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Cultural Representations, Transmission Mechanisms, and Contemporary Value of the "Four Huai Medicines" of Jiaozuo in the Perspective of Folklore Studies

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Abstract:

The Four Huai Medicines — Huai Chinese Yam (Dioscorea opposita), Huai Rehmannia (Rehmannia glutinosa), Huai Chrysanthemum (Chrysanthemum morifolium), and Huai Achyranthes (Achyranthes bidentata) — are authentic and genuine Chinese medicinal herbs indigenous to the ancient Huaiqing Prefecture (present-day Jiaozuo, Henan Province) and are listed as a national-level intangible cultural heritage (ICH) representative project. Drawing on the analytical framework of material folklore, social folklore, spiritual folklore, and oral folklore, and grounded in local gazetteers, classical Chinese medical texts, and authoritative scholarly works, this paper systematically elucidates the folkloric generative logic, core folkloric event composition, and sociocultural functions of the Four Huai Medicines. It further examines contemporary challenges in their transmission and explores pathways for their protection. Research findings indicate that over three thousand years of historical accumulation, the Four Huai Medicines have developed a complete folkloric system encompassing agricultural customs, craft folklore, dietary practices, commercial folklore, temple fair worship, deity beliefs, and folk literature. They represent a quintessential example of the fusion of Central Plains agrarian civilization and traditional Chinese medicine culture. The essential nature of their transmission is the living continuation of folkloric culture, not merely the preservation of craftsmanship or material products.

Keywords:

Four Huai Medicines, Folkloric Culture, Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection, Living Transmission, Central Plains Agrarian Civilization

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Problem Formulation

In the heartland of the Central Plains along the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, the ancient Huaiqing Prefecture (encompassing present-day Qinyang, Wuzhi, Wenxian, Bo'ai, and Mengzhou under Jiaozuo) gave rise to the internationally renowned "Four Huai Medicines": Huai Chinese Yam, Huai Rehmannia, Huai Chrysanthemum, and Huai Achyranthes. Since being designated as tribute items

during the Western Zhou period, the Four Huai Medicines have not only been recorded for their distinctive medicinal value in classic medical texts such as the Shennong Bencao Jing (Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica) and the Bencao Gangmu (Compendium of Materia Medica), but have also been deeply embedded in the seasonal festivals, wedding and funeral rituals, dietary nourishment, religious worship, and commercial networks of local communities, becoming highly emblematic folkloric symbols of regional culture. In 2008, "Traditional Chinese Medicine Processing Techniques (Cultivation and Processing of the Four Huai Medicines)" was inscribed on the National Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects, marking the formal recognition of their cultural value at the national level.

Current academic research on the Four Huai Medicines is largely concentrated in agronomy, chemical composition, pharmacology, and economic development. Systematic inquiry from a folkloristic perspective remains relatively limited. Existing studies tend to treat the Huai Medicines primarily as material products or traditional crafts, neglecting their folkloric essence as living culture, symbolic systems, and social bonds. Based on this, the present paper — grounded in the disciplinary foundations of folklore studies — systematically examines the cultural generative process, core folkloric events, local social functions, and contemporary transmission challenges of the Four Huai Medicines, and proposes corresponding protection pathways rooted in folkloric principles.

1.2. Definition of Core Concepts and Research Framework

The folkloric framework employed in this paper is based on Zhong Jingwen's theory of folklore studies (Zhong, 1998), which defines the objects of inquiry as four major domains: material folklore, social folklore, spiritual folklore, and oral folklore, with a focus on habitual, patterned, and collective cultural events formed by people in productive practice, daily life, belief systems, and oral narratives. The concept of "living folklore" proposed in this paper emphasizes that the Four Huai Medicines are not static and fixed cultural heritage, but a dynamic cultural system continuously embedded in everyday life, constantly practiced and reproduced [2].

2. The Generative Foundation of the Folkloric Culture of the Four Huai Medicines

2.1. Natural Foundation: Geographical Endowment and the Folk Belief in "Geo-Authenticity"

Jiaozuo lies at the foot of the Taihang Mountains to the north and borders the Yellow River to the south, situated in the alluvial plains of the Qin and Yellow Rivers. Its soil is rich in potassium, calcium, magnesium, and other trace elements, with deep and loose soil layers, providing irreplaceable geographic and ecological conditions for the growth of the Four Huai Medicines. From a folkloristic perspective, this natural endowment has been gradually sacralized and symbolized by local communities, giving rise to the collective cultural belief that "one region's soil nurtures one region's medicine." The Shennong Bencao Jing records that "Chinese yam from Huaiqing in Henan is the finest"; Li Shizhen explicitly stated in the Bencao Gangmu that "people today regard Huaiqing rehmannia as superior"; and the widely circulated folk saying "Huai medicines removed from Huaiqing Prefecture lose ninety percent of their efficacy" vividly reflects the community's deep recognition of the regional sacredness

of Huai Medicines. This concept — merging "soil and water, medicinal efficacy, and divine power" — constitutes the belief foundation underlying the generation and development of the folkloric culture of the Four Huai Medicines.

2.2. Historical Accumulation: From Imperial Tribute to Popular Folklore

The folklorization of the Four Huai Medicines has accumulated over three thousand years of history. During the Western Zhou period, according to the Qinyang City Gazetteer [6], as early as 734 BCE, Duke Huan of Wei presented Huai Chinese Yam as tribute to the Zhou royal court — an act that not only established the prestigious status of Huai Medicines but also conferred upon them the cultural authority of official endorsement. During the Han and Tang dynasties, Sun Simiao detailed the application of Huai Medicines in epidemic prevention, physical conditioning, and healing in the Beiji Qianjin Yaofang (Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold for Emergencies), gradually extending their use from exclusive court medicine to everyday folk use, forming popular medical customs of "preventing disease, nourishing health, and treating illness with Huai Medicines." By the Ming and Qing dynasties, Huaiqing Prefecture had developed an industrial pattern of "every household cultivating medicines, every family processing, and everyone trading," with Huai Medicine cultivation reaching 900 hectares by the Guangxu reign of the Qing dynasty and annual output approaching one million kilograms [9]. The rise of the Huai merchant community, the establishment of Huaiqing guild halls across major cities, and the gradual consolidation of temple fair rituals and craft transmission practices marked the historical transformation of Huai Medicines from a material product to a cultural symbol.

3. The Core Folkloric Event System of the Four Huai Medicines in the Perspective of Folklore Studies

3.1. Material Folklore: Agricultural Customs, Craft Traditions, and Dietary Practices

The traditional cultivation of the Four Huai Medicines is not a purely agricultural practice; it is a folkloric practice embedded with taboos and ritual symbolism. Huai Rehmannia must not be continuously cultivated in the same plot and requires rotation of more than six years, with the folk understanding that "replanting exhausts the soil's vitality and diminishes the medicine's efficacy"; harvesting Huai Chinese Yam must follow the furrow to avoid breaking the tubers, as communities widely regard this as "injuring vitality and bringing bad fortune" [7]. The agricultural proverb "plant achyranthes in spring, chrysanthemum in summer, rehmannia and yam are suitable for autumn and winter" vividly reflects the deference and reverence toward natural seasonal rhythms in Huai Medicine cultivation customs. Frost's Descent (Shuangjiang) serves as the pivotal solar term for harvesting Huai Medicines; herb farmers face east, burn incense, and offer sacrifices to the Earth God, performing the "Opening the Hoe Ceremony," praying for intact harvests and abundant yields — an indispensable ritual component of Huai Medicine agricultural folklore [8].

Processing craftsmanship carries a sacralized folk understanding. The processing of Huai Rehmannia must follow the rigorous procedure of nine-cycle steaming and sun-drying — nine rounds of steaming and nine days of drying — with the folk consensus that "incomplete procedures yield incomplete medicinal properties." Craft transmission is primarily conducted through family-based father-to-son and master-to-

apprentice models; the processing process generates behavioral taboos including prohibitions against impurity, noise, and insincerity, reflecting the belief core of "revering medicine as revering the divine" [2]. Grounded in the tradition of medicine-food homology, the Four Huai Medicines are deeply integrated into local dietary customs: newborns' first solid food often consists of yam porridge; wedding ceremonies include the Four Huai Medicines as essential gifts; birthday banquets feature yam cake and rehmannia congee, symbolizing longevity and good fortune [10]. The seasonal nourishment traditions of eating yam and mutton soup at Winter Solstice and drinking Huai Chrysanthemum tea in summer align with the Chinese cultural logic of "storing in winter and growing in spring" [11].

3.2. Social Folklore: Merchant Guild Culture and Temple Fair Public Rituals

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, merchants from Huaiqing Prefecture formed a nationally prominent merchant guild — the Huai Bang — with Huaiqing guild halls established across Beijing, Tianjin, Xi'an, Wuhan, Guangzhou, and other major cities [7]. The guild codes of the Huai Bang were founded on integrity, emphasizing no sale of counterfeit medicines and honest dealing with all customers; shrines to the Medicine King and Guan Yu were worshipped within guild halls, with mandatory offerings before market opening, forming regulated sacrificial customs; the guild upheld mutual assistance among fellow townspeople and relief for the needy, building a tight community of commercial kinship. The Medicine King Temple at Gedangpo in Bo'ai County, dedicated primarily to Sun Simiao, has held temple fairs for over a millennium [7]; during the first through the sixteenth day of the first lunar month and the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month (the Medicine King's birthday), ritual activities encompass offerings, incense burning, prayers for medicine, theatrical performances, and medicinal material trading — annual folkloric cycle nodes in local society. At the communal level, the customs of mutual labor exchange, unpaid assistance, and cooperative cultivation among herb farmers during the busy growing season represent a vivid embodiment of the ethic of mutual aid in traditional agrarian society; craft transmission centered on family and master-apprentice units constitutes a stable folkloric transmission mechanism [9].

3.3. Spiritual Folklore: Deity Beliefs, Taboo Systems, and Symbolic Concepts

Spiritual folklore is the soul of the folkloric culture of the Four Huai Medicines. The belief system is centered on Medicine King Sun Simiao, supplemented by the Earth God, Mountain God, and River God, permeating the entire cultivation and harvesting process [6]. The taboo system covers all aspects: cultivation (prohibition against trampling seedlings or speaking ill omens in the medicinal plot), processing (prohibition against impure contact or simplified procedures), and trade (prohibition against selling counterfeit medicines or short-changing), with the concept that "deceiving medicine is deceiving heaven" expressing deep communal reverence for Huai Medicines [2]. On the symbolic level: Huai Chinese Yam symbolizes health and longevity; Huai Rehmannia symbolizes fortifying the root and ensuring peace; Huai Chrysanthemum symbolizes elegance and good fortune; Huai Achyranthes symbolizes strength and resilience. These symbolic meanings are widely applied in wedding, funeral, and festive ritual contexts, forming important components of the local symbolic system.

3.4. Oral Folklore: Legends, Proverbs, Folk Songs, and Narrative Traditions

Folk legends surrounding the Four Huai Medicines form a rich narrative system, encompassing stories of the Divine Farmer discovering Huai Medicines on Shennong Mountain, Sun Simiao using Huai Medicines to cure a plague in Huaiqing and being enshrined in a temple, and anecdotes of successive emperors consuming Huai Medicines — all transmitted from generation to generation as essential vehicles of cultural memory [12]. Folk proverbs such as “year-round supplementation is no match for supplementing at Frost's Descent,” “yam nourishes best in autumn and winter, strong enough in spring to wrestle a tiger,” and “plant achyranthes in the third month, harvest gold in the ninth” embody both the wisdom of Huai Medicine nourishment and the cultural recognition and identity surrounding these medicines [12]. Huaibang opera (Huaibang Xi) and folk songs contain numerous works themed around Huai Medicines, such as Huiyao Ballad and Huai Merchant Ode, weaving cultivation, processing, and trade folklore into their fabric, serving as vivid carriers of folkloric memory [13].

4. Folkloric Functions of the Four Huai Medicines in Local Society

4.1. Livelihood Function: Supporting Regional Economy and Occupational Identity

Huaiqing Prefecture has historically developed a regional tradition of making a livelihood from medicine, establishing a thousand-year integrated livelihood model encompassing medicinal cultivation, processing, and commercial trade. Over generations of productive practice, this has cultivated the professional character of the Huaiqing people — diligent, precise, principled, and trustworthy — achieving a mutual sustenance between material industrial value and regional spiritual culture.

4.2. Identity Function: Constructing Regional Cultural Symbols and Collective Memory

The “Four Huai Medicines” have become the most distinctive cultural emblem of Jiaozuo. National Geographical Indication Product certification and the national ICH designation have further reinforced regional identity. Temple fairs, sacrificial rites, dietary practices, and folk proverbs continuously reproduce the sense of belonging and pride of the “Huaichuan people.”

4.3. Educative Function: Transmitting Ethical Order and Reverential Attitudes

The culture of Huai Medicines — through multi-dimensional practical norms of cultivation in accordance with seasonal rhythms, rigorous processing standards, reverential worship, commercial integrity, and dietary restraint and nourishment — constructs a comprehensive system of traditional moral education. This system, using daily production and life as its carrier, imperceptibly regulates the behavioral norms of the community, cultivating the value orientation and ethical standards of the regional population [11].

4.4. Integrative Function: Maintaining Social Solidarity and Public Order

The various folkloric activities of temple fairs, agricultural labor exchanges, medicine deity sacrifices, and medicinal trade cooperate synergistically to continuously sustain family ethics, neighborly mutual aid, and merchant guild cooperation — effectively resolving internal conflicts of interest in local society, strengthening communal sense of regional belonging and collective consciousness, and providing cultural support for the stable integration of local social structures [1].

5. Contemporary Transmission Challenges of the Folklore of the Four Huai Medicines

5.1. Contraction of Agricultural Customs

Some farmers, in pursuit of maximum yields, have gradually shifted to mechanized cultivation aided by chemical fertilizers and pesticides; traditional cultivation practices with cultural meaning — such as rotation systems, deep soil tillage, and manual harvesting — are consequently disappearing. The aging of the transmission community is severe, with young people showing extremely low participation; the crisis of generational discontinuity is acute.

5.2. Rupture in Craft Transmission

The traditional nine-cycle steaming and sun-drying procedure is complex and time-consuming; driven by market forces and short-term economic interests, most farmers prefer modern processing methods. Young people, finding the traditional learning cycle lengthy and the income returns low, are unwilling to undertake transmission, placing this core national ICH craft technique at risk of extinction.

5.3. Dilution of Belief-Based Folklore

The younger generation, increasingly detached from agricultural production, has grown progressively indifferent to beliefs in the Medicine King and Earth God; related sacrificial ceremonies are being simplified or forgotten. Temple fairs that once served sacred functions of prayer and worship are now increasingly reframed as tourist attractions, significantly diminishing their sacred character and ritual gravitas.

5.4. Rupture of Oral Folklore

As urbanization accelerates, traditional venues for folk literary transmission — field singing and courtyard storytelling — are gradually disappearing; young people's familiarity with and willingness to transmit folk legends, songs, and proverbs have sharply declined, leaving a vast body of precious oral narrative at risk of extinction.

5.5. Industrial Development Prioritizing Commerce Over Culture

Most enterprises are excessively focused on economic returns, neglecting the folkloric depth behind Huai Medicines, reducing them to ordinary commodities. Cultural carriers originally associated with Huai Medicines — sacrificial ceremonies, traditional processing techniques, and folk legends — have been stripped from the industrial chain, leading to a severe fragmentation of the Huai Medicine folkloric system.

6. Protection and Transmission Pathways for the Folklore of the Four Huai Medicines in the Perspective of Folklore Studies

6.1. Insisting on Living Transmission: Protecting the Complete Folkloric Chain

The protection of the Four Huai Medicines must cover the complete chain of cultivation-processing-dietary use-worship-trade-oral transmission, fully aligned with the principle of holistic ICH protection proposed by Wu Bing'an [2]. Efforts should guide farmers toward ecological cultivation following traditional customs, strengthen support for traditional processing craft, cultivate young inheritors, systematically

restore traditional ceremonies including Huai Medicine dietary customs, Medicine Deity sacrifices, and Opening the Hoe Ceremony, comprehensively organize folk legends and proverbs, and achieve full-chain living protection.

6.2. Integration into Contemporary Life: Returning to the Basis of Daily Folklore

Efforts should promote Huai Medicine dietary practices, seasonal customs, and health culture into modern households, allowing folklore to return to a daily, practical, and perceptible state rather than being confined to static museum display — consistent with the philosophy of living folkloric protection advocated by Zhong Jingwen [1]. The connections between Huai Medicines and the Twenty-Four Solar Terms can be developed, Huai Medicine health recipes promoted, and Huai Medicines integrated as an important component of family diet.

6.3. Strengthening Community Agency: Respecting the Cultural Subjectivity of the People

With herb farmers, craft inheritors, and village communities as the core force, excessive governmental intervention and corporate dominance should be avoided, ensuring that folkloric culture continues in an indigenous, spontaneous, and living state. Inheritors should be given ample autonomous space and policy support, community transmission consciousness should be stimulated, and the original qualities of Huai Medicine folkloric culture preserved.

6.4. Promoting Cultural Tourism Integration: Realizing Living Dissemination

Building on the characteristics of the Huai Medicine industry, immersive experiential projects — including Huai Medicine cultivation experiences, traditional processing experiences, Medicine King temple fair experiences, and Huai Medicine health cuisine tastings — should be developed to bring Huai Medicine culture out of museums and into public life, enhancing community participation and cultural identification, and driving the living dissemination of folkloric culture.

6.5. Strengthening Educational Transmission: Entering Schools and Communities

Incorporating Four Huai Medicines-related legends, folk proverbs, traditional crafts, and folkloric knowledge into local school-based curricula and rural cultural halls, through the dual platforms of school education and community outreach, strengthens the cultural identification of the younger generation and addresses the crisis of generational discontinuity in transmission [1].

7. Conclusions

The Four Huai Medicines are not merely a category of medicinal herbs; they constitute a complete system of living folkloric culture accumulated over three thousand years by the people of ancient Huaiqing Prefecture. With the four authentic herbs — Huai Rehmannia, Huai Chinese Yam, Huai Achyranthes, and Huai Chrysanthemum — as the core material carriers, this system encompasses agricultural customs, processing craftsmanship, belief rituals, and oral literature, bearing the core values of “reverence for nature and integrity in mutual assistance,” and serving as a vivid example of the deep integration of Central Plains agrarian civilization and traditional Chinese medicine culture. From a folkloristic perspective, the core value of the Four Huai Medicines lies in the cosmological, ethical, and social order they

embody; their protection is fundamentally the protection of a complete folkloric cultural system.

At present, the Huai Medicine industry suffers from a bias toward commerce over culture, with severe fragmentation of the folkloric system and an intensifying transmission crisis. In response, protection work must adhere to the principle of holistic protection proposed by Wu Bing'an [2], covering the complete chain from cultivation to oral transmission; must practice the concept of living transmission advocated by Zhong Jingwen [1], allowing Huai Medicine culture to truly integrate into daily life; and must center herb farmers, inheritors, and village communities as the primary agents, reducing external over-intervention, and preserving the original qualities of folkloric culture. Only by returning to folkloric principles, insisting on living transmission, rooting in daily life, and respecting the agency of the people can this Yellow River cultural heritage achieve perpetual and sustainable continuation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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