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CULTURAL GENE ANALYSIS OF WUDING YI COSTUMES

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of rapid modernization, the structural connotations of traditional ethnic costume cultures and their modes of transmission have attracted renewed academic attention. As an important cultural form carrying historical memory and cultural identity, Wuding Yi costumes possess significant research value. This study aims to identify the core cultural genes of Wuding Yi costumes and to reveal the internal mechanisms underlying the gradual weakening of their spiritual essence. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study systematically analyzes the symbolic systems and deep cultural structures of Yi costumes from the Nasu and Naisu branches through literature review and fieldwork investigation. The results indicate that the cultural genes of Wuding Yi costumes are primarily manifested in the coexistence of ancient and modern materials, the continuity of ancient Qiang spiritual traditions, the aesthetic legacy of ancient nobility, and the integrative characteristics formed through long-term multi-ethnic interactions. However, in the process of modernization, these cultural transmission chains are gradually breaking, leading to an increasing tendency toward symbolic and superficial expressions of spiritual meaning. This study deepens the theoretical understanding of the structural foundations of Yi costume culture and provides support for cultural genes preservation and the contemporary design translation of cultural elements.

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1. Introduction

The Yi people are among the oldest ethnic groups in China, with a total population of 8.71 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Chuxiong Prefecture in Yunnan Province is one of the two Yi autonomous prefectures in China (Li & Tong, 2011). Chuxiong Yi costumes embody rich historical, religious, and folk-cultural information. They exhibit diverse types, refined craftsmanship, and high cultural density, and have been inscribed on China's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Shao, 2016).

As one of the nine counties in Chuxiong, Wuding has developed a distinctive aesthetic and symbolic system in its Yi costumes, shaped by local geography, clan structures, and cross-cultural interactions. However, modernization is reshaping the local cultural ecology. Survey data indicate that among residents under 40, only 16.2% wear ethnic costumes in daily life, 64.9% during festivals, and 43.2% at weddings, revealing a marked weakening of cultural continuity.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the gradual erosion of the cultural and spiritual core of Wuding Yi costumes. As traditional symbols are increasingly marginalized in everyday life, their associated value systems, historical memories, and identity mechanisms have likewise weakened. This calls for an urgent examination of the deeper structures that sustain cultural continuity.

The study adopts Dawkins' (1976) theory of "cultural genes," which views cultural elements as *memes* that spread through processes of replication, variation, and selection. Their survival depends on symbolic power, communicative efficacy, and environmental adaptability. From this perspective, the research analyzes the deep cultural structures and aesthetic logic embedded in Wuding Yi costumes.

The aim is to identify and interpret the core cultural genes of Wuding Yi costume culture, reveal their cultural meanings and spiritual foundations, and propose pathways for transmission and innovation that support long-term cultural continuity. Qualitative methods, including literature analysis and fieldwork, are employed to gather the data necessary for a systematic analysis of cultural symbols and their underlying structures.

Using purposive sampling, the study focuses on the Nasu and Naisu branches, which are the most representative of Wuding's six Yi branches. Nasu is the largest group (about 60,000, 66% of the Yi population), while Naisu is known

for its distinctive costumes and fine embroidery. These two branches form the core sample for cultural gene analysis.

Overall, the study examines the cultural gene system of Wuding Yi costumes from a deep-structure perspective, clarifying their cultural foundations and providing theoretical support for their preservation and sustainable development.

2. Cultural Context and Contemporary Challenges

As a major Yi settlement in Chuxiong Prefecture, Wuding has long been situated along routes of migration and cultural exchange. Since the opening of the Southern Silk Road during the Han dynasty, and later throughout the Tang–Ming period—when the “Luowu Tribe,” a powerful polity under the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms, emerged as a regional political and cultural center—multiple cultural forces have converged and interacted in this region (Wuding County Chronicles Committee Office, 2016) (Figure 1).

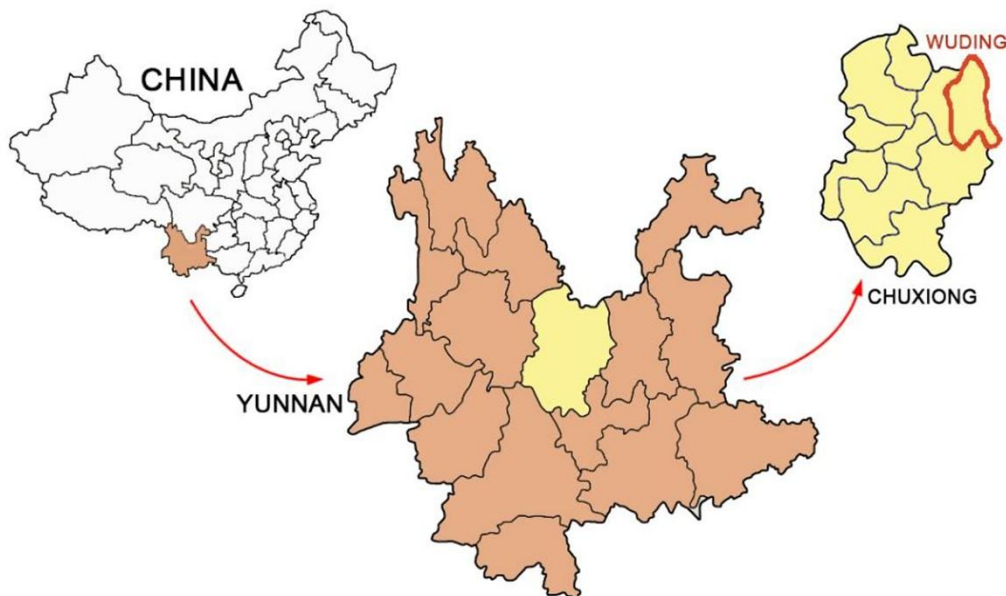


Figure 1 Location of Wuding

Multiple cultural forces converged and interacted in this region, shaping the distinctive forms, color systems, and symbolic structures of Wuding Yi costumes, and providing an essential historical context for the formation of their cultural genes (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Wuding Yi costumes

Existing literature offers only preliminary descriptions of the six Wuding Yi branches, notably *Wuding Ethnic Costumes*, which identifies shared features such as tiger worship, fire-god belief, and a preference for black (Wuding County CPPCC, 2016). However, these studies remain focused on external forms and provide limited analysis of the cultural motivations and symbolic structures underlying the costumes.

Meanwhile, the production and use of traditional attire in Wuding are undergoing structural changes. Youth migration for education and employment has weakened family-based skill transmission, while marketization has driven costume elements toward increasing symbolization and performativity, reducing the extent to which deeper cultural meanings remain embedded in everyday practice.

Against this backdrop, uncovering the deep cultural structure and internal logic embedded in Wuding Yi attire becomes essential for understanding the formation of its cultural genes and for identifying sustainable pathways of cultural transmission.

3. Overview of Cultural Genes

3.1 Theoretical Foundation

Dawkins (1976) proposed the concept of the “meme,” suggesting that cultural ideas and symbols operate through mechanisms analogous to genetic replication, variation, and selection, functioning as the basic units of cultural continuity. Subsequent studies define cultural genes as inheritable information patterns shaped within specific cultural environments (Zhao, 2021), with their core expressed through value orientations and modes of thought—*particularly the fundamental principles governing relationships between people and nature,*

people and people, nation and nation, and heart and objects (Wang, 2003).

From a structural perspective, cultural genes can be organized into three nested layers: the visual layer, the ontological layer, and the implicit layer (Zhao, 2021).

3.2 Cultural Gene Structure of Wuding Yi Costume

Based on the above framework and field data, the cultural information of Wuding Yi costume is organized into three layers—visual, ontological, and implicit—to construct its cultural gene semantic system.

The visual layer includes morphological styles, color schemes, motif structures, and material use; the ontological layer relates to clan branches, craft systems, and regional production conditions; the implicit layer carries deeper meanings such as religious beliefs, collective memory, identity markers, and cultural integration logic (Figure 3).

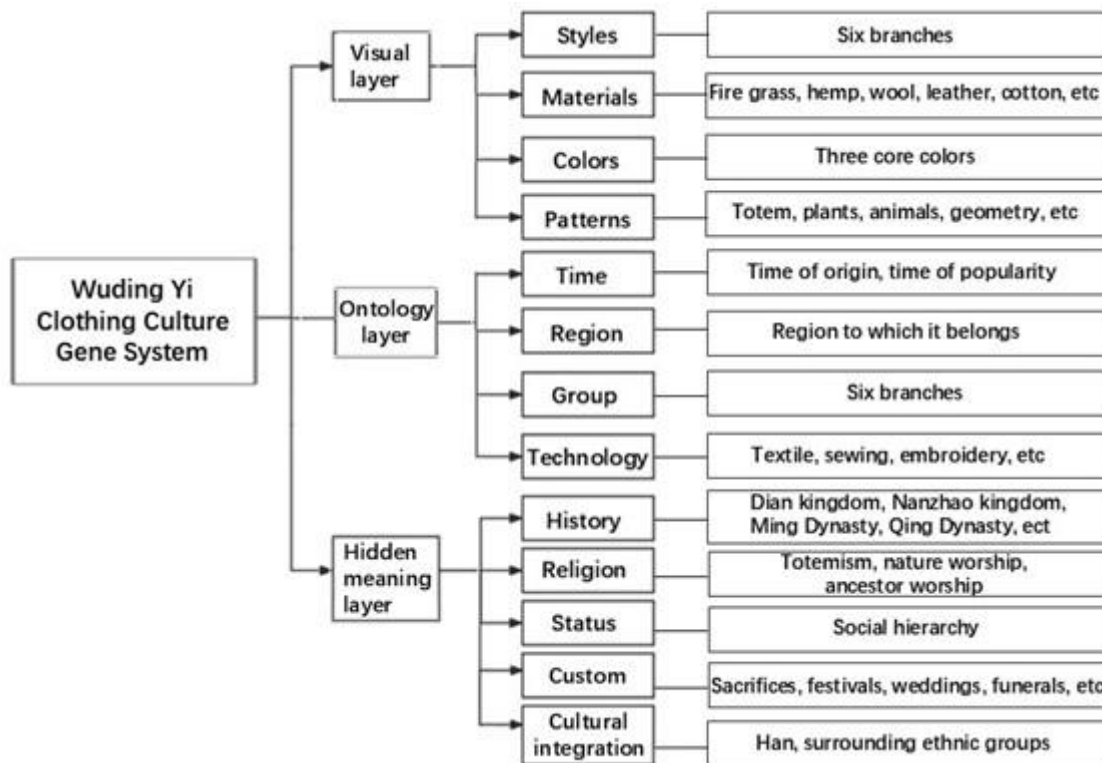


Figure 3 Cultural gene system of Wuding Yi costume

4. Analysis of Cultural Genes of Wuding Yi Costumes

Clothing culture is a system of images with cultural significance based on visual communication (Zhao, 2021). Over time, layered cultural imprints and recurring patterns have become embedded in Wuding Yi costumes, shaping a stable cultural gene structure.

4.1 People and Nature – Coexistence of Ancient and Modern Materials

The materials used for clothing reflect people's relationship with nature. The Yi ancestors originally made simple garments from bark, plant fibers, and animal skins, and these forms have persisted over time. For example, the straw raincoat and the palm-fiber coat are still used in some mountainous areas today.

Hemp-spinning technology was mastered by the Yi ancestors at least 3,000 years ago (Shao, 2016). Fireweed cloth, spun from the leaf fibers of a wild plant, also has a long history, although its precise origin can no longer be clearly dated.

In ancient times, civilians made simple garments from hemp cloth, which today is treated as a refined material often enhanced with embroidery. Fireweed cloth remains the most distinctive feature of Wuding Yi attire, especially the men's fireweed lab coat and the women's fireweed shawl of the Naisu branch.

In the Qing Dynasty, cotton cloth emerged, and by the late 20th century, modern blended fabrics and chemical fibers became widespread for their bright colors and durability. Notably, materials from different historical periods now coexist in contemporary Yi costumes, shaping their distinctive cultural character.

4.2 Heart and Objects – Spiritual Imprints of Ancient Qiang Culture

The Yi people are generally believed to have originated from ancient Qiang groups who once inhabited the northwestern plateau of China. Approximately 6,000–7,000 years ago, some of the ancient Qiang people migrated from the Huangshui River basin to the Jinsha River basin of Yunnan. Ancient Qiang people practiced nomadic herding (Bai, 2014).

Although the ancient Qiang people gradually transitioned to farming after settling, the spiritual imprint of the nomadic people was inherited in the costumes.

First, the styles of clothing reflect the nomadic spirit. For example, the Qiang nomads invented the cloak, which is easy to wear and can also protect from wind and rain, during their long migratory life. The cloak was often made of wool, and with the development of society, the material and shape of the cloak became richer.



Figure 4 cloak and sheepskin coat

Sheepskin coats reflect the nomadic roots of the Yi ancestors. The basic form has changed little over time, typically made from a whole black goat hide with the scalp as the collar and the tail draping at the back. Today, sheepskin coats are still worn in daily work, social occasions, and festivals. (Figure4)

Secondly, the decorative motifs reflect a nomadic spirit. Totems serve as key visual symbols and clan markers. The Yi inherited the black-tiger totem from the ancient Qiang. For example, the Nasu “four-directions and eight-tigers” motif combines tiger totems, rhododendron flowers, and Taiji symbols, expressing both tiger worship and the Yi cosmology of the eight directions (Wuding County CPPCC, 2016).

Animistic beliefs are also embodied in clothing motifs. Common designs—such as rhododendron, fire, ram’s horn, tree, fish, bird, and eagle patterns—derive from nature and are revered as sacred. Passed down through generations, these motifs allow the Yi to honor their ancestors’ nomadic spirit through material symbols (Figure 5).

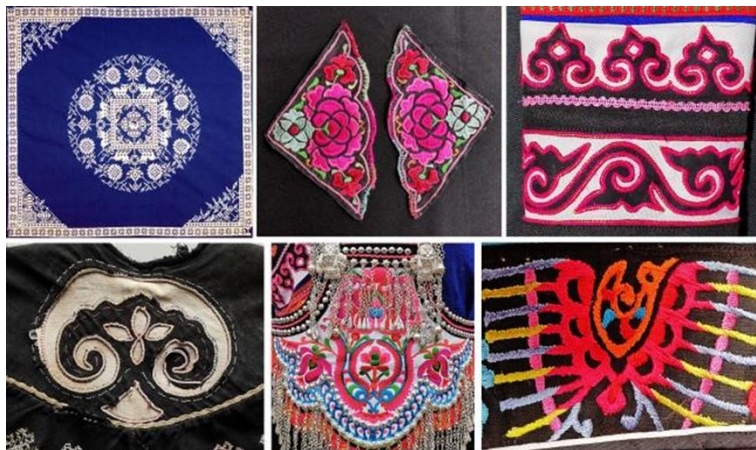


Figure 5 Motifs of tiger, rhododendron, sheep horn, fish, and bird

4.3 Nation to Nation - Decorative Legacies of Aristocratic Culture

The most prominent feature of modern Yi clothing is the emphasis on decoration. The decoration techniques of Wuding Yi costumes are diverse, including embroidery, patchwork embroidery, inlay, splicing, etc.

Ancient Yi clothing was generally simple and plain. Historical evidence shows that modern Yi attire has gradually evolved into ceremonial dress, while preserving and integrating the craftsmanship and decorative traditions of former aristocratic garments.

The Dian Kingdom, founded by Yi ancestors around the 5th century BC (Yang, 2017), once governed the Wuding region. Bronze artifacts depict figures wearing animal skins, belted garments, and tail-like back ornaments—features that remain present in Wuding Yi costumes today.



Figure 6 Clothing of the Naisu branch

The Nanzhao Kingdom, established by Yi ancestors in the 8th century (Li & Tong, 2011), governed the core region that includes present-day Wuding. The Naisu branch is said to have migrated from Dali, with legends tracing their origins either to the Nanzhao royal clan or to the embroidery women who historically served the aristocracy (Wuding County CPPCC, 2016). Naisu clothing features dense red rhododendron motifs and ornate shawls, creating a refined and distinctly aristocratic aesthetic (Figure 6).

From the Yuan dynasty (AD 1271-1368), the central dynasty established a chieftaincy system in Wuding, and Luowu tribal chiefs continued to be appointed as local officials (Wuding County Local Chronicles Compilation Committee Office, 2016). The Luowu tribe has been the ruling class of the Wuding Yi for over 600 years.



Figure 7 Clothing of the Nasu branch

The most complete and representative Wuding Yi costumes are found among the Nasu of Fawo and Huanzhou, historically the seats of chieftains. Their elevated status fostered clear hierarchical distinctions in materials, styles, colors, and motifs (Wuding County CPPCC, 2016). Modern Yi attire continues this aristocratic aesthetic: although formal hierarchies have disappeared, the refined techniques and ornate designs once reserved for the elite have been preserved and reinterpreted, shaping the contemporary look of the Yi costumes. (Figure 7)

4.4 People to People – Integration of Other Ethnic Cultural Elements

During the Dian Kingdom period, silk and iron from Sichuan entered Yunnan via the Southern Silk Road, advancing Yi textile and embroidery traditions (A, 2017). Yi embroidery experienced two major leaps: first in 223 A.D., when the Shu Han entered the Yi region, enabling early contact with Han embroidery; and again in the 8th century, when Nanzhao captured numerous Han embroiderers from Shu, significantly influencing Nanzhao's embroidery techniques (A, 2017).

From the Yuan to Qing dynasties, Han migration introduced Central Plains embroidery techniques to Yi areas, diversifying Yi embroidery. Present-day Chuxiong Yi attire took shape between the Qing and Republican periods, evolving from local traditions while incorporating Manchu and Han influences (Shao, 2016).

Decorative motifs also absorbed external influences. Phoenixes, auspicious clouds, lotuses, peonies, bats, and butterflies on the Qing-dynasty Yi chiefs' attire were adapted from Han patterns and later entered modern Yi costumes. Likewise, Buddha figures on children's hats and Tai Chi emblems on elderly women's hats

reflect the impact of Buddhism and Daoism (Wang, 2010). Through sustained interethnic contact, Yi costumes have incorporated elements from other cultures, resulting in more diverse and complex stylistic forms.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the weakening cultural and spiritual core of Wuding Yi costumes and identifies four key cultural genes in Nasu and Naisu attire: historical stratification formed by mixed ancient–modern materials, the continuity of ancient Qiang spiritual traditions, the decorative legacy of aristocratic aesthetics, and cultural hybridity shaped through multi-ethnic exchange. These insights compensate for prior research that focused mainly on external forms and align with cultural sustainability theories.

Findings show that modern social change is accelerating the symbolization and superficialization of costume culture, weakening its spiritual foundations. In response, the study proposes two strategies: (1) a tiered cultural-gene protection framework covering spiritual values, symbolic motifs, and craftsmanship, and (2) contemporary design translation of key patterns to support cultural regeneration in modern contexts.

Overall, this research addresses the erosion of cultural core and offers actionable directions for the sustainable transmission of Wuding Yi costume culture.

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