propagation analysis and digital reconstruction, demonstrating that the meme framework aids in identifying replicable and diffusible cultural core elements.

Meme theory has also been used to explain the dynamic balance between “tradition and innovation.” This means finding core memes that can adapt to different cultures while still allowing for controlled changes in form, material, or usage scenarios to fit with modern tastes and market needs. (He, 2022) analyzed the aesthetic evolution of Guilin Nüo masks, showing that by “repackaging” memes through design innovation, it is possible to maintain cultural distinctiveness while expanding contemporary applications. These studies offer philosophical perspectives on decomposing the Dong Grand Song into multi-level memes and integrating them into design processes. In the practice of design culture, the application of meme theory can effectively analyze the evolution and development trajectory of cultural genes in the process of civilizational evolution, thereby providing practical strategies for the authentic preservation and inheritance of traditional regional cultures and their localized development (Zhang, 2024; Zhang, Wang, & Zhang, 2024).

## 3. A Cross-Perspective of Design Semiotics and Memetics Theory

(Morris, 1938) proposed the trichotomy of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, laying the foundation for the analytical framework of form-meaning-use in later semiotics. Building on this foundation, the design community introduced the context dimension, forming the four-dimensional model of “syntactics, semantics, pragmatics, and context” employed in this study:

syntactics focuses on morphological combinations; semantics refers to symbolic meaning; pragmatics emphasizes operational interaction; and context focuses on culture and context (Zhang, 2024). As demonstrated by the case of Jidong lamps used in shadow puppetry, this four-dimensional analysis helps prevent "appliqué ethnic style" and provides an executable language for the translation of overpowering memes. Embedding this framework in illustration design ensures that the cultural elements of the Dong ethnic group's big song are both visually authentic and accessible.

Semiotics provides hierarchical grammar for visual encoding and decoding, while meme theory explains the adaptive mechanisms of cultural information in reproduction, variation, and selection. The intersection of these two forms is the theoretical foundation for this study's "meme priority, symbolic depth, and emotional translation."

### Research Methods

This study employs a sequential mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, cultural information related to the Dong Grand Song was systematically collected through field observations, literature reviews, and in-depth interviews with cultural heritage bearers, leading to the establishment of a multi-domain meme database (Cochran, 1977). Based on the meme database, visual translations were conducted, and finally, prototypes of Dong Grand Song souvenirs were developed. The design effectiveness was evaluated through a public user questionnaire (covering dimensions such as cultural recognition, creativity, practicality, interactive experience, overall satisfaction, and purchase intent) to supplement the interview assessment, thereby completing the closed-loop research process of "research, design, and feedback."

Research tools included Field observation records, semi-structured interview outlines, user evaluation questionnaires, etc., aiming to provide scientific methods and empirical support for the visual inheritance and cultural and creative development of the Dong ethnic group's big song culture.

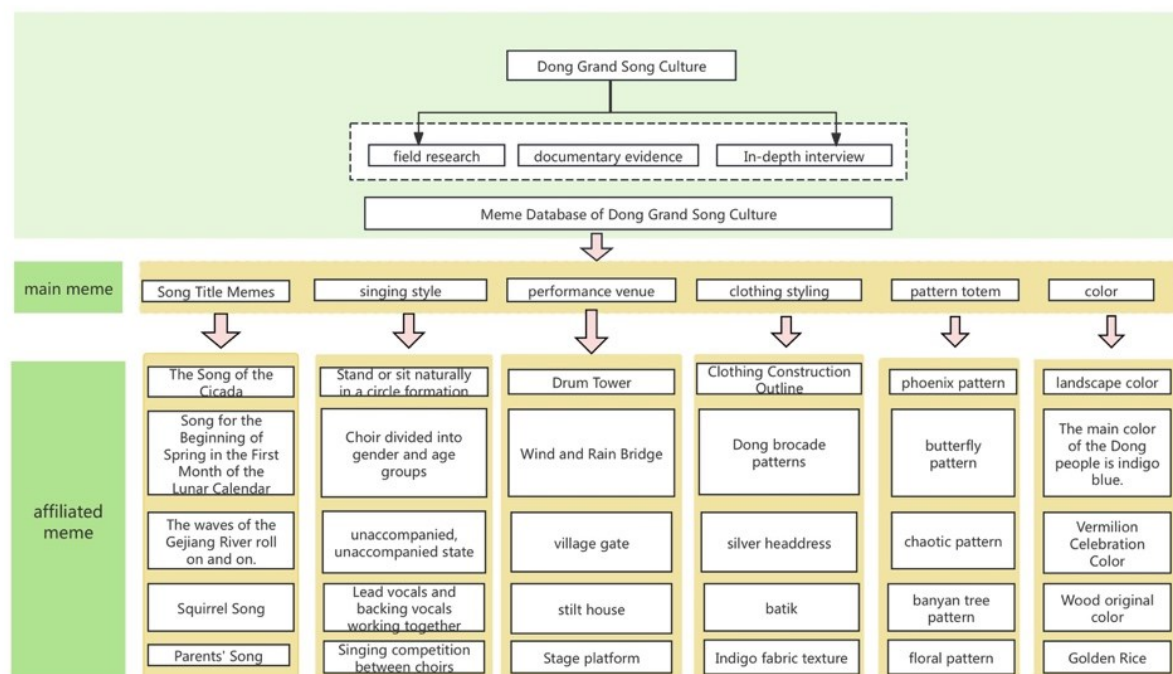
### Research Findings

#### 1. Construction of the Dong Grand Song Memetic Database

To ensure that the cultural memes extracted are both academically reliable and directly applicable in visual design, the meme database was constructed following a three-step logical process of multi-source collection, systematic coding, and hierarchical screening, strictly adhering to the principles of mutual exclusion, exhaustiveness, and visualization.

First, this study conducted field research in the Dong villages of Sanjiang, Guangxi, recording a total of 22 hours of audio and video of Donggrand songs and collecting over 1,110 photographs of performance scenes and costumes. Concurrently, 89 relevant academic papers were systematically searched and carefully read, and 262 song lyrics were compiled. By constructing a “tongg depth” framework involving 3 national and regional-level representative inheritors, 3 village song masters, 3 ethnic art design scholars, and 3 cultural creativity practitioners, and through in-depth interviews with experts across these fields, we conducted oral verification of song origins, costume symbolism, and performance venues, providing a solid foundation of cultural accuracy and local specificity for meme extraction.

Finally, through coding, synonym merging, and low-frequency filtering, 42 candidate memes were preliminarily screened. Following the three criteria of “mutual exclusion within the same layer, exhaustive coverage across layers, and the presence of visual anchor points,” 6 primary domains and 30 secondary memes were ultimately established, forming the Dong Grand Song Cultural Memetic Database. (See Figure 1.)



Meme theory emphasizes the competitive mechanisms within the “replication, variation, and transmission” chain of cultural information (Dawkins, 2016); semiotics provides the tripartite framework of “signifier, signified, and cultural context,” laying the foundation for visual coding (Peirce, 1931). Narrative theory focuses on the influence of the “event, character, and plot” structure on audience emotions and meaning construction (Wang & Yang 2024). Therefore, this paper will formulate the following design strategies based on the above principles.

First, meme-driven symbol extraction and translation form the starting point of the entire design process. Designers need to systematically deconstruct the authentic cultural connotations of the Dong Grand Song in terms of multiple dimensions, such as the lyrics, singing style, costume design, and performance venue, and then establish a visual symbol library through the methods of “deconstruction, extraction, abstraction, and reorganization.”

Secondly, combine modern design styles to enhance product appeal. Targeting the youth market, souvenirs need to strike a balance between cultural heritage and modern aesthetics. Visually, through comparative research on similar intangible cultural heritage products, contemporary design styles can be identified, and traditional elements can be “reimagined” using contemporary design language.

Finally, enhance cultural dissemination to increase market recognition. Design is not only about “creating objects,” but also about “telling stories.” Through a series of narrative illustrations, the origins, singing etiquette, and folk tales of the Dong Grand Song are embedded in product packaging and explanatory text, giving souvenirs readability.

Through the above three-tiered progressive strategy, the cultural genes of the Dong Grand Song have been efficiently replicated and adapted in souvenirs, preserving the rich heritage of tradition while meeting the modern consumer market's diverse demands for aesthetics, functionality, and interactive experiences. This approach ultimately achieves a mutually beneficial outcome by balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with commercial value.

#### 1. Extraction of cultural symbols from Dong grand songs



**Table 1** Analysis of Symbols Used in the Design of Song Titles

repertoire	Lyric meaning	factor extraction
(The Song of the Cicada)	Performed in the traditional singing style of the Dong ethnic group, the song imitates the sound of cicadas to show the rhythm of nature and convey the concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. This reflects their affection for nature and their desire to be at one with it.	Singing about nature, loving nature, and living in harmony with nature.

Source: Author

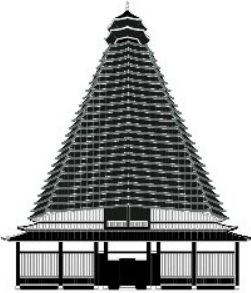



Table 2 Extraction of performance form memes

Name	Characteristics	Factor extraction	Illustration
Semi-circular Formation with Natural Standing or Sitting	The Dong Grand Song can be divided into male grand song, female grand song, children's grand song, and mixed grand song.		




Source: Author

Table 3 Extraction of memes from performance venues

Name	Symbolic meaning	Factor extraction	Illustration
Drum Tower	The Sanjiang Drum Tower uses a traditional mortise-and-tenon structure, without a single nail or piece of iron, relying entirely on the ingenious assembly of wooden components. It serves as the activity center of the Dong.		

Source: Author



Table 4 Extraction of clothing style memes

Name	Clothing characteristics	Factor extraction	Illustration
Costume Structure Outline	Sanjiang Dong women: A long shirt with a large open front, embroidered collar, and flowered apron lining, paired with a blue pleated skirt, embroidered leggings, and flowered shoes. Dong men: A purple-red or blue-black shiny fabric shirt with a small stand-up collar and wide-leg pants of the same color.		 

Source: Author





Table 5 Pattern Totem Memes Extracted

Pattern name	Symbolic meaning	Factor extraction
Chaos Pattern	Combining the forms of spiders and flowers, this design metaphorically represents the Dong people's understanding of the chaotic state of the universe and the origin of life.	
		Illustration
		

Source: Author

Table 6. Color meme extraction

Color names	CMYk values	Landscape design
Landscape Color	#FBF7C6	
	#ACCC7E	
	#95B81F	
	#60B697	
	#50AE6C	
	#265D3B	Illustration
		

Source: Author

2. Design practice for Tourist Souvenirs

In the design practice, the “Dong Sound and Color” series of illustrations was used as the core visual theme. The image of “harmony between humans and nature” contained in “The Song of the Cicada” was selected as the starting point for creation. The cultural images of strong and weak memes extracted in the early stages were then combined with the semiotic “tripartite method” to deconstruct the memes into “signifier, signified, and context” and reorganize the morphological vocabulary.

In terms of graphic language, the design first employs geometric decomposition and the principle of symmetry and balance from formal aesthetic principles to abstract the terraced fields into rhythmic wave patterns. Then, using a traditional compositional approach combining square and circular elements, the drum tower is established as the central visual focal point. In the performance poses of the characters, male actors, female actors, and child actors stand separately to sing, with the illustrations forming a narrative scene where they naturally stand in a semicircular formation. Subsequently, we used Photoshop to create a rough sketch and then proceeded with detailed painting, blending realistic brushstrokes with the flat style of Chinese fashion trends.

In terms of color selection, the ecological qualities of low-saturation blue-green and amber orange tones are emphasized. During the product extension phase, the main illustrations and auxiliary totem patterns are deconstructed and reorganized, and then incorporated into carriers such as mobile phone cases, canvas bags, and pillows. The interactivity and fun are enhanced through the use of deformable stickers and puzzles.

Finally, a small-scale sample production was conducted, and 15 tourists and 9 Dong ethnic group inheritors were asked to evaluate the “cultural recognition” and “aesthetic freshness” using a Likert scale (Likert, 1932). Based on the feedback, the color contrast and packaging copy were fine-tuned to achieve a closed-loop design process from cultural collection to visual translation to market implementation.



Figure 2. Main visual illustration effect

Source: Author



**Figure 3** Dynamic extension effect of illustrated characters

Source: Author



**Figure 4** The effect of integrating design elements from Dong Grand Song

Source: Author



**Figure 5** Design effect of Dong ethnic group grand song tourism souvenirs

Source: Author





**Figure 6** Design effect of Dong ethnic group grand song tourism souvenirs

Source: Author

## Conclusion and Discussion

### Conclusions

This study used meme theory as a framework to complete a systematic practice of “Dong Grand Song cultural information collection—meme analysis—design translation—souvenir creation” and reached the following main conclusions:

1. Meme Database Construction: Through field research, literature review, and F-AHP weight calculation, four criterion layers and 30 specific memes were identified, forming a “Dong Grand Song Meme Database” with hierarchical relationships and weight annotations. This database provides a searchable foundation for subsequent cultural visualization and product development.

2. Souvenir Practice Validation: Using AI-assisted illustration and sustainable materials, over 10 prototype products such as phone cases, canvas bags, and puzzles were developed. Empirical results demonstrated the feasibility of the meme translation method, achieving a balance between cultural recognition and aesthetic freshness.

3. Proposing a meme design model

Combining Morris's (Morris, 1938) “trichotomy” of semiotics with the context dimension, a four-dimensional analytical model of “syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and context” is formed. Strong memes use “faithful translation,” while weak memes achieve

controllable variation through “contextual embedding,” ensuring a balance between cultural identity and contemporary aesthetics.

### Discussion

This study demonstrates that meme theory can not only explain the process of “replication-variation-dissemination” of cultural elements but also provide operational decisions to guide designers in their creative work. Currently, the database samples are mainly from Dong villages in Guangxi and do not fully cover the differences in Dong vocal styles in other areas, such as Guizhou and Hunan. The prototype souvenirs have not yet been verified by many users, and the willingness to purchase and long-term dissemination effects need to be further tracked.

### Suggestion

#### 1. Promote the “community co-creation-design accelerator” model

Guide design teams to establish long-term collaborative workshops with local Dong ethnic artisans and intangible cultural heritage inheritors, using “co-creation contracts” to clarify intellectual property rights and revenue distribution; simultaneously, establish cultural and creative accelerators in collaboration with local universities or incubators to provide support such as AI illustration, digital prototyping, and supply chain matching, enabling traditional cultural resources to be rapidly transformed into marketable products.

#### 2. Enhance multi-dimensional experiences and new media storytelling.

Incorporate AR and VR dynamic content into souvenir packaging and exhibition displays, featuring performances of Dong Grand Song choruses and illustrated animations to enhance immersion. Encourage the development of interactive puzzles, stickers, and DIY kits to fulfill visitors' three-stage experience needs: participation, creation, and commemoration. Expand the online “#DongVoices Flowing Colors#” topic matrix using short videos and co-branded challenges to boost user-generated content engagement.

#### 3. Conduct Cross-Cultural and Long-Term Tracking Research

Currently, the user evaluation sample primarily consists of tourists from Guangxi and surrounding areas. In the future, this should be expanded to encompass diverse cultural backgrounds and age groups to test the universality of visual translation in promoting cross-cultural understanding. We also recommend conducting six- and 12-month tracking surveys, combining sales, repurchase rates, and social media behavior data to assess the continued reach and economic benefits of souvenirs, providing a dynamic basis for decision-making regarding the iteration of intangible cultural heritage creations.

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