

A Study on the “卍” Symbol in the Songpan Area of Sichuan Province

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Abstract

This paper aims to expand the understanding of the “卍” symbol in the religious art of Songpan, Sichuan Province, by examining its origins, evolution, and significance across Han, Qiang, Tibetan, and other ethnic groups. Through a comprehensive review of historical and contemporary documents, as well as archaeological materials, the study explores how this graphic motif adapted to diverse cultural and religious contexts, serving as a bridge for cross-ethnic communication and artistic expression. The research highlights the symbol’s role in reflecting the region’s multiculturalism and the dynamic evolution of religious iconography. Additionally, the study investigates the symbol’s use in specific rituals, its connection to local folklore, and its influence on contemporary art forms. By examining the symbol’s association with local deities and its manifestation in various art forms, the research offers a holistic view of its cultural and religious significance, contributing valuable insights to the study of ethnic art history and religious symbology.

Keywords

“卍” Symbol; Diversity; Belief Symbiosis

1. Introduction

In the belief art of the Songpan area of Sichuan Province, the “卍” symbol is commonly seen in Bon temple architecture, decorations, ceremonial hats of statues, ritual instruments, and thrones, as well as in residential architecture and decorations. These residences are not limited to Tibetan ones; they can also be found in Qiang residential architectural decorations. For instance, during the author’s investigation of Xiaoxingxiang Village in Songpan County, the “卍” symbol was observed painted under the eaves of wooden buildings (Figure 1) and on furniture cabinet doors (Figure 2). The “卍” symbol in Songpan is not exclusive to any single ethnic belief system.

Regarding the origin of the “卍” symbol, scholars have conducted extensive research. First, definite evidence obtained from archaeological artefacts tells us that: (1) the “卍” symbol, pronounced “Yong Zhong” in Bon, is also prevalent in Buddhism, and it appeared in the Neolithic culture of the Han people, with different meanings; (2) the “卍” symbol also emerged early in other cultures worldwide, each with different connotations.

Secondly, comparing archaeological evidence with literature provides a double verification: (1) the “卍” symbol was involved in totem worship and sacrificial culture; (2) when integrated into the Chinese character system, the “卍” symbol is pronounced as “wan,” with some believing it was established during the reign of Empress Wu of Tang Dynasty, while others argue it was during the Later Qin Dynasty; (3) the Qiang people absorbed the “卍” culture as early as the Xia and Shang dynasties.

The historical context of the “卍” symbol determines its symbolic meanings. It reflects how different ethnic groups

achieve self-identity through differentiated representations in their production and life. It also manifests the blood ties of mutual prosperity and coexistence among ethnic groups. This paper supplements relevant fieldwork materials from the Songpan area regarding the current use of the “卍” symbol, aiming to deconstruct and reveal new meanings of the “卍” symbol in the modern context of multi-ethnic harmony and coexistence. The following text traces the meaning construction of the “卍” symbol in the belief art of Songpan from an archaeological and literary perspective.



Figure 1. The originally inhabited residential buildings of Xiaoxingxiang Village, abandoned halfway up the mountain after the “5·12” earthquake in 2008 (Image source: Photographed by Guo Ping during her fieldwork).



Figure 2. The furniture cabinet door is in the currently inhabited residential buildings of Xiaoxingxiang Village (Image source: Photographed by Guo Ping during her fieldwork).

2. The Meaning of the “卍” Symbol in the Context of Nature Worship

Nature worship emerged during the earliest stages of human civilization, when humans, in their struggle to survive and obtain basic living conditions, imagined various mysterious deities as the rulers of the natural world due to their lack of understanding of it. The “卍” symbol first appeared among different ethnic groups, symbolizing the sun and the universe. Archaeological artefacts can help us trace back to the formation and evolution of this image’s external form, as well as the process of the formation of its implied meaning—that is, the process of representation of signified and signifier.

2.1 The Representation of the “卍” Symbol in Ancient China

Archaeological materials indicate that the “卍” symbol already existed in the ancient beliefs of China’s Stone Age.

2.1.1 The “卍” Symbol in Rock Art

Many rock paintings have been discovered in ancient Tibetan regions, and many of them feature the “卍” symbol. Professor Zhang Yasha has discussed this extensively in her research (Zhang Yasha, 2007). It mainly involves the association between the “卍” and the bird totem of early Tibetan regions; patterns often appearing alongside this

symbol include “bird shamans,” the moon, the sun, and birds (or eagles). A representative rock painting is the Xiacang Rock Art in northern Tibet, where the protagonist of the group painting is a person wearing a “mountain”-shaped crown and dancing with outstretched limbs. Above and in front of this person is a bird-like pattern, resembling a bird but without specific depictions of wings, simplified to a combination of curved lines forming a pattern similar to the “卍” symbol. In her article “The ‘Bird Pattern’ in Tibetan Rock Art,” Professor Zhang believes there may be a special relationship between the flying bird shape and the most popular “Yong Zhong” symbol in Tibetan Bon culture. In the rock art of Zhaxi Island, Namtso Lake, northern Tibet, there is a figure wearing a “mountain”-shaped crown, with the “卍” symbol carved beside it. The standing figure beside it should be a Bon priest or shaman.

The rock paintings painted in red in the caves of Zhaxi Island on the eastern shore of Namtso Lake depict a person on an altar with raised hands, the long sleeves of their clothes fluttering on both sides, seemingly engaged in a prayer dance. Three “卍” symbols are painted on both sides of the tower, and two more are painted on the tower itself. The rock art of Zhaxi Island, Namtso Lake, also features graphic bird-like figures, whose shapes are extremely close to the “卍” symbol.

Three rock paintings discovered in the Risong, Ritu, and Doma districts of Rutog County in Tibet often feature the “卍” symbol amidst numerous sacrificial scenes depicting animals, hunting, and dancing. There are also schematic diagrams of dotted “卍” symbols surrounded by outer circles. Some scholars studying these rock paintings believe that the core of Tibetan primitive culture is solar culture, evolving from intuitive depictions of “☐” and “○” to abstract variations of the “卍” symbol (Lin Jifu, 1991).

The following reflections are proposed: there exists a borrowed and interconnected relationship between birds and bird-men and the “卍” symbol, with a shift in implied meaning. (1) Worship of birds: In ancient times, birds were widely present in the beliefs of various ethnic groups. People focused their attention on the unreachable heights of the sky, longing for the dominion of sacred power and the ability to understand and conquer irresistible disasters with the help of external forces. Thus, birds with wings became the embodiment of people’s early wishes. (2) The derivation of wishes through the combination of birds and humans: From reverence and admiration to psychological anticipation, people longed to possess the divine power of birds. Consequently, various images of bird-men were created, with wings as a prominent feature, serving as a powerful tool to reach the heavenly realm. (3) The construction of images for sacrificing to the heavenly realm: When people equipped themselves with wings and gained the abilities of birds, they began to imagine and create a composite world in the heavens. The most intuitive and limited understanding was based on the daily observations of the sun, moon, stars, and clouds. These celestial bodies were not presented simply; since they were closely related to human survival, they were inevitably endowed with divine power. The “卍” symbol represented the eternity of the sun and the universe through the image of ceaseless rotation. The combination of birds, bird-men, and the “卍” symbol in Tibetan rock art conveyed the implied meaning of sacrificing to the sun and heavenly deities, praying for the endless rotation of the “卍” symbol to protect human reproduction and coexist with the universe in glory.

At the Renmudong rock art site in Ritu County, western Tibet, there are images combining the “卐” and “卍” symbols with humans. Scholars speculate that these are related to the worship of human reproduction (Zhang Yasha, 2006). In the book “Sexual Worship” (Weiler, O. A., 1988) by American anthropologist O.A. Weiler, it is believed that the “卍” symbol represents sexual union, but within the context of polygyny, similar to the primitive customs of the Tibetan people. However, there are also dissenting views on this interpretation (Zhang Yuanshan, 2017).

The frequent appearance of the “卍” or “卐” symbols in early Tibetan rock art represents the connotations of the early sacred beliefs of Tibetan people.

2.1.2 The “卍” Symbol in Pottery Artifacts

The earliest physical evidence of the “卍” symbol unearthed from the traces of early human activities in ancient China is located at the Shengpengshan Cemetery of the Xiaoheyuan Culture in the Liao River basin in Northeast China (dating back approximately 4,000 to 4,500 years ago). Four pottery artefacts unearthed from this site are adorned with twelve primitive graphical symbols, seven of which belong to the “卍” category. Slightly later than the Xiaoheyuan Culture, the “卍” symbol appears abundantly on single-handled, long-necked painted pottery jars unearthed from the Machang-type site of the Majiayao Culture in the upper reaches of the Yellow River, predominantly located on the bellies and bases of the artefacts. During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, variant forms of the “卍”

symbol emerged, such as those painted on the bellies of pottery tripods unearthed from the Erlitou Site, resembling associations with the sun and fire. Additionally, a bronze jar with chariot and horse hunting motifs from the Warring States period also bears the “卍” symbol.

Based on the analysis of early unearthed artefacts in China, there are several interpretations of the “卍” symbol: (1) a cosmic symbol representing fire and the sun; (2) a symbol of fertility worship; (3) a representation of yin-yang, bagua, and the hexagram (Zhuang Chunhui, 2008); (4) a symbol of good luck.

2.1.3 The “卍” Symbol and Wan Dance in Written Records

The “卍” symbol appeared as a character in oracle bone inscriptions and pottery inscriptions of the Yin Dynasty, and its meaning is related to sacrificial activities: (1) Celestial phenomena. The oracle bone inscription for the character Shaman is similar to the “卐” symbol. In the early desires of humans to coexist harmoniously with nature, they prayed for the protection of divine forces in the universe. During sacrificial activities related to celestial phenomena such as the sun, fire, the four seasons, and the Big Dipper, shamans performed dances to invoke deities (Xu Shen, 2013), which were associated with the “卍” symbol. (2) The “卍” dance. According to records, the “卍” dance is also known as the “Wan” dance. The character “卍” in Yin Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions is also interpreted as referring to the “Wan” dance, as seen in “Xiaotun Jiabian” (a compilation of oracle bone inscriptions). “The Book of Songs - Jian Xi” mentions: “They are about to perform the Wan dance.” And “Shang Song-Na” states: “Great drums sound, the Wan dance is splendid.” The Mao Commentary⁸ (Mao Heng, without specific publication year, generally related to the Han Dynasty) explains that the Wan dance involved shields and feathers and was performed in ancestral temples and at sacred mountains and rivers. “The people of Yin were fond of feather dances.” One of the earliest forms of shamanic dance, the “卍” dance, emerged and was performed during celestial sacrificial ceremonies to seek blessings and protection. An entry in “Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions (Guo Moruo & Hu Houxuan, 1982)” seems to be a divination for a rain dance, where the Wan dance involved shields and feathers. Detailed discussions on the Wan dance in oracle bone inscriptions have been provided by scholars such as Xi Gui (Qiu Xigui, 1992). The “卍” dance may be a variant form of the Wan dance.

The “卍” symbol found in early rock art and pottery paintings unearthed from various archaeological sites in Tibetan regions is a representation of shamanic dance rituals. Zhang Yuanshan, in his series of studies including “The Wan Dance of Ancient China is the Dance of the Swastika—A History of the Propagation of the Swastika (Zhang Yuanshan, 2016)” and “The Swastika is a Composite Symbol of the Four Seasons and the Big Dipper (Zhang Yuanshan, 2016; Zhang Yuanshan, 2017),” argues that: (1) The Wan dance, which is the dance of the swastika, is an ancient Chinese celestial sacrifice dance. It was established in ancient times, passed down through the medieval period, and has endured for thousands of years. The Fu Xi tribe created dance poses for the Wan dance that mimicked the appearance of the Heavenly Emperor. As seen in the painted pottery basins of the Majiayao culture, the dancers in these poses resembled those raising their elbows and arms upwards while bending their knees and squatting. Ancestors performed these dances as part of celestial sacrifice rituals, often on the southern faces of cliffs facing the sun, which is why early rock art relics with the “卍” symbol mostly appear on the southern walls of cliffs. Such archaeological materials reflect the symbolism of the “卍” symbol in early rock art from places such as Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Mongolia, Jiayuguan’s Heishan, Gansu, Ningxia, Tibet, Yunnan, Huashan in Zuojiang, Guangxi, and Xianzitan in Hua’an, Fujian. And this fact confirms that the “卍” symbol is a composite of the Four Seasons and the Big Dipper. (2) Shamanic dances were used for praying for blessings and warding off disasters. During the Shang, Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties, the idea of theocratic rule in the state and class society infused the meaning of the “卍” dance. “The great affairs of the state lie in sacrifice and warfare,” and the dance of celestial sacrifice evolved into shamanic dances for praying for blessings and warding off disasters. The “卍” dance was performed to entertain celestial deities and to pray for favourable weather conditions, harmony between yin and yang, and abundant agricultural harvests. Thus, the “卍” symbol is not merely a form of symbol or image itself, but rather highlights its significant participation value in the spiritual life of ancient peoples, both in terms of its signifier and signified.

2.2 The Symbolism of the “卍” Symbol in the World Context

This “卍” symbol, which carries the symbolism of early human nature and the universe, not only appeared within the territory of China but also emerged early in the initial thought processes of other human societies worldwide. There

are extremely similar phenomena of nature worship. In ancient Egypt, Persia, India, Greece, Europe, West Asia, and Altaic language-speaking nations, the worship of the “卐” symbol can be traced (Liu, 2024).

As early as around 5000 BCE, pottery unearthed from the Mesopotamian plains of West Asia depicted the “卐” symbol. During the Twelfth Dynasty of ancient Egypt (3000 BCE), this symbol also appeared on pottery shards from Cyprus and Caria outside the region. It was even more commonly seen in ancient India. Before 2000 BCE, when the Aryans invaded ancient India, they found that the local indigenous people used the “卐” symbol on their silver coins. During the same period, the Aryans brought the “卐” symbol sun disk, which carried their beliefs, into Europe. Remnants of this symbol can also be found in artefacts unearthed from kurgan caves in the Siberian steppes of Russia and Aryan cave sites discovered in Xinjiang, China. Many decorations of the Cretans and Trojans in ancient Greece featured the “卐” symbol. In response to this, Goblet D. Alviella of Belgium wrote “The Migration of Symbols” in 1891, with the second chapter titled “On the Gemmadion or Swastika.” Through detailed analysis, the book traces the origin of the “卐” symbol to the Troas culture, stating that the symbol spread east from the Caucasus to India and west from Mycenae to Greece, Anatolia, Macedonia, Sicily, Rome, and even appeared in the Villanova culture. Its widespread propagation reached as far as Iceland in the 18th century (Rao Zongyi, without specific publication year, from relevant works).

3. The Meaning of the “卐” Symbol in the Context of Humanities and Religion

3.1 The “卐” Symbol in Buddhism

The character “卐” found in oracle bone inscriptions indicates that during the Yin Dynasty, it was interchangeable with the characters “wan,” “wàn,” and “Wàn,” and had no connection with the Buddhist use of the symbol. In Buddhism, this symbol represents one of the thirty-two major physical characteristics of the Buddha (Chen, 2023). According to the Mahānīpāta Sūtra, it is listed as the sixteenth major characteristic, appearing on the Buddha’s chest. Additionally, the Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra (Volume 6) mentions it as the eightieth auspicious mark on Śākyamuni Buddha’s body, located on his chest. The Dasabhūmika-sūtra-śāstra (Volume 12) states that when Śākyamuni was still a bodhisattva, he had a “卐” symbol of merit and virtue on his chest. This is commonly referred to as the merit and virtue mark on the chest. However, the Mahāvaiṣṭya Sūtra of Great Majesty (Volume 3) mentions that the Buddha’s hair also has five “卐” symbols. The Vinaya-Pitaka (Volume 29) of the Theravada school states that the Buddha also has a “卐” symbol on his waist. Here, “卐” is merely a symbol, not a character, representing supreme auspiciousness. Therefore, the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra (Volume 381) states that the Buddha’s hands, feet, and chest all have auspicious swirling patterns, symbolizing his merit and virtue.

Regarding the debate on the direction of the “卐” and “卍” symbols in Buddhism, the left-rotating “卐” eventually became the dominant view. In Hinduism, the right-rotating symbol represents male deities, while the left-rotating represents female deities, among other connotations. In Tibetan Lamaism, the right-rotating symbol is used, while the Bon religion uses the left-rotating one.

Early theories suggested that the “卐” pattern entered China along with Buddhism. However, if we consider the entry of Buddhism into China in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, this contradicts archaeological evidence indicating that the “卐” symbol existed in China before the Han Dynasty. Therefore, this theory is refuted. Nevertheless, the introduction of Buddhism did bring the “卐” symbol with different meanings into Chinese culture, which can be traced back to the origins of ancient Indian culture. In ancient India, the Sanskrit terms for the “卐” pattern were swastika and swastika, referring to the right-rotating “卍” and left-rotating “卐” patterns, respectively. Marx Müller suggested that they symbolized the sun’s movement from spring to summer (right-rotating) and from autumn to winter (left-rotating), although this theory lacks conclusive evidence. Burrow, on the other hand, had a different perspective: the right turn is a symbol of the benevolent deity Gaṇeśa, representing the masculine principle, while the left turn symbolizes the goddess Kālī, representing the feminine principle. Both interpretations are based on the movement of the sun. Regarding the spelling of specific terms referring to the “卐” pattern, there are many discussions from an etymological perspective, with most scholars agreeing that the term swastika conveys meanings such as “good,” “fortunate,” and other auspicious connotations.

The Dictionary of Religions explains that “卍” (in Sanskrit, *Śrīvatsalaksana*), meaning “the auspicious mark in the chest,” was anciently translated as “the auspicious sea cloud mark.” It is one of the thirty-two physical characteristics of Śākyamuni Buddha. Originally, it was a kind of talisman, amulet, or religious symbol considered a representation

of the sun or fire, found in ancient India, Persia, Greece, and other countries, and used by Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other religions (Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 1981). China's Cihai dictionary provides a similar explanation. Huilin's Yiqiejing Yinyi interprets the “卐” character as the mark of the virtuous. The Sanskrit Dictionary explains it as a mysterious symbol of good omen (Eitel, Ernest J., 1981, cited in Rui Chuanming, Yu Taishan, 1995). Thus, the auspicious meaning of the “卐” graph (or symbol) in Buddhism is an undisputed definition, although there are some differences in translations and annotations. The “卐” and “卐” symbols appeared in symbols representing the Buddha's footprints in India, continuing the boundlessness of Buddhist teachings, and later appeared extensively on the Buddha's chest (as mentioned above), expressing the Buddha's sacred heart, known as the “Buddha's Heart Seal” by Buddhists. Chinese Buddhism has referred to the “卐” symbol as the “wan” character, which contradicts the claim that the pronunciation of “卐” as “wan” originated during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian. Professor Jao Tsung-I's article (Jao Tsung-I, 1993). A Study of the 卐 Character points out that Liu Xie wrote an inscription for a Maitreya statue at Shicheng Temple in the fifteenth year of Emperor Liang's Tianjian reign, mentioning “a wan character on the chest.” Furthermore, the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra translated by Dharmarakṣa also mentions “a 卐 character on the prince's chest.” These occurrences preceded the inscription of the “卐” character on the Tianshu monument in the second year of Empress Wu's Changshou reign. Therefore, the pronunciation of “卐” as “wan” did not originate during the reign of Empress Wu. Moreover, the Sūtra of the Buddha's Chest Manifesting the 卐 Character, popular during the Wu Zhou period, is considered an apocryphal scripture. Qian Wenzhong's Collection of Sanskrit Studies states that in the Mahānīpāta Sūtra translated by Buddha-yeśe during the Hongshi period, “卐” was already written as “wan,” suggesting that “卐” entered the Chinese character system no later than the Later Qin Dynasty.

3.2 The “卐” Symbol of Bon Po

The “卐” symbol, known as “Yongzhong” in Tibetan, serves as the emblem or badge of Bon Po (Bon Religion). It faces opposite to the “卐” symbol of Tibetan Buddhism but aligns with the “卐” of Buddhism. The term “Bon” (བོན་), derived from Tibetan translations, carries meanings such as “chant,” “prayer,” and “eulogy” in ancient Tibetan records. Consequently, the “卐” symbol in Bon Po symbolizes auspiciousness and is also interpreted as representing conformity and righteousness. This symbol appears on the architectural decorations of Bon temples, is painted on the clothing and hats of temple statues, and is even commonly seen in the architectural decorations of residential buildings, reinforcing the implication of “auspiciousness” in everyday prayers for good weather and abundant blessings.

The origin of the “卐” symbol in Bon Po, viewed from the perspective of its developmental history, extends beyond its emergence as the “Yongzhong” emblem and can be traced back to the primitive beliefs of the Tibetan people that underpinned Bon Po (Wang, 2022). Archaeological artefacts such as rock paintings from primitive Tibetan periods indicate that the “卐” symbol in early Tibetan beliefs had a considerable influence on the establishment of the Bon Po emblem. As mentioned earlier, three rock painting sites with “卐” symbols have been discovered in Ritu County, Tibet. Situated at the western tip of Tibet, approximately 110 kilometres south of Shiquanhe in the Ngari Prefecture, Tibetan archaeologists have deduced, based on the themes, techniques, and stylistic characteristics of the rock paintings, that they date back to before Buddhism was introduced to Tibet on a large scale, namely, before the Tibetan Tubo Dynasty or in its early stages. Geographically, Ritu County falls within the ancient Zhang Zhung kingdom, the birthplace of Bon Po. If the dating of the Ritu rock paintings is reasonably accurate, the “卐” symbols found there, unaffected by the introduction of Buddhism, should represent indigenous beliefs. The “卐” symbols in the Ritu rock paintings, depicted alongside crescent moons, suns, and large trees, are accompanied by circular patterns of dots. These images signify concepts formed in the minds of the local people. According to Lin Jifu, the dots surrounding the “卐” may be related to the rays of the sun, potentially representing the sun god (Lin Jifu, 1991). Rock paintings from other regions in Tibet also depict the “卐” symbol with double lines and four dots within, which are presumed to have a direct representation of the sun. From Ritu County to the rock paintings across Tibet, they mostly pertain to large-scale sacrificial themes, and the “卐” symbol can be identified as a representation of the sun. Thus, it is inferred that the connotation of the “卐” symbol in Bon Po originated from the natural worship of ancient Tibetan people and later influenced Buddhism or was influenced by it, at least becoming integrated into the belief system of Tibetan Buddhism. Regarding the current distinction where Tibetan Buddhism adopts the dextral “卐” pattern while Bon Po uses the sinistral “卐” pattern to differentiate, it is paradoxical. Chronologically, this distinction is reversed.

4. The “卍” Symbol in Songpan Area - Cultural Interaction

Today, the “卍” symbol can be found in Bon temple architecture, ritual objects, thrones, residential buildings, furniture, carpets, clothing, and artwork in the Songpan area. It has historically transformed “folk to official and back to folk.” At the level of belief, it has evolved from primitive nature worship to humanistic religious faith (Li, 2021). In the historical context of multi-ethnic fusion, it has also carried the multicultural integration of Han, Tibetan, and Qiang cultures, ultimately forming a regional cultural identity gradually supported by physical evidence (Gao, 2023).

4.1 Interpretation of Religious Rituals

During the Buddha’s Birthday Festival in February each year at Shanba Temple in Songpan County, participants gather at night in the square in front of the Buddhist temple and arrange butter lamps to form a Dharma Wheel pattern (as shown in Figure 3). At the heart of the wheel lies the “卍” symbol. This symbol embodies steadfastness and unchanging nature, highlighting the Buddha’s boundless virtues. It serves as a symbolic marker of the Mandala’s spiral structure, signifying a spiritual journey towards the cosmic center and the concept of eternity. The outer ring is divided into eight sections, displaying the “Eight-Character Mantra,” with this Dharma Wheel symbolizing the Buddha of Bon Po. The circle of the Dharma Wheel can be seen as an interpretation of the “circle” in the Mandala in Buddhist teachings. Life and death circulate within the circle, depicting the “Wheel of Life and Death” as a finite process within an infinite universe. The Dharma Wheel combining a symbol with the circle also represents the temporal nature of the universe, symbolizing Buddhist Dharma as perfect and flawless like a wheel, a manifestation of truth, and representing the supreme enlightenment of the Buddha—the highest realm of awakening in Bon Po. The eight spokes of the Dharma Wheel, resembling a cartwheel, represent the Buddha’s Eightfold Path. Bon Po, like Buddhism, uses the turning of the Dharma Wheel to signify the Buddha’s teaching and the crushing of all incorrect and evil views and troubles, representing the supreme power of Buddhist Dharma. The “circle” of the Mandala points to the highest meaning, representing that the method or path to liberation is to listen to the Buddha’s subtle Dharma, transcend the boundaries of samsara after enlightenment, and attain rebirth in the eternal Buddhist pure land.



Figure 3. During the Buddha’s Birthday Festival at Shanba Temple in Songpan in February 2017 (Image source: Provided by Silang, a monk from Gami Monastery in Songpan).

4.2 Spatial Context of Bon Po and Taoism

Recognition of the Yin-Yang Concept. This pattern can be found on the doors and windows of Bon Po temples in Songpan, as well as on the front of Buddhist stupa bases, Buddhist throne seats, and above Buddhist statues inside the temple. For example, in the Buddhist hall of Shanba Temple, the symbol is prominently displayed in the centre below the Buddhist throne, often accompanied by Dharma Wheels above and below it. Additionally, one of the temple’s main doors features the symbol directly above it, while the other door is adorned with a Dharma Wheel (as shown in Figure 4). The combination of these represents the spread of Bon Po’s teachings in all four directions (Beer, Robert, without specific original publication year, Chinese translation published by China Tibetology Publishing House). Special attention should be given to the imagery surrounding the symbol (resembling 卐 rotated 45 degrees clockwise) here—the hubs of the Dharma Wheels are engraved with two rotating “auspicious swirls.” Tibetan

Buddhist Dharma Wheel hubs contain three or four such swirls, resembling the shape of the ancient Chinese Yin-Yang diagram, where three swirls represent the “Three Treasures” or the superior “Three Realms,” and four swirls symbolize the “Four Holy Emperors” and the four cardinal directions. The auspicious swirls seen in Bon Po temples are in pairs, resembling the “two fish” in the Tai Chi diagram. Similarly, the “two fish” in the Eight Auspicious Symbols also represent Yin and Yang, and are ancient symbols of the two major sacred rivers, the Ganges and the Yamuna, symbolizing that these two rivers represent Yin and Yang meridians or channels. In the supreme Yoga Tantra, they symbolize the ascending or descending of the red and white bodhisattvas’ heart essence through the navel, heart, throat, and crown chakras of the central meridian (Beer, Robert, without specific original publication year, Chinese translation published by China Tibetology Publishing House).



Figure 4. The “卐” Symbol on the Main Door of the Buddhist Hall at Shanba Temple in Songpan, Sichuan (Image source: Photographed by Guo Ping during her fieldwork).

The auspicious swirls aren’t merely present on Dharma Wheels; they can also be spotted on Tibetan ritual drums and in the patterns of traditional Tibetan furniture. The auspicious swirls embellishing Tibetan ritual drums and furniture are in harmony with the patterns in the hubs of Tibetan Buddhist Dharma Wheels. As the symbol rotates, its lines gradually morph into curves, spontaneously shaping four, three, or two auspicious swirls. This Bon Po symbol embodies an eternal, unceasing cycle, a Yin - Yang rotation that encapsulates the growth and transformation of all things in the universe.

Research on the relationship between Bon Po and Taoism has been well-documented, demonstrating their origins and examining their connection from both Han and Tibetan cultural perspectives (Tong Mei, 2013). The connection between Esoteric Buddhism and Taoism further attests to the close relationship between Bon Po and Taoism (Sun, 2023). Professor Huang Xinchuan has written a dedicated paper on this subject, tracing the long history of interactions and mutual influences between Indian Esoteric Buddhism and Chinese Taoism in ancient and medieval times, based on Indian scholars’ research and a vast amount of historical materials preserved in India and China. According to statistics by Professor Nagabe and Yuxiong in Japan, 70 out of the 593 Esoteric Buddhist scriptures in Volumes 18 to 21 of the Taishō Tripiṭaka are influenced by Taoism, proving striking similarities between the two religions in terms of cosmology, views on life, and religious practices. Indian Esoteric Buddhism also integrated Bon Po, emphasizing the inseparable nature of Bon Po and Taoist beliefs. Esoteric Buddhism absorbed previous thoughts and beliefs from Taoism, such as the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, the Five Viscera theory, divination and astrology, immortality techniques, hexagrams, sorcery and incantations, gods and ghosts, etc. (Huang Xinchuan, 1999), which have been incorporated into the “Vajrasamādhi Sūtra.” Among them, the Five Divisions and Five Wisdoms meditation practices contain corresponding Taoist concepts of the Five Elements and Five Viscera.

The differences in beliefs about the soul are profound. The “卐” symbol and the double “auspicious spiral” dharma chakra seen in Bon monasteries in Songpan not only represent the material manifestation of Bon’s absorption of Taoist Yin-Yang and Five Elements theory but also demonstrate a discrepancy in graphical expression. The distinction between the “two fish” with only auspicious spirals and the Tai Chi Bagua diagram stems from variations in Tibetan folk beliefs, particularly in their conceptions of the soul. In folk beliefs, the soul is closely linked to concrete entities such as wind, horses, and light, and Tibetans perceive the soul as tangible, residing within a certain object that serves as its container. Tibetans’ understanding of life views humans as a combination of material bodies and spiritual consciousness. The material body is composed of the five elements: wind, water, fire, earth (or wood in some interpretations), and space. Wind is considered the fundamental element among the five, forming the initial shape of humans and providing breath and movement. After death, the five elements disintegrate, with the

decomposition of wind marking the end of life. Wind thus serves as the dividing line between life and death (E'man, 2015). Consequently, the double auspicious spiral and the “卐” symbol represent “wind,” explaining human life and death within the context of Bon, which is infused with Tibetan folk beliefs, and Tibetan Buddhism. Bon, which incorporates Taoist Yin-Yang and Five Elements theory, also integrates Tibetan folk beliefs, with the “卐” symbol conveying a naturalistic view of the soul. Tibetan Buddhism adopts these folk beliefs about the soul and closely associates them with the concept of reincarnation (Wei Qiang, 2008), which is also the ideological foundation of the living Buddha reincarnation system (Jiangbian Jiacao, 1995).

4.3 Historical Interaction of Beliefs Between the Qiang, Han, and Tibetan Ethnic Groups

The relationship between Taoism and the Di-Qiang peoples is rooted in the Wudoumi Sect, established in Heming Mountain, Sichuan, which is considered the origin of Taoism. Scholars such as Xiang Da, Meng Wentong, Wang Jiayou, and Wang Chunwu believe that the Wudoumi Sect founded by Zhang Daoling in Bashu (an ancient region encompassing Sichuan and Chongqing) shares a common origin with Tibetan, Qiang, Di, and other ethnic minorities in Southwest China (Xiang Da, 1957; Meng Wentong, 1987; Wang Jiayou, 1987; Wang Chunwu, 1995). This is also documented in the “Huayang Guozhi-Hanzhongzhi” (Annals of Huayang: Hanzhong Prefecture) (Ren Naiqiang, 1987).

Physical evidence also supports this: Archaeological finds in Gansu Province, such as the “卐” symbol on the ears of a pottery jar from Site M4 at Lanqiao in Xihe County, dating to the late Neolithic period after the Majiayao culture and continuing into the mid-Shang Dynasty, as well as artefacts of the Qiang people unearthed from the Siwa culture (Xia Nai, 1949), indicate that as early as the Shang Dynasty, symbols used by the Qiang on pottery were similar to those found at Yin Ruins. This suggests possible cultural exchanges. Through the above research, we can discover that the appearance of the “卐” symbol in the Songpan area is a manifestation of consensus reached in the historical and cultural interaction among the Qiang, Tibetan, and Han ethnic groups. It not only represents the traditional culture of the Qiang people but also reflects cultural exchanges and fusion among various ethnic groups. This interaction and fusion contribute to building a more harmonious and inclusive society.

In conclusion, the “卐” symbol in Songpan reflects a rich history of multicultural interaction among Han, Qiang, and Tibetan ethnic groups, promoting harmonious coexistence. Through such exchanges and fusion, an inclusive system of national identity has been constructed. This place is not only where different religious beliefs coexist and prosper, but also a beautiful home where people of all ethnic groups are emotionally connected and share a common heart. It witnesses the inheritance and development of excellent cultures and heralds a more open and inclusive social vision for the future.

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