

---

# International Journal of Creative Multimedia

---

## One Body Two Gods: A Visual Ethnographic Case Study of Ritual Roles in Southwest China

Bao Mingxing

498202249@qq.com

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

ORCID iD: 0009-0006-7557-9960

*(Corresponding Author)*

Mohd Ekram Al Hafis Hashim

ekram@fskik.upsi.edu.my

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1096-6306

### Abstract

This field report documents the dual ritual identity of a Yi practitioner in Southwest China who performs both as Lamplighter during the Taiping Lantern Festival and as Bimo in ancestral and funerary ceremonies. Drawing on visual ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between 2017 and 2024, the study incorporates participant observation, interviews, and visual recordings through photography and video. Particular attention is given to how rituals are enacted through bodily practice, symbolic gestures, spatial arrangements, and community reflection during the viewing of images. Visual ethnography is treated not only as a means of documentation but also as a collaborative process in which participants evaluate and reinterpret their own performances. The account shows how ritual authority is sustained through community recognition, generational perceptions, and symbolic consistency, while also adapting to the influence of contemporary media practices. The case demonstrates the value of visual ethnography in understanding how sacred authority is practised, negotiated, and remembered within local cultural settings.

**Keywords** Visual ethnography; Ritual authority; Sacred legitimacy; Community recognition; Yi ritual practice

**Received:** 8 April 2025, **Accepted:** 16 October 2025, **Published:** 30 April 2026

## Introduction

In classical anthropological literature, ritual authority has generally been described as a structurally constructed form of legitimacy, often grounded in the wider organisation of social and religious life. Authority was typically understood as a fixed order sanctioned by institutions or lineage systems. Yet in practice, particularly within ethnic minority communities in Southwest China, authority does not always appear in such rigid form. Instead, it often emerges as a fluid, negotiated process, sensitive to the immediate social context of ritual enactment. In these settings, legitimacy is not only embedded in symbolic systems but is also continually shaped through bodily practice, gestures, spatial positioning, and the community's collective memory and moral trust (Zheng and Wang, 2000). This more flexible understanding provides the background for the present study.

The focus here is a ritual practitioner from Songyuan Yi village in Chengjiang County, Yunnan Province, who simultaneously undertakes two important priestly roles. As Lamplighter during the Taiping Lantern Festival, he guides villagers in the public lighting of lanterns, leads ritual processions, and establishes a festive sacred space through the interplay of light, fire, music, and movement. As Bimo, by contrast, he presides over ancestral and funerary rituals, including the Yin Lantern festival, where the focus is intimate, domestic, and directed towards appeasing spirits through scriptures, chants, sacrificial offerings, and spatial invocations (Guo and Cheng, 2019). These two roles draw upon different knowledge traditions and ritual logics, yet they converge in the body of one practitioner, making the case distinctive and worthy of closer ethnographic attention.

The coexistence of these roles raises several important questions. First, how is this dual ritual identity constructed, embodied, and recognised in local practice? Second, what kinds of bodily movements, symbolic artefacts, and spatial strategies enable the practitioner to differentiate or merge his two functions? Third, how do community members themselves understand, validate, or challenge the legitimacy of such overlapping authority? These questions go beyond descriptive detail, touching on broader concerns about how sacred authority is produced, sustained, and transformed in contemporary minority contexts.

To address these issues, the study presents long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2024. The research combined participant observation during major ceremonies, semi-structured interviews with ritual bearers and villagers, and extensive visual ethnographic documentation. Photographs, video recordings, and spatial diagrams were not merely archival records; they also functioned as reflexive tools, shared back with the community to invite interpretation, critique, and collaborative re-evaluation. This feedback process added another layer of insight, revealing how rituals are not only performed but also continually reinterpreted through communal dialogue.

The objectives of the study are threefold. First, to document and analyse how one practitioner simultaneously carries out two priesthood roles with distinct symbolic systems yet overlapping in community life. Second, to explore how villagers make sense of this dual authority, generating interpretations that range from moral trust to aesthetic judgement. Third, to reflect on how the mechanisms of visual presentation and communal feedback contribute to the resilience and adaptability of local ritual systems. By presenting this case as a field-based report, the study offers a detailed account of how sacred authority is lived, negotiated, and remembered in one Yi community, while also illustrating the broader value of visual ethnography in contemporary ritual studies.



Figure 1. 'Lamplighters' and 'Bima' in the Ceremony

## Methodology

This study adopts a practice-oriented theoretical framework that draws on ritual theory, visual anthropology, and symbolic spatial analysis. Rather than approaching ritual authority as an institutionally fixed role, it builds on Bell's (1992) understanding of ritual as a performative and negotiated practice, one that is embedded in lived experience and community interactions. Visual ethnography, informed by MacDougall (1998), is employed here not only as a means of recording ritual forms but also as a reflexive tool that encourages participants to engage with images of their own practice. This approach highlights the interpretive process through which authority is acknowledged, questioned, or reinforced by the community. Turner's (1969) conceptualisation of liminality and sacred space further provides a basis for understanding how ritual identities are enacted, differentiated, and symbolically reinforced through embodied gestures, material objects, and spatial arrangements. These interrelated elements are brought together in a conceptual model that situates practice, space, and visual mediation within a single analytical framework (see Figure 2).

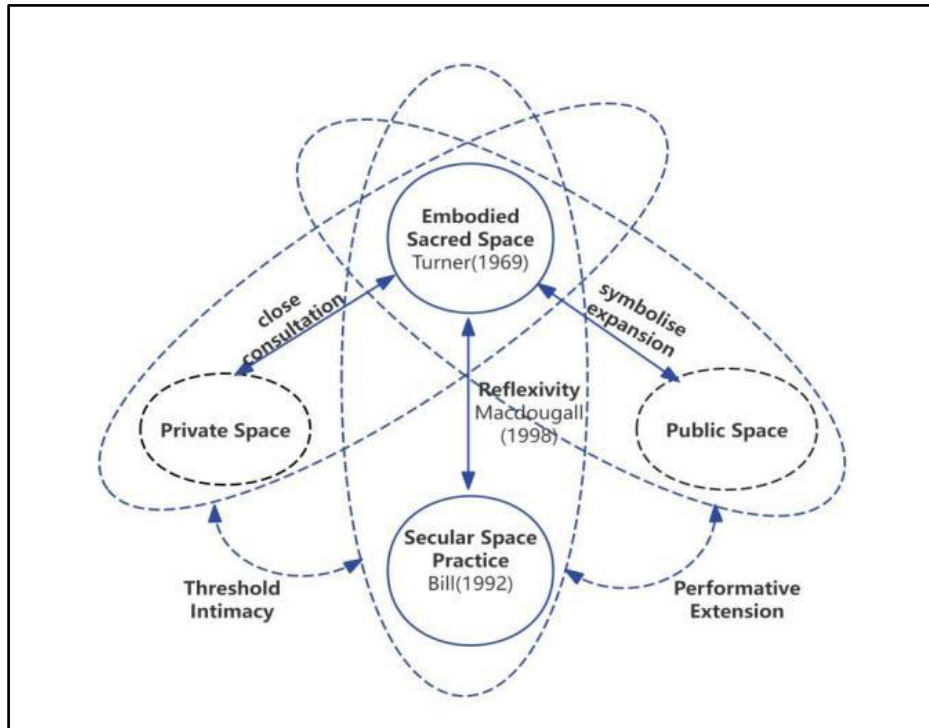


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework with Spatial Dimensions of Ritual Practice

The research is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2017 and 2024 in Songyuan Village, a Yi agglomeration community in Chengjiang County, Yunnan Province. The village is known for its enduring ritual ecology, where Yi ancestral rituals and calendrical festivals remain central to local cultural life. The study focuses specifically on one ritual practitioner who holds two distinct ceremonial positions. The first is his role as Lamplighter, where he presides over the annual Taiping Lantern Festival, guiding villagers in lighting lanterns, leading ritual processions, and orchestrating a communal atmosphere through fire, music, and collective movement. The second is his role as Bimo, in which he conducts funerary and ancestral rituals such as the Yin Lantern festival, using oral scriptures, chants, sacrificial practices, and symbolic invocations to mediate relations with the spirit world. The convergence of these roles within a single individual provides a unique opportunity to investigate how ritual authority is embodied and understood in practice.

Attention to spatial typology was particularly significant in shaping both the documentation strategies and the positioning of the researcher in relation to ritual settings. The distinction between sacred and secular spaces influenced not only the kinds of images that could be recorded but also the community's responses to them. Photographs taken in sacred private spaces, for example, often elicited cautious or protective commentary from participants, while those taken in more public spaces encouraged more relaxed, playful, or even critical reactions. These responses should not be seen as fixed oppositions but as dynamic points of negotiation that affected how rituals were enacted, interpreted, and remembered. By embedding spatial distinctions within the methodological design, the

study demonstrates how ritual authority is co-produced through embodied performance, the structuring of space, and the visual mediation of practice.

Data collection combined several interrelated methods, including participant observation, visual documentation, and interviews. Ethnographic engagement took place across multiple seasonal cycles, covering public ceremonies and private family rituals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ritual bearers, family members, community elders, and younger villagers. These conversations explored themes of ritual transmission, symbolic differences between ceremonial roles, the embodied dimensions of performance, and community perceptions of legitimacy. Field notes and interview transcripts were primarily recorded in Mandarin, supplemented with Yi-language explanations where necessary, and were co-translated with bilingual villagers to ensure accuracy and cultural nuance.

Visual anthropology in this study was treated not as an auxiliary tool but as a central method of analysis. Photography, video, and spatial mapping were used to document gestures, costumes, ritual objects, and the paths followed during ceremonies. The analysis of such material was informed by the work of Barbash, MacDougall, Taylor and MacDougall (1996), who emphasise the interpretive potential of visual media for understanding ritual meaning. Importantly, video recordings were not kept as passive archives. Instead, they were actively shared with participants after ceremonies, allowing for collective viewing sessions. During these sessions, villagers and the researcher engaged in discussions about the accuracy of ritual postures, the legitimacy of symbolic gestures, and the aesthetic standards by which ritual performances were judged. This “re-viewing” process created a second layer of ethnography in which ritual knowledge was renegotiated through dialogue. It generated new insights into how rituals are not only enacted but also continually interpreted within the community itself.

This approach is consistent with anthropological traditions of revisiting field sites, where scholars return to earlier contexts to compare past and present practices. As noted by Guo and Tang (2023), re-investigation allows rituals to be studied as living and adaptive processes. The present study extends this tradition by introducing mobile video technologies and incorporating them into everyday village life. The development of an “image journal” and “video journal” with community members represents an innovative dimension of the methodology, as it combined ethnographic documentation with collaborative reflection.

Ethical considerations were carefully negotiated throughout the fieldwork process. Verbal consent was sought from participants before filming or photographing rituals. Particularly sensitive ceremonies, such as those involving death, illness, or strong cultural taboos, were selectively filmed or omitted entirely in order to respect community concerns. When visual material was considered too intimate or potentially offensive, it was anonymised or withheld from circulation. The researcher’s own

dual identity, as a Han Chinese academic and doctoral student in creative media, was made explicit during interactions with villagers. This transparency not only shaped trust relations but also influenced how participants engaged with the research process and the material that was produced.

The collected data was analysed through thematic coding, linking visual, verbal, and spatial elements. Ritual photographs were examined for their symbolic content, but equally for their role in shaping community perceptions of legitimacy. Interview data provided context for understanding how villagers judged ritual effectiveness, while visual analysis revealed how gestures and spaces reinforced authority. The integration of these sources allowed for a multilayered understanding of ritual authority as something performed, seen, evaluated, and reinscribed through communal interpretation.

By situating visual ethnography at the centre of the methodology, the study demonstrates how images act as both records and agents of ritual authority. They document practice, generate feedback, and open interpretive spaces where villagers debate meaning. This reflexive process, where community members actively engage with their own visual representations, ensures that the analysis is not solely researcher-driven but is enriched by local perspectives. Such collaborative engagement is integral to the contribution of this study, as it highlights the agency of participants in co-constructing the ethnographic record and in shaping the understanding of sacred legitimacy (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. The Main Characters of the Team

## **The Practice of Ritual Duality - Embodying Two Sacred Roles**

In the traditional settlement areas of the Yi, the family system and ancestral worship form the core of social and spiritual life. The family branch system provides the foundation of Yi social structure, while rituals for the ancestors constitute the primary setting in which sacred and secular life is intertwined. These practices reflect an enduring worldview in which kinship, spirituality, and everyday community

bonds remain inseparable (Wang & Yang, 2024). In Songyuan Yi Village, located in Chengjiang County, one of the most important expressions of this tradition is the long-standing activity of “jumping lanterns”, known locally as Yangdeng or “Taiping Huadeng”. This performance occurs each year in the first month of the lunar calendar, preceded by a solemn ritual known as the “Invitation to the God of Lanterns”. Villagers recount that the God of Lanterns has accompanied them since ancient times, returning annually to join in the celebration of the festival and to safeguard the community.

The “Sacrifice to the God of Lanterns” remains a central ritual of the Taiping Lantern Festival and is deeply embedded in the collective memory of Songyuan villagers. Having developed through nearly two centuries of cultural interaction between Yi and Han Chinese traditions, the festival is both a symbolic event and a living record of regional identity. Its annual re-enactment reflects how ritual practice transmits values across generations and shapes both intra-village cohesion and connections with neighbouring communities. Within this process, the ritual practitioner assumes the role of Lamplighter, or lantern master, a position that emphasises visibility, spatial leadership, and symbolic authority. The Lamplighter guides the sequence of ritual events, directs collective movements, and embodies the moral and visual presence of the divine (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Lamplighter and the Lamp God

The material culture associated with the lantern rituals is simple yet highly symbolic. The “God of the Lantern” is represented by a small wooden idol, carved into the figure of a woman and decorated with cloth garments and painted features. Accompanying it is the “seal lantern”, crafted from red paper into a square form approximately thirty centimetres high, inscribed with the characters “Song Zi Yuan Taiping Flower Lanterns”. These artefacts are not only material objects but serve as ritual technologies that open spiritual pathways, making the divine visible and present within the festival space.

Visual anthropology offers a useful perspective for interpreting these practices. As Deng Qiyao (2013) has argued in *I See and Other – Inquiring Between Mirror Self and Otherness*, visual anthropology is not confined to analysing images as representational texts but must also consider the

relations of power, ideology, and cultural background in which images are embedded. From this perspective, the Lamplighter's role is not only about ritual efficacy but also about performing authority through visibility and spectacle. The flame-coloured sash and headband worn during the ceremony symbolise visual authority and protective power, marking the ritual expert as both guide and guardian. His centrality within the procession highlights his role in orchestrating movement, embodying moral order, and affirming communal solidarity.

In contrast, the role of the Bimo unfolds in more private and often domestic contexts. Bimos preside over funerals, ancestral rites, and healing ceremonies, which remain vital within Songyuan Yi life. Traditional funerary practices are closely linked to Taoist-influenced ritual forms such as the "Yin Lantern" ceremony, also known locally as "looking into the yin lanterns". Here the community distinguishes between "Yang Lanterns", which celebrate life and invoke heavenly blessings, and "Yin Lanterns", which guide the dead and console the living. The dual forms symbolise the balance of joy and sorrow: the Yang Lantern represents festive revelry and hope, while the Yin Lantern expresses mourning and prayers for the safe passage of souls. In both forms, the ritual expert draws upon ancient traditions to address contrasting dimensions of existence.

During the Yin Lantern ceremony, gestures and movements are subdued, precise, and deeply symbolic. Participants kneel, bow, and handle sacred objects with reverence. Chants are deliberate, melodic, and carefully timed. Unlike the public authority of the Lamplighter, the Bimo's authority is intimate and spiritual, marked by a quieter but equally powerful connection between the living and the ancestral world. His chanting voice bridges visible and invisible realms, while his hands inscribe totems that symbolise spiritual pathways (see Figure 5). The contrast between the extroverted, communal character of the Lamplighter and the inward, contemplative presence of the Bimo demonstrates the practitioner's capacity to embody two complementary sacred roles.



Figure 5. Yin Lantern Ceremony (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/6sI9kqRQJ-OmM-J3uMty6w>)

A comparative view of these practices reveals that ritual authority is contextually shaped by space, symbolism, and purpose. It is striking that both roles are performed by the same practitioner in the same body, though through entirely different bodily languages and ritual technologies. This duality raises important questions. How does the practitioner shift between roles in practice? What visual cues, gestures, or spatial markers signal the transformation from Lamplighter to Bimo? How does the community interpret these shifts and confirm their legitimacy?

Ethnographic observation suggests that role transformation occurs as a gradual, structured process rather than as an abrupt switch. Prior to the Yang Lantern festival, the ritual expert adorns himself with colourful garments and visual symbols that project energy, light, and festive spirit. By contrast, before officiating at funerals or the Yin Lantern ceremony, he undergoes elaborate face and body painting, adopting colours and motifs derived from the traditional Nuo repertoire associated with exorcism and protection. These costumes and embodied acts constitute a symbolic technology that not only differentiates roles but also affirms the practitioner's sacred position within the ritual order. In this sense, the practitioner's dual authority is not contradictory but demonstrates the adaptability of Yi ritual systems in maintaining coherence across diverse ceremonial contexts.

## **Community Perception: Recognition of Legitimacy**

In a ritual environment that lacks institutionalised religion, community perception becomes a crucial medium through which sacred authority is legitimised, defended, or at times challenged. Behind the apparent sacredness of folklore lies a deeply rooted secular cultural psychology that governs how rituals are valued and interpreted (Zhang, 2024). In Songyuan Yi villages, the authority attached to ritual practices does not derive solely from clan affiliation, formal training, or hierarchical appointment. Instead, it arises through a process of community recognition, in which practitioners such as the Lamplighter and the Bimo are continually assessed by the villagers themselves. Their authority rests upon a combination of moral trust, visual cues, and collective memory, all of which must be carefully maintained and re-enacted during each ceremony. In this context, ritual experts negotiate legitimacy not only through their actions but also in the perceptions of those who watch, comment, and remember.

Fei Xiaotong, in his book *Native China*, observes that groups within vernacular society cannot exist as isolated individuals but must embed themselves within a social structure that ensures an 'orderly' rhythm of life in both time and space (Fei, 2012). The ritual life of the Yi is similarly embedded in a dual structure: on one level, the family-based clan system sustains kinship and authority, while on another level, ancestor worship establishes the sacred framework within which moral expectations are shaped. These two dimensions are interdependent, and within them, the legitimacy of ritual participants is revealed to be dynamic rather than absolute.

To explore this dynamism, the study introduces a nested model of ritual legitimacy derived from visual feedback gathered during fieldwork. At the centre of the model lies symbolic legitimacy, surrounded by two intermediate dimensions: trust and symbolic form. Around these are four outer mechanisms by which the community observes, assesses, and responds to ritual practice. Together, these layers show how legitimacy is simultaneously constructed by ritual performance and recognised by community evaluation (see Figure 6).

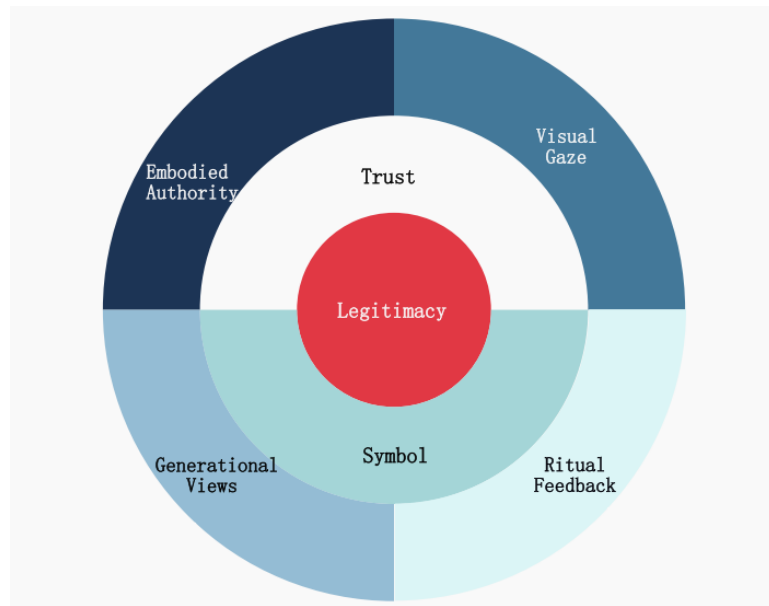


Figure 6. Implied Nested Model of Ritual Legitimacy

### ***Visual Gaze***

The first outer layer is the visual gaze. In anthropological research, visual methods have long been applied to the study of perception, where the gaze serves to structure how individuals experience material culture and ritual space (Qin et al., 2024). In Songyuan, the visual gaze functions as a form of continuous surveillance exercised by the community. Villagers do not participate passively; rather, they scrutinise ritual actions, interpreting their meaning and effectiveness through attentive watching. For example, during the Taiping Lantern procession, respected elders often stand close to the God of Lanterns, their bodies still and their expressions intent. This form of observation communicates an active but silent judgement on the correctness and dignity of the performance.

The gaze is not distributed evenly. Older men typically occupy positions at the front or flanks of the lantern procession, maintaining composure and sustained attention. Their manner of watching conveys respect and signals approval or concern without verbal comment. In contrast, women are generally excluded from ritual participation, and young men watch from a distance, often with a mixture of curiosity and levity, accompanied by laughter or side conversations. These spatial and behavioural

patterns reflect generational differences in both authority and perception, highlighting the ways in which ritual significance is read differently across demographic groups. Such arrangements reinforce hierarchy but also allow younger observers to develop their own interpretations of ritual meaning.

### ***Embodied Authority***

The second outer layer concerns embodied authority. This dimension refers to the capacity of the practitioner's body to manifest alignment with the sacred. In both the Yang Lantern and Yin Lantern ceremonies, posture, rhythm, and gesture are tightly monitored. Authority is communicated not simply through costume or words, but through the trained control of movement. In this sense, the body itself becomes an instrument of ritual legitimacy.

Specific practices illustrate this point. During the Songyuan Taiping Lanterns, the Lamplighter performs the act of "stepping on the ground" around the God of Lanterns. These steps imitate the ploughing of oxen in the fields and symbolically invoke hopes for a fertile harvest. Such acts link bodily enactment with agricultural prosperity, thereby connecting the sacred ritual to the community's material concerns. The physical discipline of the practitioner, visible to all, provides reassurance that ritual order is maintained and divine favour secured.

Durkheim's classic distinction between the sacred and the profane emphasises the division of life into two opposing realms, one focused on worldly activities and the other on transcendent meaning (Lin & Peng, 1999). Yet in the context of Songyuan Yi villages, this distinction does not manifest as a sharp antagonism. Instead, villagers themselves recognise continuity between the sacred and secular through their engagement with ritual specialists. Authority is conferred as the community affirms its identity around the Lamplighter and the Bimo, using ritual as a means of orienting both daily life and long-term aspirations. In this way, ritual authority is continually reinforced by practice, yet remains open to reinterpretation, adaptation, and cultural enrichment.

### ***Generational Views of Ritual Authority***

The third outer layer, the generational views, reveals the tension between inherited aesthetic standards and evolving expectations. Elders tend to emphasise restraint and legitimacy grounded in lineage, while younger villagers often prioritise energy, glamour, and visual impact. As one young man remarked after viewing a recorded procession, "He looks cool. It's like a character from a historical film." Such comments are not dismissals but reconstructions. The younger generation engages with rituals as audiences accustomed to digital aesthetics, which reshapes their symbolic expectations. Legitimacy persists, but the codes for interpreting it are increasingly hybridised.

### ***Ritual Feedback and Visual Reflexivity***

In recent years, the convergence of visual technologies, particularly photography and videography, with ethnographic practice has expanded not only data collection but also opportunities for participant feedback and reflective engagement. In Pine Plains Village, playback sessions of photographs and videos have become important social interfaces between ritual practitioners and their communities. Here, performances are reinterpreted, criticised, and reassessed through collective viewing.

After the production of an ethnographic film, for instance, a group of elders gathered to watch the Lamplighter's procession and established a feedback mechanism through discussion. Their comments extended beyond aesthetic critique to express a localised symbolic logic: physical actions were seen to reflect mental preoccupations. Movements and performances of central figures were carefully dismantled and evaluated by the audience. In this way, villagers did not merely watch passively but participated in ritual calibration through visual memory. Drawing on Sarah Pink's (2007) notion of visual ethnography as collaborative knowledge creation, such sessions of pictorial retrospection constitute a co-constructed form of reflection. They provide a shared arena where not only researchers but also community members actively rewrite meaning.

These exchanges are not institutionalised assessments; rather, they are embedded in the everyday ethics of village life. Feedback is expressed through metaphor, analogy, and gentle comparison—never formalised but deeply felt. Within this reflective dialogue, ritual authority is continuously negotiated, and legitimacy is either reaffirmed or questioned depending on how well bodily presence aligns with community expectations.

### ***Trust and Symbols***

Trust in this context is a moral belief grounded in character. For many ritual practitioners, trust is not an abstract psychological disposition but a faith-based recognition built upon physical performance, family reputation, and daily conduct. Observers pay attention not only to ritual behaviour but also to whether it reflects a calm, restrained, and non-theatrical personality.

The source of faith is cumulative, formed over long periods through observation of a practitioner's background, parental example, and habitual behaviour. Without this inner composure, it is unlikely that rituals will impress the gods or secure communal approval, even when executed flawlessly. Trust, therefore, is a physicalised form of intellectual understanding. It is the essential condition that allows a practitioner to be seen as a person to whom others can entrust their souls.

Alongside trust operates the symbolic system, which serves as the sacred grammar of the visual order. Every element of dress, movement, and prop embodies specific meaning and collectively forms a strict grammar of ritual practice. In the Lamplighter's role, for instance, the red sash, the raised seal lantern, and the rhythmic crossing of the square are indispensable markers. In funerary contexts, by contrast, the practitioner must draw symbols on the body, imitate the iconography of Nuo figures, lower the voice, and adopt measured movements. Through such practices, ceremonies delineate sacred boundaries and prevent slippage between the symbolic orders of Yang Lantern and Yin Lantern. Symbols are not ornamental; they operate as visual contracts that bind the practitioner to the mechanisms of passage between spiritual worlds.

### **Seeing the Sacred: Vision, Mediation and Ritual Authority**

From the observed to the viewable, from the Lamplighter to the Bimo, from the Yang Lantern to the Yin Lantern, and from the public festival to the private family hall, the body of a ritual practitioner carries more than dual identity. It is also the medium through which sacredness and legitimacy are continually adjusted, embodied, and subjected to communal scrutiny. In such settings, photography and filming are not simply external documentation. They operate as mechanisms of surveillance, symbolic validation, and the reaffirmation of ritual authority.

#### ***Visual Mediation as Ethnographic Practice***

Following MacDougall's (1998) approach, this study treats photography and video not as supplementary materials but as constitutive of subjectivity itself. Visual records are not inert; they become social agents in the negotiation of meaning. In the context of Songyuan Yi Village, the convergence of long-form filming, mobile short videos, and still photography during 2017–2024 revealed how images acquire social lives. They return to the community, are replayed with participants, and provoke new cycles of comment, evaluation, and reinterpretation. The act of “looking back” is therefore not only a supplement to analysis but also a vital site where ritual authority is re-examined and recalibrated.

This dimension of viewing acquires added complexity through the integration of new digital platforms. Mobile short videos, circulated via TikTok and related applications, now feed into discussions of intangible heritage (Si & Luo, 2023). With TikTok's editing functions, villagers themselves become inadvertent ethnographic filmmakers, splicing together footage, adding filters, and re-casting ritual performances in contemporary visual idioms. This reflexive reworking does not detach rituals from their sacredness; rather, it expands the channels through which sacred legitimacy is mediated.

## ***Social Life of Images***

Between 2017 and 2024, the researcher documented core ritual sequences including the Taiping Lantern Festival, Yin Lantern funerals, and the Invitation to the God of Lanterns. The recordings varied from long videos to short mobile clips and extensive photographic series (refer to Table 1). Importantly, these materials circulated back into village life, generating evaluative commentary that was at once aesthetic, moral, and symbolic.

For example, after watching a video of a lamp-sending ceremony, one older woman noted: “In the past, we were not allowed to participate directly. His hand movement here was too fast; the god had no time to enter the doorway. He should slow down.” Such subtle commentary demonstrates the community’s heightened sensitivity to rhythm, pacing, and atmosphere. It also illustrates how authority is produced through the visual order: bodily performance is scrutinised in its smallest gestures, and ritual legitimacy is either confirmed or gently corrected.

Table 1. Visual works screened within the community

<b>Playing Order</b>	<b>Title of work</b>	<b>Producer(s)</b>	<b>Type &amp; Content</b>
1	<i>Lamplighter</i>	Bao Mingxing	Mobile short video (3 minutes)
2	<i>Foot Tapping Dance</i>	Bao Mingxing	Mobile short video (2 minutes)
3	<i>The Last Call</i>	Yang Shulin, Bao Mingxing	Long video (17 minutes)
4	<i>Songyuan Yi Village</i>	Bao Mingxing	Photo album (114 images)

These works illustrate how different visual forms circulate. They provide ritual content in distinct registers: the immediacy of short clips, the density of long-form narrative, and the fragmentary accumulation of photographs. Together, they frame how villagers themselves “see” their rituals.

## ***Platform Circulation and Performance Adjustment***

The inward circulation of images within Songyuan Village now intersects with outward projection. Younger villagers edit ritual clips and upload them to platforms such as TikTok (Douyin) and Shuttle. External viewership, algorithmic recommendation, and filter styles feed back into the village, subtly shaping expectations of what a “good performance” looks like. Ritual practitioners, observing their own clips online, sometimes adjust movements to appear more striking or authoritative. One Lamplighter reflected that, after reviewing his short video, he deliberately strengthened his stepping rhythm because it “seemed to look more powerful”.

This dynamic of “performing for the platform” does not strip the ritual of sacredness. Instead, it shows how sacred legitimacy is extended into digital spaces and negotiated through new visual grammars. Jiang (2024) observes that such interactions transform communication from linear and one-directional into multidirectional feedback loops. Authority becomes a dialogue not only between practitioner and community, but also between community and digital audiences.

### *Visual Feedback Loops in Local Practice*

These feedback loops also operate internally. After ceremonies, villagers gather to view recordings, discussing details of posture, sound, and gesture. Some praise, others suggest corrections, but all contribute to an atmosphere of collective calibration. This commentary reactivates symbolic norms within the community, ensuring that legitimacy is neither static nor monopolised but continuously renegotiated.

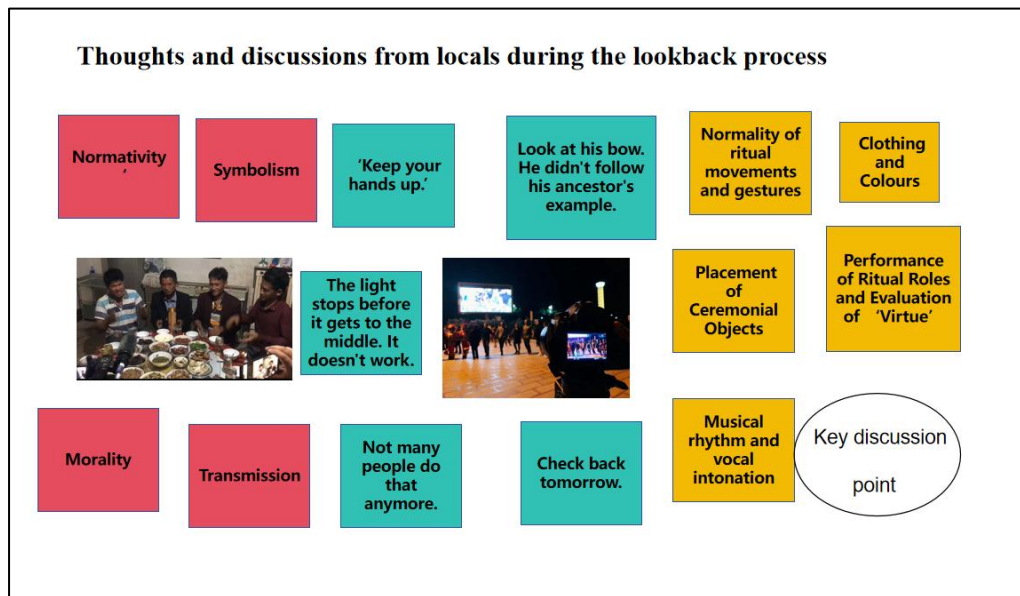


Figure 7. Focused Ideas and Discussions Among Locals in Visual Feedback Loops

What emerges is an expanded interpretive space. Oral traditions provide frameworks of meaning, but visual feedback layers on new textures of reflection, particularly for younger villagers who are adept at mobile recording and editing. Elders focus on steadiness and solemnity, while younger viewers use comparisons such as “like a film” or “like a costume drama” to validate the performance. These cross-generational differences highlight that legitimacy is not diluted but hybridised where new aesthetic standards fold into older symbolic grammars, creating a pluralised viewing culture.

### *Generational Shifts in Viewing*

The practice of visual ethnography revealed marked differences in how generations perceive sacredness. Elders emphasise introspection, rhythmic steadiness, and solemn expression. For them, legitimacy depends on composure and restraint. Younger villagers, by contrast, prioritise dynamism, rhythm, and visual spectacle. Their references are cinematic, aesthetic, and digital, often aligning rituals with broader media culture.



Figure 8. Content Posters for On-Site Screenings

This divergence does not represent a breakdown of sacredness. Instead, it demonstrates that the sacred is being reconstituted through evolving codes of recognition. Sacredness is not given in advance; it is generated through constant acts of seeing, commenting, and accepting.

### *Seeing and Being Seen*

Taken together, these processes show that visual ethnography does more than record. It enhances perception, reveals communal standards, and creates new forums for reflection. The sacred, in Songyuan Yi Village, is not fixed in priestly office or doctrinal sanction. It is dynamically produced through cycles of seeing and being seen, in both ritual performance and digital circulation. Authority emerges not from institutional decrees but from communal consensus, patterned movement, and accumulated experience.

In other words, sacred legitimacy here is not absolute. It is achieved through the iterative labour of watching, reviewing, commenting, and reframing. The sacred is not merely performed; it is continually “seen into being.”

### **Rethinking Ritual Systems: Flexibility, Hybridity and Local Cosmology**

The field study conducted in Songyuan Yi Village does not reveal a ritual system with rigid structures or clear divisions of labour, but rather a dynamic constellation of practices adapted by ritual specialists and continually reshaped through community dialogue. The dual identity of the Lamplighter and the Bimo compels us to reconsider the very composition of what we might call a “ritual system.” Instead of a fixed foundation, ritual emerges as a constantly reconstructed configuration of bodily strategies, spatial practices, and symbolic resources.

Flexibility here is not an incidental feature but a defining principle. It is evident not only in the practitioner's ability to shift between the Yang Lantern and the Yin Lantern roles but also in the capacity to adjust rhythm, control space, modulate voice, and gauge emotional intensity in response to context. Each adjustment—whether altering the pace of movement, raising or lowering vocal pitch, or changing costumes—reshapes the symbolic logic of the Taiping Lantern and Yin Lantern ceremonies. Ritual practice becomes a choreography of adaptation, one that accommodates seasonal cycles, communal moods, and shifting social demands.

Yet this flexibility should not be mistaken for arbitrariness or erosion of meaning. Rather, it embodies what may be described as a “practical rationality” rooted in local experience. This rationality sustains sacredness and community identity under conditions of change. It does not dismantle norms but reconstructs them through practice. One elder reflected in interview: “He does not jump the lamp every day, but when he does, it feels as if the ancestors are truly here.” Such testimony demonstrates that ritual efficacy does not depend on frequency or doctrinal consistency but on performative power to evoke memory and stimulate spiritual resonance. This capacity to generate affective presence is itself the essence of ritual variability.

The coexistence of dual roles further reveals a distinctive localisation process in Yi ritual culture. As Wu Wenzao argued in his *Sociology Series* (1944), effective theory must grow from trial hypotheses tested in the field, where fact and interpretation continually reshape one another. In practice, the Lamplighter and the Bimo appear to represent two distinct symbolic orders: the former associated with festivals, joy, and the public sphere; the latter linked to funerals, mourning, and the intimate domain of the family. Yet they are not antagonistic. Instead, they constitute complementary poles of a broader cycle of balance. Their coexistence demonstrates that the central issue is not the division between deities or the imposition of abstract norms, but rather the embodied ability of one individual to “move together” with the community and to enact a moral life that unites festivity with mourning. What appears as heterogeneity is in fact an integration rooted in bodily experience and shared identity.

This integrative process forms the basis of a locally distinctive cosmology. As Yang and Gu (2024) observe, cosmology here does not derive from systematic theology but from lived experience, collective memory, and symbolic practice. Sacred order is not imposed from above but emerges through daily acts of performance, remembrance, and transmission. In this framework, deities, ancestors, ghosts, and natural forces are conceived not as sharply divided entities but as overlapping presences negotiated in practice. For example, when inviting the Lantern Gods, villagers move fluidly between Yi and Chinese languages; when sending off lanterns, they combine Taiping Lantern costumes with ancestral invocations. Such symbolic ambiguity is not feared as disorder but embraced as a means of sustaining

heterogeneity. This openness forms the basis of respect for the “one body, two gods” configuration, embedding dual authority within both cultural legitimacy and communal acceptance.

From a theoretical perspective, Turner (1969) understood ritual as a symbolic re-examination of social structure, while Bell (1992) later emphasised ritual as praxeological negotiation of difference. The Songyuan case extends these insights. Here, rituals need not be interpreted as closed structures. Instead, they function as sensory orders sustained through gesture, symbol, community feedback, and spatial creativity. What persists is not an immutable system of priesthoods but a living network of practices continually evoked and reconstructed in situ.

This perspective also challenges the notion that peripheral ritual cultures are merely local idiosyncrasies. On the contrary, they provide new insights into the nature of religious authority and symbolic systems under contemporary pressures. Globalisation, state regulation, media circulation, and migration all shape village life. Yet the Songyuan case shows that sacred legitimacy can endure precisely because it is flexible and hybrid. Ritual authority does not retreat into nostalgic tradition but dynamically deploys traditional resources in new ways. It is mobile, negotiable, and perpetually reconstituted through practice.

In this sense, Songyuan rituals exemplify a broader mechanism of producing “local sacredness.” They show how communities maintain ritual coherence in the face of external influences while preserving the ability to innovate. Hybridity here is not dilution but resilience, allowing sacredness to remain a living force embedded in the rhythms of everyday life.

## **Limitations and Further Studies**

While this study has sought to provide a detailed account of ritual duality in Songyuan Yi Village, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of the research is necessarily narrow. It centres on a single village and one ritual practitioner whose overlapping roles as Lamplighter and Bimo are not easily generalisable to other Yi communities or minority contexts in Southwest China. The ethnographic material therefore reflects a situated case study rather than a comprehensive account of ritual systems across regions.

Secondly, the methodology of visual ethnography brings both strengths and constraints. Although the use of photographs and videos provided valuable opportunities for feedback and reflexive dialogue with community members, access to certain rituals was restricted. Death-related ceremonies, illness rituals, and moments considered too sensitive for recording were either partially documented or excluded entirely. The resulting corpus, while substantial, represents only a partial archive of ritual life.

Moreover, the reliance on visual data risks privileging the performative and visible dimensions of ritual at the expense of more hidden layers of belief and cosmology.

Thirdly, the position of the researcher must be recognised as both enabling and limiting. As a Han Chinese academic and doctoral student of creative media, the researcher occupied a dual identity that shaped relationships with villagers. While reflexivity and transparency were prioritised throughout, interpretations inevitably reflect this positionality, and certain layers of insider knowledge may remain inaccessible.

These limitations also suggest avenues for further research. Comparative studies across different Yi villages, or between Yi and other minority communities, could clarify whether dual ritual authority is a widespread phenomenon or a local specificity. Longitudinal studies would also allow closer tracking of how younger generations continue to reshape ritual authority in the era of mobile media. Finally, future work might explore the digital afterlives of rituals, especially how short-video platforms and algorithmic circulation transform perceptions of sacredness across both local and external audiences.

By recognising these limitations and outlining pathways for future inquiry, the study situates itself as an initial contribution to a wider conversation on ritual authority, visual ethnography, and the dynamics of local cosmology.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the unique case of a ritual practitioner in Songyuan Yi Village who simultaneously inhabits the roles of Lamplighter and Bimo. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork from 2017 to 2024, supported by participant observation, interviews, and visual methodologies, the research demonstrates that ritual authority is not anchored in fixed institutions or doctrinal frameworks. Instead, authority is continually negotiated through bodily performance, community recognition, and symbolic mediation.

The findings suggest that ritual systems in Songyuan Yi Village operate with remarkable flexibility. Ritual specialists move between festive and funerary domains by adjusting gestures, vocal registers, costumes, and spatial patterns. This ability to shift across contexts does not undermine sacred legitimacy. On the contrary, it allows ritual authority to remain responsive to changing social circumstances while maintaining symbolic coherence. Flexibility here should not be seen as dilution but as a vital mode of resilience, enabling rituals to remain meaningful in a community experiencing broader cultural and generational shifts.

Equally significant is the role of the community. Villagers are not passive witnesses to ritual practice; they are active participants in sustaining authority. Through attentive observation, evaluative commentary, and visual feedback loops, they hold practitioners accountable to aesthetic, moral, and symbolic standards. Photography and videography, far from being mere recording tools, function as social agents that stimulate discussion, shape expectations, and recalibrate ritual norms. This study highlights the importance of “seeing” as both a methodological tool and a cultural practice: sacred legitimacy emerges not simply in what is done, but in how it is seen, reviewed, and remembered.

The coexistence of Lamplighter and Bimo roles also reveals a distinctive cosmological integration. Rather than representing discrete religious systems, these dual roles embody complementary aspects of community life: celebration and mourning, public festivity and private devotion, vitality and remembrance. Their conjunction demonstrates how sacred authority can exist as hybridity rather than opposition. It is through this hybridity that the community sustains a cosmological vision that embraces ambiguity, negotiates difference, and affirms continuity between worlds.

Although this study is grounded in the local context of one Yi village, its implications extend further. In an era marked by media saturation, digital circulation, and cultural transformation, the case shows how communities preserve sacred legitimacy not by clinging to static norms, but by adapting them. Visual ethnography reveals that rituals today are entangled with mobile technologies, short-video platforms, and external spectatorship. Rather than eroding sacredness, these new channels generate additional layers of recognition and reflexivity. They contribute to a dynamic ecology in which ritual performers are aware of being watched, judged, and recorded, both within the village and beyond it.

In short, the research addresses a central anthropological question: how is the sacred produced, sustained, and perceived under contemporary conditions? The answer lies not in theology or doctrinal systems, but in the lived practices of a community. It lies in the practitioner whose body embodies two sacred roles, in the villagers whose gazes and commentaries constitute legitimacy, and in the images that circulate as evidence, memory, and critique. Here ritual is not a static institution but a visible negotiation between past and present, private and public, structure and improvisation. Through this negotiation, the cosmology of Songyuan Yi Village continues to adapt, perpetuate, and remain vital in the twenty-first century.

## References

- [1] Zheng, H., & Wang, W. (2000). On the connotation and objectives of the localization of sociology. *Social Sciences Journal of Jilin University*, (1), 40–46.

- [2] Guo, D., & Cheng, S. (2019). Funeral culture conflict among the Yi people from the perspective of cultural relativism. *Journal of Xichang College (Social Science Edition)*, (4), 13–17, 124.
- [3] Guo, J., & Tang, S. (2023). The method of “revisiting”: From “text ethnography” to “visual ethnography” — A discussion based on the “Dulong Visual Workshop”. *Film Criticism and Review*, (6), 1–10 .
- [4] Barbash, I., MacDougall, D., Taylor, L., & MacDougall, J. (1996). Reframing ethnographic film: A “conversation” with David MacDougall and Judith MacDougall. *American Anthropologist*, 98(2), 371–387.
- [5] Wang, M., & Yang, Y. (2024). The sacred and the secular: Ancestor worship and lineage society among the Yi people in Liangshan. *Journal of Huaihua University*, (4), 38–46.
- [6] Deng, Q. (2013). *My gaze and others: Inquiry between mirrored self and alterity*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press..
- [7] Zhang, Q. (2024). The fusion of the “sacred” and the “secular”: A folkloric-artistic study of Yangjiabu New Year woodblock prints. *Ge Hai*, (5), 88–99.
- [8] Fei, X. (2012). *From the soil: The foundations of Chinese society* . Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [9] Qin, Z., Wang, Y., Tan, M., & Zhang, W. (2024). Differentiated visual perceptions of tourism space between hosts and guests in a red-themed village: A case study of Tabusai Village, Inner Mongolia. *Human Geography*, 39(6), 183–192.
- [10] Durkheim, E. (1999). *The elementary forms of religious life* (L. Z. Lin & S. Y. Peng, Trans.). Beijing: Minzu University of China Press. (Original work published 1912).
- [11] Pink, S. (2007). *Doing visual ethnography: Images, media and representation in research* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications..
- [12] Si, S., & Luo, J. (2023). A comparative study on the short video communication effects of different production models of traditional instrumental music from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage. *Journal of Xihua University*, 83–91.
- [13] Jiang, X. (2024). Research on the protection and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage based on the TikTok short video platform. *Collection and Investment*, (10), 194–196 .
- [14] Wu, W. (1944). *A synthesis of theory and fact: On the localization of sociology in China*. Sociological Series.
- [15] Yang, N., & Keawsuwan, C. (2024). A rhetorical study of the Yi creation epic Meige. *Chinese Language and Culture Journal*, 11(2), 593–606.
- [16] Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine.
- [17] Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## **Acknowledgment**

The author expresses heartfelt gratitude to all individuals who have directly or indirectly contributed to the completion of this research and the development of this article. Special thanks to Dr. Mohd Ekram AlHafis bin Hashim.

## **Funding Information**

This paper did not receive any internal nor external funding and was produced solely by the author.

## **AI and LLM Disclosure (Limited Use)**

Limited use of generative AI/LLMs supported language clarity and formatting. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, edited for originality, and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the submission.

## **Authors' Bio**

*Bao Mingxing* graduated from Yunnan Arts College, Yunnan, China, majoring in Anthropology of Film and Television, with a master's degree, is currently studying for his PhD degree at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia, with an interest in visual culture, new media and other content studies.

*Dr. Mohd Ekram Al Hafis bin Hashim* is Head of Department (Creative Multimedia) at the Faculty of Art, Sustainability and Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). He holds a PhD in New Media and his scholarship spans animation, extended reality (XR), visual communication, and design pedagogy. Recent works include contributions on digital storytelling and VR/AI in creative practice. Beyond academia, he is active in Malaysia's creative scene, with exhibition and award credits, and regularly serves as reviewer, panelist, and juror.