

"Pediatrics": Perspectives on Illness and Folkloric Identity in a Traditional Village

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Abstract: *In the current exploration of strengthening the sense of community for the Chinese nation, investigating the development of traditional culture must be grounded in the humanistic perspective of everyday life. At the relatively micro-level, the mechanism of folkloric identity serves as a starting point. In the context of traditional villages, "pediatrics" refers to the application of the "dual divine medicine" approach in the health and development of fetuses, infants, and young children. It fulfills positive functions such as curing illness, offering psychological comfort, providing end-of-life care, delivering life education, regulating behavior, fostering social integration, and promoting cultural transmission. "Pediatrics" supplements the emotional needs and psychological consolation that are often lacking in modern medical systems. Moreover, by interpreting birth, aging, illness, and death through a system of "local knowledge", it sustains the enduring influence of folkloric identity.*

Keywords: *Shemihu Village, Traditional Medicine, Folkloric Identity*

1. Introduction

"Folkloric identity concretely expresses the core symbols that sustain recognition in everyday life. It is the vitality of tradition itself, while also utilizing incidental symbols to demonstrate the efficacy of inheritance practices." [1] In the current daily life of Shemihu, the resurgence of "pediatrics" appears to be just such a symbol that represents the practice of inheriting traditional medicine. This paper explores the social functions of traditional medicine in ethnically interwoven regions through the study of "pediatrics," as well as its relationship with local folkloric identity.

2. The "Dual Divine Medicine" of Shemihu Village

Shemihu Village is located at the junction of Hubei, Hunan, and Chongqing, in the southwest of Baifusi Town, Laifeng County, Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hubei Province. It lies about 7.5 kilometers from Baifu Town, and 50 kilometers from Laifeng County. To the east, it borders Guitangba in Longshan County, Hunan Province; to the southwest, it faces Youyang County in Chongqing across the mountains. It is a location where the three regions meet. The village covers an area of 1.57 square kilometers. According to the Laifeng County Gazetteer, "Laifeng is remote and mountainous, inhabited by a mix of indigenous peoples following the old customs of the native chieftain system." The various ethnic peoples have jointly created the brilliant culture of this beautiful land. Shemihu is a traditional village characterized by ethnic intermingling. The village consists of six villager groups, 183 households, and a registered population of 702 people, with about 140 permanent residents. [2]

In short, the concept of disease in Shemihu Village is "a dual system of witch doctors and divine medicine." After the administrative reform, "the customs of Chu still hold onto superstitions, especially among the indigenous peoples. When ill, they do not seek medical treatment." [3] During the Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty, Zhan Yingjia, a former magistrate of Enshi, remarked: "The villagers do not believe in doctors; even when they know the medicinal properties, it is of no help. In rare cases of illness, they turn to the witch doctor, who uses charms to drive away evil spirits, but no medicine can cure them." In today's Shemihu Village, "divine medicine" is one of the trusted methods of disease treatment for many villagers. The villagers particularly rely on witch doctors for "exorcism," "ghost separation," treating "long boils," and curing madness. There is also a traditional interpretative system that people accept to explain the effectiveness of these treatments. When the modern medical system initially fails, villagers will turn to traditional medicine. If a disease that is not cured in formal hospitals is healed by folk remedies, or when the costs in modern medical services do not meet the villagers' expectations, the

miraculous effects of traditional medicine will spread through word of mouth. Furthermore, villagers distinguish between diseases that can be treated by traditional medicine and select the appropriate treatment method. [4] Lastly, the transmission and inheritance of traditional medicine are closely related to the witch doctor's role. The witch doctor is not just a healer but the central figure of the village's "local knowledge" and the core of the villagers' shared spiritual home.

3. "Pediatrics": The Preservation of Traditional Medicine in Shemihu Village

"Pediatrics" is a highly localized and metaphorical concept, a miniature knowledge system and practice method spontaneously formed within the village and passed down across generations. It is specifically used to address the small but frequent daily issues of life. Its characteristics include simple techniques, low cost, and the use of locally available materials. Although it lacks the rigor of modern science, it embodies practical wisdom accumulated through long-term trial and error by the folk. It often exists among non-authoritative groups such as women and the elderly through oral transmission or physical demonstrations. Unlike the systematized traditional Chinese medicine or modern medicine, pediatrics is fragmented "first aid for daily life," with its effectiveness usually established through individual experiences, and often characterized by distinctive "home remedies." In rural societies where medical resources are scarce, pediatrics essentially serves as a self-protection mechanism for villagers and reflects the village's value judgments and survival logic.

Peng Dagui is the only traditional village doctor in Shemihu Village. At 77 years old, he is a native of Shemihu Village and belongs to the Tujia ethnic group. In the 1960s, Peng Dagui apprenticed under a local shaman from Longshan, Hunan, to learn the methods of divine medicine. In the 1970s, Peng Dagui met a Mr. Wang in Maodong, who gave him a handwritten copy of *Youke Teding*, a book that contains detailed records of the symptoms of various diseases and illustrates them through pictures. Because of this book, Peng Dagui devoted himself to studying traditional medicine and gained a certain level of influence in the field of folk "pediatrics" at the junction of Hubei, Hunan, and Chongqing provinces.

3.1 Consultation Situation

Peng Dagui began treating patients in 1981, averaging 30 to 40 patients per year and saving 12 critically ill patients. Almost every household in Shemihu Village has had the experience of seeking treatment from Peng Dagui. Many people from neighboring regions like Hunan and Sichuan also specifically drive to invite Peng Dagui for home visits to seek treatment. Peng Dagui describes his "local methods" as being able to "step into three provinces." Typically, one would assume that those seeking medical attention would be older. Young people mostly work away from home and rarely stay home, and even when they do, they tend to trust modern medicine more. Notably, in 2022, a couple from the 90s in Baifusi Township brought their infant, who had not yet turned one, to seek help from a shaman for a solution to the child's fright-induced issues.

3.2 Treatment Process

Peng Dagui's diagnostic process follows the steps of "observation, inquiry, listening, and pulse-taking" — "divine medicine and solution" — followed by phone calls or home visits for follow-up. "Observation" involves looking at the patient's facial features and blood flow. "Listening" includes, for instance, listening to the cry of a child. If there is indigestion, Peng Dagui will tap the patient's abdomen and judge the cause based on the sound — whether it is due to water, food, or oil. "Inquiry" involves asking questions about when the discomfort started, its duration, and other symptoms. "Pulse-taking" is the process of feeling the pulse. Peng Dagui has over 100 treatment methods, each tailored to different diseases. For the same disease, there are also different methods of treatment. Among these, Peng Dagui is most skilled in pediatrics, such as treating fright, indigestion, abdominal pain in children, etc., as shown in Table 1.

Peng Dagui's "pediatrics" treatment methods can be categorized into two types. The first type is "divine solution." Peng Dagui communicates with spirits and deities through "Gelo sentences." These sentences vary in length, and the content changes depending on the illness. They are highly relevant to the disease being treated. Every "Gelo sentence" ends with the phrase, "I invoke the Supreme Lord Laozi, urgent as the law commands." The second type is "herbal solution." In addition to the herbs he collects from the mountains, for conditions such as diarrhea, indigestion caused by oil, and pain in specific parts of the body, Peng Dagui also uses external medicines, which are sourced from Hunan. The medicine

follows seasonal and calendar-specific prescriptions: "in the second and third months, the fourth, fifth, and sixth months, the seventh, eighth, and ninth months, and the tenth winter month, the treatment differs."

"Divine medicine and solution" is not a universal remedy. If a patient exhibits the following conditions, it indicates a serious situation that exceeds the scope of traditional medicine, and Peng Dagui typically does not take on such cases. These are referred to as the "Four Conditions Not Treated by Medicine": "Yellow person with a fish-like mouth" (patient's mouth is deformed); "Injured by two types of food" (patient cannot eat, not even drink water); "Yellow spine fracture" (patient cannot raise their back); "Caused by fright" (mainly characterized by dry nostrils).

Table 1. Classification of Peng Dagui's Pediatric Traditional Medicine Treatment Methods

Category	Symptoms	Treatment Method	Incantation	Precautions
"Scaring Away"	Child frightened, displaying symptoms such as crying, refusing milk, trouble sleeping at night (crying at night), fever, etc.	First, burn three incense sticks and three paper money notes. For a boy, hold the child on the left leg, with the left foot on the tripod. For a girl, hold the child on the right leg, with the right foot on the tripod. Then chant the incantation, followed by touching the three points on the tripod in a clockwise direction. Dip a little black powder on your hand and draw a "+" (cross) on the child's forehead. Repeat this three times, and after the last "+" is drawn, reverse the motion (counterclockwise) for two and a half circles, making sure not to complete three full circles.	"Look at the blue sky, master is near. Master calls me to drive away fright, drive away fright from heaven, earth, year, month, day, hour. I invoke the Supreme Lord Laozi, urgent as the law commands."	The "scaring away" treatment should be done after noon, and during this process, the shaman should keep their thoughts focused on the master's image.
"Burning Egg"	Unstable fetus during pregnancy, infants crying uncontrollably, difficult children, etc.	First, get three strands of thread (preferably cotton thread) from someone else's house. At home, take one egg, write the patient's birth date and a character on it with a pen. Wrap the egg with the thread (wrapping outward), then place the egg in the fire to cook. Once the egg is cooked, peel the shell off (the shell should also be burned), and give the peeled egg to the patient to eat. The amount doesn't matter, but it is crucial that no one else eats the egg. Any leftover egg must be burned.	None	The "Burning Egg" treatment should be done around 7 pm. After the treatment, the patient should not change clothes for five days, should not cross a bridge dedicated to the god of craftsmanship for seven days, and should not be hit during this time.
Throat Obstruction	Fishbone, bead, or similar object stuck in the throat.	Chant the incantation and then draw a symbol on a bowl of clean water, with one above and two below). The patient should then drink the water.	"Silent, transform into silence, silently retreat, retreating the method, the method retreats,	If it's a fishbone stuck in the throat, only one round of the water ritual is needed. If it's a bead, repeat the

			the Nine Dragons retreat, the demon queen takes the next life, the Nine Dragons picture and ecology, I invoke the Supreme Lord Laozi, urgent as the law commands."	ritual three times: morning, noon, and evening.
Stop Bleeding	Continuous bleeding from a knife wound.	After chanting the incantation, pick up a piece of soil from the ground and press it onto the bleeding area.	"One, two, three, four, five, Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth. Today, being cut by a knife, the knife cuts the earth. I invoke the Supreme Lord Laozi, urgent as the law commands."	None
Scraping Therapy	Stomach pain in infants who have not eaten grains, crying when in pain but not crying when not.	Take some quicklime and mix it with water, then tightly hold the infant's wrist and scrape their back with the water from top to bottom. Scrape until marks appear.	None	None
Umbilical Wind	Stomach pain in infants who have not eaten grains.	Place the umbilical cord in the fire until it bursts, then quickly remove it and put it in water. Give the child some of the water to drink.	None	None
The massage therapy is divided into three types: cold water, alcohol, and ginger.	For infant colds, medicinal ingredients such as tung oil, old ginger, ephedra, and cinnamon twig are used to clear heat and dispel cold.	Based on the symptoms, the therapy involves massaging, pressing, and kneading on areas such as the palms, soles, temples, and around the belly button.	None	For infants as young as one or two months, ginger should not be used directly. Instead, the ginger should be chewed and its juice applied to the palm before performing the massage.

Whether communicating with spirits on behalf of the patient, using medicine to treat the patient, or combining both approaches, this does not signify the end of the treatment process. After a certain period, Peng Dagui will follow up with a visit. If the patient is a close neighbor, he will visit directly; if the patient is farther away, he will conduct a follow-up call to check if the patient has recovered. If the patient has not recovered, Peng will adjust the treatment accordingly. This follow-up process reflects the traditional village doctor's humanitarian care for patients and is also part of his ongoing effort to summarize and refine his treatment experiences.

3.3 Treatment Philosophy

Before Peng Dagui, the traditional village doctors in Shemihu Village followed many professional taboos. For example, if they encountered someone carrying a hoe or bamboo strips on their way to see a patient, they would immediately turn around and go back home, no matter how much the host pleaded. Peng Dagui believed this approach contradicted his medical philosophy, so he chose to go to Longshan, Hunan, to learn folk medicine. Peng Dagui's folk medicine practice does not follow a fixed charging

standard. When villagers in Shemihu Village ask for help, Peng generally does not charge them anything. People from other areas typically give him a pack of cigarettes or a bottle of alcohol as a token of gratitude.

In the context of modern society's division of labor, traditional social order and relationships have broken down. People now meet individual and societal needs through increasingly specialized social divisions. Although the modern medical system has replaced traditional medicine, it is at the boundaries of scientific and cultural knowledge that traditional medicine finds its opportunity for development. Peng Dagui's non-profit medical philosophy has, however, seemed to make him miss this opportunity. Due to his non-profit approach, he has gained recognition in the traditional village social structure and relationships. Yet, because of his insistence on a non-profit model, he has been unable to find a successor. In 2018, he buried the manuscript of "Youke Tijing" in the ground.

4. "Pediatrics" Social Function and Folk Recognition

The villagers of Shemi Lake are deeply convinced by the "scare-driving" treatment. In 2021, a three-year-old child in Xing'an Village, Baifusi Town, reported stomach pain at the hospital, but after visiting several hospitals without success, the child was cured through Peng Dagui's "earthly methods." Regarding the lack of successors to this practice, the villagers expressed regret but mentioned that if there were truly no successors, they would seek help from "local doctors" in neighboring villages. This clearly demonstrates the villagers' trust in the "divine medicine" approach. The fact that traditional medicine can survive under the influence of modernity in Shemihu Village is undoubtedly reasonable. This reasonableness can be explained from the perspective of function. [5] While the functional perspective more rationally considers the legitimacy of traditional medicine in contemporary traditional villages, folk recognition provides a stronger affirmation of its indispensable role in villages surrounded by modernity.

4.1 Continued Recognition of the Function of Healing Diseases

Traditional medicine, as a supplement to scientific treatments, has similarly helped many patients address urgent issues and played a functional role in curing diseases. This directly addresses the concern of folk recognition regarding the continuity of traditions. Particularly in the process of raising children, many young parents face the problem of "two-month turmoil." Infants under 100 days old cry incessantly, day and night, unable to sleep soundly, especially becoming more intense in the evening. Modern pediatric medicine offers some explanations focusing on the infant's adaptation to the new environment after birth and their own development, but there is no definitive solution. In the traditional pediatric medical system, "scare-driving" treatment helps alleviate the baby's crying and, to some extent, alleviates the anxiety of parents.

4.2 Psychological Support and Comfort through Subjective Recognition

Placing "pediatrics" within Lévi-Strauss's "structuralism" framework[6], "pediatrics" becomes a logically self-consistent cognitive system. It uses symbolic order to alleviate the fear of disorder, and in structure, it shares the same foundational human thought processes. In rural areas where transportation is inconvenient and medical conditions are limited, the "local knowledge" expressed in the "divine medicine" approach in "pediatrics" emphasizes the group's subjective awareness. A group writes its culture through embodied practices, rather than having it explained by the "other." This is the premise of folk recognition.

4.3 Social Integration and Cultural Inheritance

The folk medical system can be viewed as a form of local knowledge, where "divine medicine" solves daily life challenges brought about by historical constraints within specific spatiotemporal contexts. This, in turn, subtly bridges the gap between villagers and between villages. "Local doctors" are well-versed in the local legends, folk tales, customs, and traditions, acting as the "living fossils"[7] of the community. "Earthly methods" also embody the villagers' understanding of nature gained through practice, which are unique cultural treasures. Therefore, through the intergenerational transmission of traditional medicine, cultural symbols are also passed on, and folk recognition continues to persist.

5. Conclusion

As a complement to modern medicine, the folk medical system plays a positive role in curing diseases, providing psychological support, and offering comfort. As a cultural symbol, folk medicine also plays a positive role in cultural inheritance. We may focus on the life-regulating function and cultural recognition function of traditional medicine. Folk recognition, as an expression of a cultural self-healing mechanism, continues to influence individuals' daily lives.

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