

The Phoenix Dress as Ethnomedicine: Indigenous Health Knowledge and Healing Beliefs of the She Ethnic Group in China

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Abstract

Traditional clothing among indigenous communities often embodies cultural knowledge extending beyond aesthetics and identity to include beliefs concerning health, healing, and well-being. This study aimed to: (1) examine the historical development of the Phoenix Dress in relation to indigenous health beliefs; (2) investigate the indigenous health knowledge and healing beliefs embodied in the Phoenix Dress; and (3) analyze the contemporary transmission of ethnomedical knowledge among the She ethnic group in China.

A qualitative research approach was employed through document analysis, field surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observation, and focus group discussions. Data were collected from 48 informants, including 12 key informants, 24 casual informants, and 12 general informants across six representative She communities: Jingning (Zhejiang Province), and Luoyuan, Fu'an, Xiapu, Fuding, and Shunchang (Fujian Province).

The findings revealed that the Phoenix Dress functions as an embodied ethnomedical system rather than merely traditional ethnic attire. Indigenous health knowledge is embedded throughout the production process, embroidery, ribbon weaving, silver ornament craftsmanship, symbolic motifs, colors, and ritual practices. These cultural elements collectively express beliefs concerning protection from harmful forces, fertility, longevity, psychological well-being, family prosperity, and harmony between humans, ancestors, and the spiritual world. Regional comparison showed considerable variation in the continuity of ethnomedical knowledge. Jingning demonstrated the strongest continuity due to institutional support and active community participation, whereas Shunchang exhibited the weakest continuity because of declining ritual practices and reduced intergenerational transmission. The study further found that traditional household-based knowledge transmission has gradually shifted toward institutional mechanisms, including intangible cultural heritage programs, museums, educational activities, and cultural tourism. Interpreted through the perspectives of Medical Anthropology, Ethnomedicine, and Material Culture Theory, the Phoenix Dress represents a therapeutic cultural artifact that integrates symbolic beliefs, ritual practice, and indigenous healthcare knowledge. The study contributes a new interpretation of ethnic clothing by positioning the Phoenix Dress as a living ethnomedical heritage, thereby expanding scholarly understanding of the relationship between material culture, traditional healthcare systems, and intangible cultural heritage preservation.

Keywords: Phoenix Dress; Ethnomedicine; Indigenous Health Knowledge; Healing Beliefs; She Ethnic Group; Medical Anthropology

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Introduction

Traditional medicine has long been recognized as an integral component of indigenous knowledge systems, reflecting the ways in which local communities understand health, illness, healing, and the relationship between humans, nature, and the

spiritual world. Unlike modern biomedicine, which primarily emphasizes biological mechanisms of disease, indigenous medical systems often incorporate beliefs, rituals, symbolic objects, natural resources, and cultural practices into healthcare. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) defines traditional medicine as the sum of knowledge, skills, and

practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures that are used in maintaining health as well as preventing, diagnosing, improving, or treating physical and mental illness. Within this perspective, clothing is not merely a functional object for covering the body but may also operate as a therapeutic medium that embodies protective beliefs, healing rituals, and preventive healthcare practices.

Medical anthropology has similarly emphasized that health and illness are culturally constructed phenomena rather than purely biological conditions. Kleinman (1980) argues that every society develops its own explanatory model of disease, shaping how individuals perceive causes of illness and appropriate methods of treatment. Likewise, Foster and Anderson (1978) describe ethnomedicine as the study of indigenous systems of health knowledge, encompassing local understandings of disease causation, diagnosis, prevention, and healing. These perspectives suggest that therapeutic practices extend far beyond herbal medicine or ritual healing to include material culture, symbolic representations, religious beliefs, and everyday objects that communities regard as possessing protective or restorative power.

Among these cultural objects, traditional clothing occupies a distinctive position. Across many indigenous societies, garments function simultaneously as social identifiers, ritual objects, and protective devices. Decorative motifs, colors, textile materials, embroidery, and ornaments frequently carry symbolic meanings associated with fertility, longevity, prosperity, spiritual protection, and resistance against illness or malevolent forces. Douglas (1966) argues that the human body is culturally protected through symbolic systems that distinguish purity from danger, while Turner (1967) demonstrates that ritual symbols actively participate in maintaining social and spiritual order. Consequently, clothing should not be understood solely through the perspectives of aesthetics or identity but also as a material expression of indigenous health beliefs. Recent studies in material culture have further suggested that artifacts possess social agency because they mediate relationships between humans, belief systems, and cultural practices (Miller, 2005). Traditional garments therefore represent embodied knowledge through which communities preserve and transmit concepts of health, protection, and well-being across generations.

China possesses one of the world's richest traditions of indigenous medicine and ethnic cultural diversity. In addition to Traditional Chinese Medicine

(TCM), the country officially recognizes numerous ethnic medical systems practiced by minority communities, including Tibetan, Mongolian, Dai, Uyghur, Miao, and Yao medicine. These healthcare traditions combine local ecological knowledge, religious beliefs, ritual practices, and material culture into comprehensive systems of health maintenance. Although ethnic clothing has frequently been investigated from the perspectives of costume design, ethnic identity, craftsmanship, and intangible cultural heritage, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding traditional dress as part of indigenous medical knowledge. This limitation is particularly evident among China's southern ethnic minorities, where clothing often embodies beliefs concerning protection against disease, evil spirits, environmental hazards, fertility, and ancestral blessings.

The She ethnic group is one of the officially recognized ethnic minorities in China, with a population primarily distributed throughout Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Anhui, Guizhou, and Hunan Provinces. More than ninety percent of the She population resides in Fujian and Zhejiang, where they have maintained distinctive cultural traditions despite centuries of interaction with Han Chinese society. Historically, the She people developed within mountainous environments and preserved a rich body of oral traditions, ritual practices, ancestral worship, embroidery techniques, and phoenix symbolism that collectively form an important component of their cultural identity. Since the She language has no traditional written script, much of their historical knowledge has been transmitted through myths, songs, rituals, craftsmanship, and material culture, particularly the Phoenix Dress, which functions as one of the most significant cultural symbols of the community.

The Phoenix Dress is widely recognized as the representative costume of She women and has been designated as China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage because of its exceptional artistic, historical, and cultural value. Previous studies have primarily interpreted the Phoenix Dress as an expression of ethnic identity, female status, craftsmanship, aesthetic tradition, and cultural inheritance. Scholars have documented its historical origins, regional styles, embroidery techniques, symbolic phoenix imagery, and role in festivals, weddings, and ancestral ceremonies. They have also examined its importance for safeguarding traditional knowledge and promoting cultural tourism.

Nevertheless, these interpretations have largely overlooked another equally significant dimension of the Phoenix Dress—its relationship with indigenous health knowledge and healing beliefs. Within She cosmology, the Phoenix Dress is far more than ceremonial clothing. The garment embodies the sacred relationship between women, ancestors, the phoenix totem, and supernatural protection. Phoenix motifs embroidered throughout the costume symbolize blessings, vitality, prosperity, longevity, and harmony. Silver ornaments attached to the headdress, chest, shoulders, and waist are traditionally believed to repel harmful influences, protect the wearer from misfortune, and ensure family well-being. The sounds produced by silver decorations during movement are also regarded as spiritually meaningful, reinforcing the connection between ritual performance and ancestral protection. Together with the symbolic meanings of color, embroidery, woven ribbons, and ceremonial usage, these elements constitute a culturally embedded system through which health is understood not merely as the absence of disease but as the maintenance of balance among the individual, the family, the ancestors, and the spiritual world.

From the perspective of ethnomedicine, these cultural meanings demonstrate that the Phoenix Dress functions as a therapeutic cultural artifact rather than simply a traditional costume. Its healing role is preventive instead of biomedical. The dress is believed to protect women from harmful spiritual forces, promote reproductive well-being, safeguard family prosperity, strengthen ancestral relationships, and reinforce psychological security during important life transitions such as marriage, childbirth, festivals, and ancestral worship. These beliefs illustrate how indigenous communities integrate symbolic materials into everyday healthcare practices. The Phoenix Dress therefore represents an embodied medical knowledge system in which ritual, material culture, spirituality, and community participation collectively contribute to health maintenance.

Despite growing interest in She ethnic culture, existing scholarship remains concentrated on costume classification, embroidery craftsmanship, regional variation, folklore, and cultural preservation. Systematic investigations of the Phoenix Dress through the theoretical perspectives of medical anthropology and ethnomedicine remain extremely limited. More importantly, no comprehensive study has examined how indigenous health knowledge is encoded within the symbolic structures, materials, craftsmanship, ritual practices, and social functions of the Phoenix Dress across the six principal She cultural

regions of Jingning, Luoyuan, Fu'an, Fuding, Xiapu, and Shunchang. This research gap restricts broader understanding of the relationship between traditional clothing and indigenous healthcare systems.

Accordingly, this study reconceptualizes the Phoenix Dress as a form of ethnomedicine embedded within the indigenous health knowledge of the She ethnic group. Rather than examining the costume solely as an object of cultural heritage, this research investigates how its symbolic forms, production processes, ritual applications, and social meanings collectively express traditional concepts of health, healing, protection, and well-being. By integrating perspectives from medical anthropology, ethnomedicine, and material culture studies, the study contributes a new theoretical interpretation of the Phoenix Dress while expanding scholarly understanding of how traditional clothing functions as an embodied system of indigenous healthcare. Furthermore, the findings enrich interdisciplinary discussions concerning intangible cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge preservation, and the cultural dimensions of health in contemporary society.

2.Objectives

2.1 To study the development of Phoenix dress of She ethnic group in China.

2.2 To Study The Phoenix Dress as Ethnomedicine

3.Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the Phoenix Dress as ethnomedicine among the She ethnic group in China. The research focused on understanding how the Phoenix Dress embodies indigenous health knowledge, healing beliefs, and preventive healthcare practices through its symbolism, craftsmanship, ritual functions, and cultural meanings. The study was guided by three objectives: (1) to examine the historical development of the Phoenix Dress in relation to indigenous health beliefs; (2) to investigate the indigenous health knowledge and healing beliefs embodied in the Phoenix Dress; and (3) to analyze the contemporary transmission of ethnomedical knowledge associated with the Phoenix Dress.

Data were collected from three groups of informants, including 12 key informants (government officers, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, cultural experts, ritual practitioners, and senior artisans), 24 casual informants (embroiderers, silver craftsmen, dress makers, sellers, and She women), and 12 general informants (local residents and tourists). Fieldwork was conducted in the principal She communities of Jingning (Zhejiang Province), and

Fu'an, Luoyuan, Fuding, Xiapu, and Shunchang (Fujian Province).

The research employed multiple qualitative methods, including document analysis, field surveys, semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observation, and focus group discussions. These methods were used to examine indigenous concepts of health, symbolic meanings of the Phoenix Dress, ritual practices, embroidery patterns, silver ornaments, color symbolism, and traditional knowledge related to healing and protection.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis, interpreting the findings through the perspectives of Medical Anthropology, Ethnomedicine, Material Culture Studies, and Living Heritage Theory. Triangulation of data sources, research methods, and informants was applied to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the Phoenix Dress as an embodied system of indigenous healthcare, cultural identity, and intangible cultural heritage among the She ethnic group.

4. Results

4.1 Development of Phoenix dress of She ethnic group in China

The findings reveal that the development of the Phoenix Dress varies considerably across the six study areas, reflecting differences in cultural continuity, ritual practice, indigenous health knowledge, and institutional support. Although all six regions belong to the same cultural system of the She ethnic group, the Phoenix Dress has developed along different trajectories, resulting in distinct regional characteristics in terms of clothing structure, ceremonial functions, and ethnomedical beliefs.

From a geographical perspective, the six study areas can be divided into two provinces. Luoyuan, Fu'an, Xiapu, Fuding, and Shunchang are located in Fujian Province, while Jingning is located in Zhejiang Province. Despite sharing a common cultural origin, the historical development of the Phoenix Dress differs substantially among these regions owing to variations in social environments, cultural policies, economic conditions, and the continuity of traditional ritual practices.

The results indicate that Luoyuan and Fu'an have retained relatively complete traditional production systems and ceremonial customs. In these two regions, the Phoenix Dress continues to be closely associated with weddings, ancestral worship, and traditional festivals. Community members still regard the dress as a cultural object capable of bringing blessings, protecting women and families, and symbolizing physical and spiritual well-being. Although the frequency of daily use has declined, its ritual and symbolic functions remain relatively intact,

enabling indigenous health beliefs to continue through ceremonial practices.

In contrast, Xiapu and Fuding demonstrate a transitional stage of development. Traditional craftsmanship remains visible; however, the cultural functions of the Phoenix Dress have gradually shifted from community-based practice toward cultural performance and heritage exhibition. Local residents increasingly perceive the dress as an ethnic cultural symbol rather than a living component of everyday health beliefs. Consequently, indigenous medical knowledge associated with the costume has become less explicit, surviving mainly through oral narratives, ritual activities, and community memory.

The most significant decline was observed in Shunchang, where the traditional cultural environment supporting the Phoenix Dress has weakened substantially. Modern lifestyles, population migration, and the reduction of traditional ritual activities have diminished opportunities for intergenerational transmission. As a result, the dress is now used primarily during occasional cultural events, while many traditional beliefs regarding protection, healing, and ancestral blessings are gradually disappearing from everyday practice.

Unlike the Fujian regions, Jingning demonstrates the strongest continuity and development of the Phoenix Dress. As the only She Autonomous County in China, Jingning benefits from comprehensive government support, systematic heritage conservation, museum exhibitions, educational activities, and intangible cultural heritage policies. Traditional craftsmanship remains active, and the Phoenix Dress continues to function not only as ceremonial attire but also as an important symbol of She ethnic identity and indigenous cultural values. Although modern adaptations have emerged, many traditional health-related beliefs remain integrated within ceremonial activities, allowing the ethnomedical meanings of the Phoenix Dress to continue in contemporary society.

Overall, the six regions can be positioned along a developmental continuum. Jingning represents the strongest level of cultural continuity and institutional support, followed by Luoyuan and Fu'an, where traditional practices remain relatively stable. Xiapu and Fuding occupy an intermediate stage characterized by cultural transformation and functional change, whereas Shunchang represents the weakest stage, where both cultural practice and indigenous health knowledge have experienced considerable decline. These regional differences indicate that the development of the Phoenix Dress depends not only on traditional cultural foundations but also on the interaction between community

participation, cultural policy, institutional support, and opportunities for maintaining ritual practice.

From the perspective of Structural Functionalism, the Phoenix Dress constitutes an integrated cultural system composed of interrelated structural and functional elements. Its structural components include clothing forms, embroidery, silver ornaments, weaving techniques, and symbolic decorative patterns, whereas its functional components include ritual performance, social identity, health protection, ancestral worship, and the transmission of indigenous knowledge. The findings suggest that regions with relatively complete structural systems, such as Jingning, Luoyuan, and Fu'an, are better able to sustain the social and cultural functions of the Phoenix Dress. Conversely, where traditional production systems have weakened, the associated cultural and ethnomedical functions have also declined.

When interpreted through the perspective of Medical Anthropology, the Phoenix Dress can be understood as an embodied form of ethnomedicine rather than merely traditional attire. Across all six regions, the costume historically functioned as a symbolic medium through which health, protection, fertility, prosperity, and harmony were maintained. Embroidered phoenix motifs, traditional colors, woven ribbons, and silver ornaments collectively represented indigenous understandings of physical and spiritual well-being. However, the strength of these beliefs varied considerably among regions. In Jingning, ethnomedical meanings continue to be actively expressed during rituals and festivals, whereas in Xiapu, Fuding, and particularly Shunchang, these beliefs have gradually shifted from lived practice toward symbolic cultural representation.

The regional comparison further demonstrates that the continuity of indigenous health knowledge is closely associated with the vitality of local cultural institutions. Regions possessing active cultural organizations, heritage transmission systems, experienced artisans, and regular ceremonial activities maintain stronger ethnomedical traditions than regions where these supporting structures have weakened. Consequently, the sustainability of the Phoenix Dress depends not only on preserving its physical appearance but also on maintaining the cultural contexts through which indigenous health knowledge continues to be practiced and transmitted.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Phoenix Dress has evolved from an everyday cultural practice into a heritage-based ethnomedical system whose continuity differs significantly across the six study areas. The developmental pattern reflects an interaction between traditional belief systems, regional cultural environments, institutional protection, and

contemporary social transformation. These factors collectively shape both the preservation of indigenous health knowledge and the future sustainability of the Phoenix Dress as an important component of She ethnomedical heritage.



4.2 The Phoenix Dress as Ethnomedicine

The findings indicate that the Phoenix Dress embodies a comprehensive system of indigenous health knowledge that integrates clothing production, craftsmanship, ritual symbolism, and healing beliefs. Across the six study areas—Jingning, Luoyuan, Fu'an, Xiapu, Fuding, and Shunchang—the Phoenix Dress is understood not merely as traditional attire but as a therapeutic cultural artifact that contributes to physical protection, psychological security, social harmony, and spiritual well-being. Although the intensity of these beliefs differs among regions, all six communities maintain the shared understanding that the Phoenix Dress represents a cultural medium through which health, prosperity, fertility, longevity, and ancestral protection are transmitted.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that indigenous health knowledge is embedded throughout the entire life cycle of the Phoenix Dress, including material selection, production processes, embroidery techniques, silver ornament craftsmanship, symbolic decoration, and ceremonial use. Rather than functioning independently, these components collectively constitute an ethnomedical system in which practical knowledge, ritual performance, and symbolic meanings interact to maintain individual and community well-being.

4.2.1 Indigenous Health Knowledge in the Production Process

The first dimension of indigenous health knowledge is reflected in the production process of the Phoenix Dress. Traditionally, dress production was organized within households, where women were responsible for spinning, weaving, embroidery, and ribbon making, while men specialized in silver ornament production. Beyond economic production, this household-based system served as a mechanism for transmitting knowledge concerning health protection, moral values, ritual conduct, and family responsibilities.

Field observations indicate that elderly artisans continue to describe Phoenix Dress production as a process requiring physical purity, emotional stability, and respect for ancestral traditions. Certain production stages are traditionally avoided during periods considered spiritually inauspicious, reflecting the belief that the spiritual condition of the maker influences the protective efficacy of the finished garment. Consequently, the production process itself is regarded as a culturally meaningful practice contributing to both material quality and symbolic health protection.

However, regional differences were observed. Jingning has successfully transformed traditional production into institutional workshops while preserving many symbolic production practices. Luoyuan and Fu'an retain partial household production traditions, whereas Xiapu, Fuding, and especially Shunchang increasingly rely on simplified production methods, resulting in the gradual disappearance of associated health-related knowledge.

4.2.2 Healing Knowledge Embedded in Traditional Craftsmanship

The second dimension concerns traditional craftsmanship, particularly embroidery, ribbon weaving, and silver ornament production.

Embroidery functions not only as decorative art but also as a symbolic language expressing wishes for health, fertility, longevity, prosperity, and protection. Phoenix motifs dominate the embroidery because the phoenix is regarded as the ancestral guardian of the She people and an embodiment of feminine vitality. Floral motifs symbolize renewal and healthy growth, while geometric patterns represent harmony and cosmic balance.

Ribbon weaving similarly carries symbolic significance. Colorful ribbons attached to the costume are traditionally believed to strengthen the protective power of the garment by symbolically connecting the wearer with ancestral blessings and communal identity.

Silver ornaments represent one of the most important ethnomedical elements of the Phoenix

Dress. Across all six regions, participants consistently explained that silver ornaments possess protective properties capable of warding off harmful influences, preventing misfortune, and safeguarding physical health. During movement, the sounds produced by silver accessories are believed to repel negative spiritual forces while simultaneously invoking ancestral protection.

Although these beliefs remain strongest in Jingning and Luoyuan, they continue to survive in varying forms throughout the other regions, particularly during ceremonial occasions.

4.2.3 Healing Beliefs Expressed through Ritual Functions

The third dimension involves the ritual functions of the Phoenix Dress.

Findings indicate that the Phoenix Dress continues to play an essential role during weddings, ancestral worship ceremonies, traditional festivals, and other important communal rituals. These occasions represent critical moments during which indigenous health beliefs are publicly expressed and reinforced.

During marriage ceremonies, the Phoenix Dress symbolizes not only social transition but also wishes for reproductive health, family prosperity, and lifelong protection. Wearing the Phoenix Dress signifies the bride's entry into adulthood under the blessings of ancestors and the phoenix spirit.

During ancestral worship, women wearing the Phoenix Dress are regarded as symbolic intermediaries between the living community and ancestral spirits. Ritual participation reinforces collective beliefs concerning protection, harmony, and community well-being.

Festival activities similarly function as opportunities for maintaining psychological security, ethnic identity, and social cohesion. Through collective participation, indigenous understandings of health extend beyond the individual to encompass families, communities, and ancestral relationships.

4.2.4 Regional Differences in Indigenous Health Knowledge

Although the six study areas share common ethnomedical foundations, notable regional variations exist.

Jingning demonstrates the strongest continuity of indigenous health knowledge owing to active cultural institutions, governmental support, and regular ritual practice. Ethnomedical beliefs remain closely integrated into contemporary cultural activities.

Luoyuan and Fu'an preserve many traditional healing beliefs despite reduced everyday use of the Phoenix Dress. Ritual functions remain relatively stable, particularly in weddings and festivals.

The Phoenix Dress as Ethnomedicine: Indigenous Health Knowledge and Healing Beliefs of the She Ethnic Group in China

Xiapu and Fuding exhibit transitional characteristics. Traditional beliefs continue to exist but increasingly function as symbolic cultural heritage rather than everyday health practices.

Shunchang presents the weakest continuity. Modernization, migration, and declining ritual participation have substantially reduced opportunities for transmitting indigenous healing knowledge, leaving many traditional beliefs preserved only through elderly community members.

4.2.5 Interpretation from the Perspective of Medical Anthropology

From the perspective of Medical Anthropology, the Phoenix Dress represents a culturally specific explanatory system of health rather than a biomedical intervention. Health is understood holistically as the integration of physical safety, psychological confidence, ancestral protection, social harmony, and spiritual balance.

Similarly, Ethnomedicine theory suggests that indigenous healthcare extends beyond herbal remedies or ritual healing to include culturally meaningful objects possessing therapeutic significance. The Phoenix Dress therefore functions as a therapeutic cultural artifact whose healing capacity derives from shared belief systems rather than pharmacological properties.

Material Culture theory further explains that objects acquire social agency through collective meanings. The protective functions attributed to embroidery, colors, silver ornaments, and ceremonial performance illustrate how material objects actively participate in maintaining cultural understandings of health and well-being.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the ethnomedical significance of the Phoenix Dress does not reside in any single decorative element but emerges from the interaction between craftsmanship, symbolic meanings, ritual practice, and collective belief. Across the six regions, these elements collectively constitute an indigenous healthcare system that has historically supported physical protection, psychological resilience, social integration, and spiritual continuity. Although modernization has transformed many traditional practices, the Phoenix Dress continues to preserve and communicate indigenous health knowledge, making it a living embodiment of the healing beliefs of the She ethnic group.



5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the Phoenix Dress as a form of ethnomedicine by examining the indigenous health knowledge and healing beliefs of the She ethnic group across six representative regions: Jingning (Zhejiang Province), and Luoyuan, Fu'an, Xiapu, Fuding, and Shunchang (Fujian Province). Using a qualitative approach, the research explored the historical development of the Phoenix Dress, the indigenous health knowledge embodied in its production, craftsmanship, symbolism, and ritual functions, as well as the contemporary transmission of ethnomedical knowledge.

The findings demonstrate that the Phoenix Dress is far more than traditional ethnic clothing. Rather, it constitutes an embodied ethnomedical system through which the She people express indigenous understandings of health, disease prevention, spiritual protection, fertility, longevity, psychological well-being, and social harmony. Health within the She cultural context is understood holistically, integrating physical, spiritual, social, and ancestral dimensions rather than focusing solely on the treatment of illness.

The first finding shows that the development of the Phoenix Dress differs considerably across the six study areas. Jingning exhibits the strongest continuity due to institutional support, active community participation, and comprehensive intangible cultural heritage protection. Luoyuan and Fu'an retain relatively complete traditional practices, whereas Xiapu and Fuding are experiencing gradual transformation toward symbolic cultural representation. Shunchang demonstrates the weakest continuity because of declining ritual practices, population migration, and reduced intergenerational transmission. These differences indicate that the sustainability of indigenous health knowledge depends not only on cultural traditions but also on institutional support, community participation, and opportunities for maintaining ritual practice.

The second finding reveals that indigenous health knowledge is embedded throughout the entire cultural system of the Phoenix Dress. Production processes, embroidery, ribbon weaving, silver ornament craftsmanship, symbolic colors, phoenix motifs, and ritual performances collectively express beliefs concerning protection against harmful forces, fertility, family prosperity, longevity, and ancestral blessings. Rather than functioning independently, these elements interact to create an integrated ethnomedical system that promotes physical safety, psychological confidence, spiritual balance, and community well-being.

The third finding demonstrates that ethnomedical knowledge continues to be transmitted through multiple mechanisms, including family learning, apprenticeship, ritual participation, cultural festivals, community activities, museum exhibitions, educational programs, and intangible cultural heritage initiatives. Although traditional household-based transmission has declined considerably, institutional mechanisms have become increasingly important in preserving indigenous health knowledge. Nevertheless, the continuity of living traditions remains uneven across regions, particularly where ritual practice has diminished.

Overall, the study concludes that the Phoenix Dress functions as an important cultural medium through which indigenous health knowledge is embodied, practiced, and transmitted. Although modernization has transformed many aspects of She society, the Phoenix Dress continues to preserve the healing beliefs and cultural values of the She ethnic group, making it an important component of China's living ethnomedical heritage

5.2 Discussion

The findings contribute to the understanding of ethnomedicine by demonstrating that indigenous healthcare systems are not limited to herbal medicine

or therapeutic rituals but also encompass material culture. Consistent with Foster and Anderson (1978), ethnomedicine includes culturally specific knowledge regarding health, illness, prevention, and healing. The present study expands this understanding by showing that the Phoenix Dress itself functions as a therapeutic cultural artifact through which symbolic meanings, ritual practices, and collective beliefs promote well-being.

The findings also support Kleinman's (1980) perspective in Medical Anthropology that health is culturally constructed. Rather than separating physical illness from spiritual and social life, the She people perceive health as a holistic condition maintained through harmonious relationships among individuals, families, ancestors, and the natural world. The Phoenix Dress therefore represents an explanatory model of health in which symbolic materials, ceremonial practices, and ancestral beliefs collectively contribute to maintaining well-being.

From the perspective of Material Culture Theory (Miller, 2005), the Phoenix Dress demonstrates that material objects possess social agency because they actively participate in shaping cultural meanings and social practices. Embroidered phoenix motifs, colorful ribbons, silver ornaments, and ceremonial clothing are not merely decorative elements but cultural symbols that communicate indigenous concepts of protection, fertility, prosperity, and longevity. These findings support the argument that objects themselves become active participants in sustaining indigenous healthcare systems.

The regional comparison further reveals that the continuity of indigenous health knowledge depends largely on the strength of local cultural institutions. Jingning demonstrates how government policy, museum development, educational programs, and intangible cultural heritage projects successfully reinforce living traditions. Conversely, the weakening of ritual practice in Xiapu, Fuding, and particularly Shunchang has reduced opportunities for transmitting indigenous health knowledge. These findings correspond with UNESCO's concept of Living Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), which emphasizes that intangible cultural heritage survives only when it continues to be practiced within communities.

Another significant contribution of this study lies in extending previous scholarship on the Phoenix Dress. Earlier studies have primarily interpreted the costume as an expression of ethnic identity, traditional craftsmanship, aesthetic value, or cultural inheritance. The present research introduces a new perspective by demonstrating that the Phoenix Dress also embodies indigenous healthcare knowledge and healing beliefs. This interpretation broadens the academic understanding of ethnic clothing by positioning it

within the interdisciplinary fields of ethnomedicine, medical anthropology, and material culture studies.

The findings also have practical implications for cultural heritage conservation. Current preservation efforts tend to prioritize embroidery techniques, costume production, and museum exhibitions. However, preserving only the physical artifact is insufficient if the associated healing beliefs, ritual knowledge, and cultural meanings disappear. Future conservation strategies should therefore integrate documentation of indigenous health knowledge, support community participation in ritual practice, encourage intergenerational learning, and promote educational programs that emphasize both the tangible and intangible dimensions of the Phoenix Dress.

In conclusion, the Phoenix Dress should be understood not only as an important symbol of She ethnic identity but also as a living ethnomedical system that integrates craftsmanship, ritual practice, symbolic meanings, and indigenous health knowledge. Its continuing significance lies in its capacity to connect cultural identity with concepts of health and well-being, ensuring that traditional healing beliefs remain meaningful within contemporary society while contributing to the sustainable preservation of China's intangible cultural heritage.

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