

## *Original Paper*

# Research on Guangdong She Culture from the Perspective of Symbols and Signs

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to conduct an in-depth study of the symbols that coalesce in Guangdong's She culture, and to reveal the historical, cultural, social and spiritual connotations carried by these symbols through the analysis of dress, architecture, craftsmanship, customs and other aspects. Through the study of these symbols, understanding the origins of the She elements and the common cultural symbols and spiritual trust they unite will help to better protect and pass on the She culture, and promote exchanges and integration among various ethnic groups. The symbols of Guangdong She culture are not only the mark of the unique identity of this ethnic group, but also an important force to unite the national emotions, pass on the national spirit, and promote the development of the ethnic group, and moreover, they embody the She people's perception and understanding of nature, as well as reflecting their aspiration and pursuit of a better life.*

*This study starts with the interpretation and aesthetic analysis of the elements of She people's dress, architecture and craftsmanship by using the case study method to examine and research.*

*It studies the cultural symbols of the She people, searches for the origin and attribution of the culture, effectively transmits the value of the excellent national culture, and keeps the She non-heritage culture abreast of the times, attracts more attention and in-depth understanding of more people, so that it can be more widely disseminated and recognized in the modern society. The cultural self-awareness and self-confidence of the She people themselves are also increasing, and they actively participate in the inheritance and innovation of cultural symbols.*

### **Keywords**

*She ethnic group, cultural symbols, dress, architecture, craftsmanship*

## 1. Introduction

As an ethnic minority in China, the She people have a long history and rich culture. The She people have experienced many migrations throughout history, and in the process of moving from the border region of Fujian, Guangdong and Gan to other areas, they have continuously adapted to new environments, and their cultural symbols have gradually been formed and evolved in the process (Fang, 2019). She culture unites the wisdom and creativity of the She people and is a bright pearl in the cultural treasury of the Chinese nation. For example, the genealogy of the She people records information about the migration of the family, which is not only a witness to the history of the family, but also becomes an important part of the cultural symbols of the She people.

## 2. Literature Review

The Gao Huang Song, which has been passed down from generation to generation by the Guangdong She ethnic group, points to the birthplace of the She ethnic group, Phoenix Mountain in Chaozhou, Guangdong, recognized as the origin of the She settlement and known for its unique mountain habitat and rich cultural heritage (Blažević, Peters, & Chen, 2018; Yousaf, Liu, & Xiang, 2024).

Some scholars believe that the She ethnic group originated from the ancient “Wuling barbarians”, and the main basis for holding this view is that the legend of Discord of the She ethnic group is similar to that of the Wuling barbarians, and there is a certain degree of correlation between some of the customs and cultural characteristics. The She people migrated from parts of Guangdong in the early days, and have been living in mixed communities for a long time, surrounded by Han culture and influenced by it (Li & Zhang, 2023). According to the “Hou Han Shu Southern Barbarians Biography”, Wuling barbarians take Pan Gou as their ancestor, and the She people also circulate the myth of Pan Gou (Zhang, 2019). Fengping She village in Fengshun County, Meizhou City, still retains the custom of the “Recruitment Festival”. The festival is in honor of the She ancestor, Panzou, and in thanksgiving for the divine soldiers. The unique custom is preserved as evidence of the She cultural heritage and has since evolved into a large-scale festival held every three to five years. The Recruitment of Soldiers Festival is a collection of She culture, covering She myths and legends, genealogy, language, folk songs, dances, martial arts, music, costumes, food and migration, etc. It demonstrates the face of the original form of She culture in many ways, and it is an important carrier of She cultural inheritance.

### 2.1 *The Geographic Influence of She Culture in Guangdong*

Fengping She Village in Fengshun County, Meizhou City, is located at the northern foot of the highest peak of the Phoenix Mountain Range, Jigongbun Mountain (1,409 meters above sea level), with treacherous terrain and dense mountain forests. In ancient times, such a geographic environment provided a relatively safe living space for the She ethnic group. The rich natural resources of the Phoenix Mountain region provided the necessary material basis for the She ethnic group's agricultural production and life, enabling them to flourish on this land. In conclusion, the Phoenix Hill area of Chaozhou has an important position in the historical development and cultural inheritance of the She

people, and is regarded as the birthplace of the She people in Guangdong. It has preserved rich She cultural heritage and unique ethnic customs, which are of great value to the study of the origin, development and cultural inheritance of the She people.

### *2.2 Inheritance Mechanisms of Symbolic Symbol Systems*

According to existing research, the key reason why the symbol system of the She culture can be passed on from generation to generation among the ethnic minorities in the South is that the homologous ethnic groups, in the course of their independent development, have gradually constructed a cultural sharing mechanism based on the memory of their ethnic origins. This mechanism provides recognizable historical information for the continuous development of ethnic identity through elaborate explicit symbols. This mechanism's manifestation in clothing and its internal structural relationship is the core point of this paper (Meng, 2021).

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 She Cultural Symbols*

#### *3.1.1 Clothing Symbol*

The phoenix costume is the most representative clothing symbol of the She women. There are various colors of embroidered floral patterns and bird, dragon and phoenix motifs on the collars, lapels, buckles and even the cuffs of the blouses worn by She women. The main color of the clothing is usually black or blue (Ding, Li, Chen, & Zou, 2023), and the collar, cuffs and lapels are embroidered with colored lace, symbolizing the feathers of the phoenix. There are also special aprons in the costume, mostly red, embroidered with various patterns of flowers and birds, like the colored feathers of the phoenix. The headdress is high up and resembles a phoenix crown. The overall shape is like a beautiful phoenix, signifying good luck and nobility. The whole set of costumes implies the beauty, nobility and auspiciousness of She women and reflects the worship of the phoenix by the She people (Xin, Li, & Zhang, 2019).

She clothing patterns are accomplished by embroidery craft, using techniques such as hypothesis, metonymy, and harmonization to weave and embroider patterns with allegorical images (Table 1). She clothing patterns are derived from She totems, in the She totem worship, the coil gourd and the phoenix are coexisting, and the She totem culture is mostly reflected in the clothing (Figure 1). Based on the practical and decorative purpose of She embroidery is completely handmade flat embroidery (fine embroidery), the stitching method is based on the neat needle (flat needle), supplemented by whirling needle, set needle, twisted needle and other embroidery stitches for the pattern embroidery, the stitches are flush, firm and wear-resistant, which is conducive to the preservation of embroidery (Liu & Xu, 2022). She embroidery is not only used to decorate clothing, but also to make various crafts, such as purses, scented bags and pillows. Embroidery is an important way for She women to pass on their culture and express their emotions.

**Table 1. She Motif Allegory Form**

Motifs	Lesson be learned
Phoenix motif	Auspiciousness, goodness, happiness
Butterfly pattern	Free, lively and cheerful
Peony	Wealthy, prosperous, beautiful
Wintersweet (dialect)	Perseverance, purity, and elegance
Pomegranate pattern	The more sons, the more happiness
Lozenge pattern	Abundance, prosperity, stability
Circular pattern	Unity, harmony and wholeness
Triangle-shaped pattern	The Great Mountains, Awe and Dependence on Nature



**Figure 1. She Women's Flower Clothes (Image Credit: Chinese Minority Design Complete Collection Compilation Committee (2019). The Complete Collection of Chinese Minority Designs. She. (Shanxi People's Publishing House.)**

### 3.1.2 Color Symbolism

In the color scheme of the embroidery style, the three primary colors of red, yellow and blue are mostly used, and the contrasting colors of green and orange are used to match the strong visual effect of the embroidery pattern (Figure 2), and the overall style of the picture is highly saturated, bright and richly layered, and strongly decorative (Chen, 2022).

Blue: The color blue often represents the sky and the sea in She clothing, implying vastness and depth.

She people live in the mountainous areas and yearn for the sky and the sea, and the blue color of their costumes also reflects their pursuit of freedom and the wide world.

Red: Red symbolizes enthusiasm, festivity and good fortune. On important occasions such as traditional festivals and weddings of the She people, people will wear red costumes to express their joy and blessings. Red is also a symbol of vitality and vigor in the She culture.



**Figure 2. She Embroidery Patterns (Image Credit:  
[https://www.sohu.com/a/296476979\\_1001360480](https://www.sohu.com/a/296476979_1001360480))**

The decorative She patterns and borders carry the history, culture and beliefs of the She people. They have been passed down through generations and have become an important part of the She culture. The images presented by the weaving and embroidery and the profound cultural connotations behind the images, the patterns and themes that are universally recognized by the people, have been preserved in the scrubbing of the long river of history and have become the theme patterns recognized by the people.

### 3.1.3 She Weaving Craft

She compilation crafts include ribbon weaving, earth cloth weaving, bamboo weaving, grass weaving and thread weaving. She bucket hats, also known as “flower hats”, are part of the traditional culture of the She people and one of the dowry items for She women when they get married. The She people live in the mountains and forests and are rich in Dianthus, Bambusa, Bitter Bamboo, Mao Bamboo, and other bamboos (Li & Zhang, 2023), which provide abundant raw materials for bamboo weaving crafts, used for weaving handicrafts and household items. The shape of the She bucket hats is usually round, with a pointed top and wider edges, somewhat like a combination of a cone and a cylinder. This shape is designed with practicality in mind, effectively shielding from the sun and rain, but also has a certain aesthetic appeal, reflecting the aesthetic concepts of the She people. With the change of time, the use of the She bucket hat has also changed, from the initial tool for sheltering from the sun and rain, gradually evolved into an ornament and a symbol of the She culture. The appearance design is also very unique, above the bucket hat swallow, top, four compartments, three eaves, cloud head, swallow mouth, tiger's teeth, bucket hat star, etc., and the surface is usually woven with a variety of exquisite patterns and

patterns. The cloud-head pattern is usually regarded as a symbol of good luck and happiness; the swallow-mouth pattern may be related to She legends or myths; and the tiger's teeth pattern may symbolize strength and courage. In addition, the weaving patterns of She bucket hats may include other elements, such as flowers and animals, etc. The combination and variation of these patterns are rich and varied, reflecting the creativity and aesthetic concepts of the She people. Looking inside the bucket hats, they are also matched with decorations such as colorful beads of various colors and ribbons of red and yellow colors, etc. The whole bucket hats are woven with colorful nine-fold fine gimlets (Figure 3), and these patterns and motifs are not only decorative, but also reflect the cultural traditions and living customs of the She people. The production process of She hats is very complicated, requiring nearly 40 procedures, including material selection, material production and weaving, each of which has strict operational requirements. In the process of weaving, it is also necessary to use the unique tung oil and other leakage-proof technology, so that the hats are delicate and lightweight, but also watertight. The bamboo splints are as fine as hair, uniform in thickness and color, and the patterns are exquisite and delicate. Bucket hats, as the carrier of traditional handicrafts of the She Cluster, are the witness of cultural inheritance. The weaving process has been passed down from generation to generation, carrying the historical memory and culture of the She people, and its development and evolution process reflects the way of life of the She people, their aesthetic concepts, and their exchanges and fusion with neighboring ethnic groups. This exquisite handicraft is the crystallization of the wisdom accumulated by the She people over a long period of time, and has been passed down through masters and disciples, families and other ways to this day, forming a unique style of She decorative arts and embodying the pursuit of beauty and the unique aesthetic concepts of the She people. It was used as a tool to protect She people from the sun and rain when they went out to work, go to market or visit friends and relatives, and later gradually evolved into a kind of jewelry and one of the dowry items for the marriage of She girls, which embodies the wisdom of the She people's life and the quality of their hard work, and enhances the sense of national identity and cohesion of the She people.



**Figure 3. She Bamboo Bucket Hat (Image Credit: Chinese Minority Design Complete Collection Compilation Committee (2019). The Complete Collection of Chinese Minority Designs. She . (Shanxi People's Publishing House.)**

Colorful belts: She colorful belts are the traditional handicrafts of the She people, known as Hop Hand Towel Belt, or Flower Belt (Figure 4; Figure 5), with various patterns and generous colors, and the weaving of colorful belts is also the women's hong of the She women. At first, they were used as belts, straps and other daily necessities, but later they were also used as clothing decorations, and they are lucky objects and tokens of love for the She ethnic group, and the inheritance of their weaving process is also a reflection of the symbols of cultural inheritance. Ribbons are usually woven from silk threads with bright colors and patterns of natural life forms and geometric shapes, including flowers, birds, fish and insects, cloud patterns, water patterns, etc. (Sun, Zhao, Hu, Zhao, & Liu, 2023), signifying happiness, good fortune and a good life. Colorful ribbons are not only used to decorate costumes, but also play an important role in important occasions such as fixation and marriage in She.



**Figure 4. She Weaves Colorful Ribbons Diagram (Image Credit: Chinese Minority Design Complete Collection Compilation Committee (2019). The Complete Collection of Chinese Minority Designs. She . (Shanxi People's Publishing House.)**



**Figure 5. She Weaves Colorful Ribbon Extension (Image Credit: Chinese Minority Design Complete Collection Compilation Committee (2019). The Complete Collection of Chinese Minority Designs. She . (Shanxi People's Publishing House.)**

#### 3.1.4 Architectural Symbol

She dwellings have distinctive ethnic characteristics, and the She people tend to prefer places on hillsides, facing the sun, sheltered from the wind and with water sources. Such a location is conducive to obtaining sufficient sunlight and avoiding strong winds, and is convenient for obtaining water for living. Around the villages, the She would plant trees such as pine, maple, quince, green chestnut, bitter chinkapin, etc. Fruit trees or bamboos were planted in front of and behind the houses, which not only purified the air, but also practiced the environmental concept of “a tree at the entrance of the village can block the wind, and planting a tree behind the house can store water”, and provided certain resources for living.

Sheliao (Figure 6): Historically, when the She ancestors lived a nomadic lifestyle, they would build simple mountain huts called “grass huts” or “grass shelters”. This kind of building used bamboo and wood as pillars and supports, thatched grass to prepare grass curtains for tiles, small bamboo pieces and reed stalks to prepare fences, and diy strips to prepare doors and windows, with building materials all taken from nature. Sheliao are mostly wooden structures with thatched roofs or tiles. Most of them are two- or three-story buildings with black tiles on the roof. The interiors of Sheliao are well laid out and usually divided into functional areas such as living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms. Sheliao buildings are characterized by beautiful shapes, reasonable structures and strong ethnic characteristics. Sheliao is not only a place of residence for the She people, but also an important space for them to pass on their culture and hold traditional ceremonies.

**She dwellings:** She dwellings are usually wooden-framed hammocks or earthen buildings with unique architectural styles. The roofs are covered with black tiles and the eaves are often carved with various patterns, such as dragons, phoenixes, flowers and birds, etc. These carvings are not only decorative, but also symbolize the She people's desire for a better life and their reverence for the gods and spirits of nature.

**Gatehouse:** Gatehouses are usually built at the entrance of villages or family settlements, which can play the role of defense against invasion by foreign enemies and is an important sign of entering the village. In ancient times, gatehouses were often equipped with defense facilities, such as archery towers and gates, to protect the safety of the family. Doorways are usually carved with She totems, figures from myths and legends, or auspicious patterns, such as the dishrag, phoenix, dragon, etc., reflecting the cultural characteristics and national spirit of the She people.

She gatehouses are usually simple and generous in shape, mostly adopting the traditional Chinese architectural style, with wooden structures, giving people a sense of simplicity and elegance. The decorations are very exquisite, often carved with various patterns, such as flowers, birds, figures, landscapes, etc. These patterns are not only beautiful, but also contain rich cultural connotations. The bright colors of the She gatehouse, mostly in red, yellow, blue and other bright colors, which not only attract people's attention, but also reflect the passion and boldness of the She people.

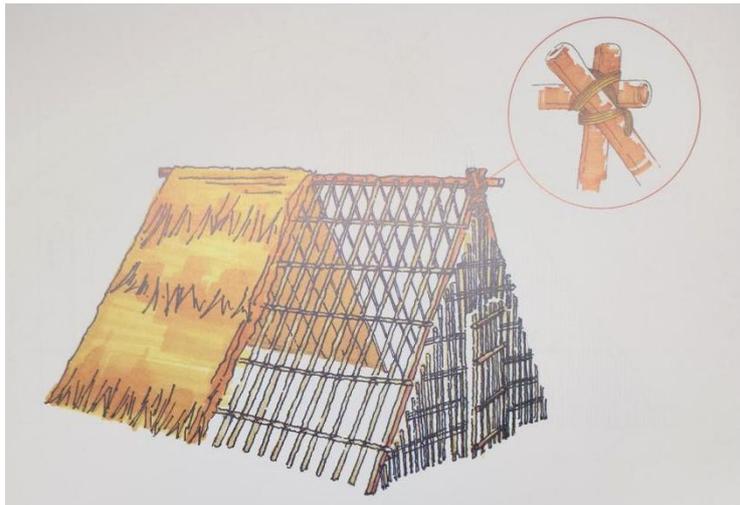
She gatehouse is not only an architectural form, but also an important carrier of She culture and a symbol of She family, which represents the honor and dignity of the family. In the She society, the scale and degree of decoration of the gatehouse are often directly proportional to the status and wealth of the family. It is a witness to the history of the She people, which records the migration, development and prosperity of the She people.

**Architectural decorations: wood carvings and relief carvings:** the halls of ancient She dwellings are tall and spacious, and the shrines and window panes are often decorated with wood carvings and relief carvings, and most of the carvings are of flowers, birds, fishes and insects, etc., which are of exquisite craftsmanship. Doorways, windows, pillars and other parts of She architecture are carved with various patterns, which are not only decorative but also contain profound cultural connotations. For example, the dragons, phoenixes and unicorns in the She architecture symbolize the aspiration and pursuit of a better life of the She people; while the plum blossoms, orchids and bamboo symbolize the noble quality and spiritual pursuit of the She people. The architectural style is simple and generous, blending in with the natural environment with high artistic value.

**Stone carvings:** The main gate and the patio will be decorated with stone carvings, and there will be a wall of illumination in front and a back wall of illumination in the back, which not only play an aesthetic role, but also reflect the cultural connotation of the She people.

**Corridor Bridge:** The She Corridor Bridge is a unique form of bridge created by the She people in their long-term production and life, with strong ethnic characteristics and cultural connotations. She corridor bridges are usually built between mountains and waters, and their sites, shapes and colors complement

the surrounding landscape and villages, blending with the surrounding natural environment to form a unique landscape. In the past, the corridor bridge was an important transportation facility in the She region, providing convenience for people's travel, and at the same time, the corridor bridge was also a place for people to rest, communicate and trade, which promoted local social interaction and economic development. Usually constructed of wood and stone, the bridges are built with porch houses for pedestrians to rest and take shelter from the rain. The unique architectural style of the corridor bridge, carved with various exquisite patterns, such as dragons and phoenixes, flowers and birds, and figures, reflects the artistic creativity and aesthetic concepts of the She people, their respect for nature and their pursuit of beauty, and has a high artistic value of the landscape. Even in modern times, the corridor bridge not only has practical value, but also has high artistic value, some corridor bridge is still a good place for local residents to relax and have fun, and it has a positive role in enhancing community cohesion and social harmony!



**Figure 6. She Thatched Cottage (Image Credit: Chinese Minority Design Complete Collection Compilation Committee (2019). The Complete Collection of Chinese Minority Designs. She . (Shanxi People's Publishing House.)**

#### **4. Discussion**

##### *4.1 The Value and Meaning of She Cultural Symbols in Guangdong Province*

The cohesive symbols of Guangdong She culture are the crystallization of the wisdom and creativity of the She people. Through the study of these symbols, the Guangdong She cultural symbols carry the historical memory of the She people and are an important source for the study of the history of the She people. Through the study of these symbols, we can understand the migration history, production and life style, and social system of the She people, which provides important clues and bases for the study of the history of the She people. Through the study of these symbols, the essence and characteristics of She culture can be better understood, and the inheritance and development of She culture can be

promoted. has important social value. These symbols can not only enhance the national pride and cohesion of the She people, but also promote the communication and integration among various ethnic groups.

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