

# Naxi Ethnic Group's Seven-Star Sheepskin Shawl: A Semiotic Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of economic globalisation, the process of modernisation has brought great challenges to the development of Chinese ethnic minority Naxi costumes while changing our lifestyles. Although the importance of traditional ethnic costumes as an important cultural heritage has attracted extensive attention from scholars at present, studies that explore traditional ethnic costumes in depth from a semiotic perspective are still relatively scarce. The seven-star sheepskin shawl is the most distinctive attire of the Naxi ethnic group. Beyond its practical functions of providing warmth and durability, as well as its decorative purpose, it encapsulates the rich historical and cultural significance of the Naxi people. This paper delves into the seven-star sheepskin shawl from a semiotic perspective, examining it at three levels: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Morris's semiotics consists of three integral parts: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Through the application of Morris's semiotic theory alongside case studies, this paper concludes that the Naxi seven-star shawl embodies stylistic art, cultural connotations, and functional categories. The objective of this paper is to deepen our comprehension of Naxi culture, aiding us in grasping the cultural significance concealed within the seven-star sheepskin shawl. Furthermore, it provides valuable insights and inspiration for contemporary dress design.

**Keywords:** *Naxi ethnic group, Ethnic costume, Seven-star sheepskin shawl, Semiotic analysis*

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnic costumes serve not only as people's daily attire but also as a symbolic system expressing national culture. They act as carriers of this culture, reflecting various aspects of social development, change, and ideological shifts. The Naxi people, as a distinctive ethnic minority, possess a unique artistic tradition and a rich history deeply rooted in traditional culture (Sang, 2021; Sun & Pan, 2019). The seven-star sheepskin shawl, as a highly prestigious and unique national characteristic of Naxi traditional dress, is one of the indispensable daily garments for Naxi women. The regional characteristics of the seven-star sheepskin shawl give the Naxi dress both a functional and decorative form of beauty (Ren & Shen, 2019). Studying it can further our understanding of the cultural characteristics and customs of their ethnicity, and it also holds important significance for the inheritance of their ethnic culture. In the backdrop of ongoing economic globalisation, the consumerist culture of Western societies has permeated China extensively. This cultural influence propagated through mediums such as clothing advertisements, apparel products, and multinational brands, has notably impacted residents, particularly those in developed regions and belonging to the middle and upper classes (Qi, 2022). This cultural convergence has not only affected the apparel industry but has cast its influence across various sectors, underscoring the increasing importance of exploring and safeguarding the distinctive national characteristics of culture.

Semiotics, as a vital methodology in contemporary social sciences and humanities, can comprehensively and creatively integrate information from various disciplines. It breaks down disciplinary boundaries, liberating the theoretical system from the constraints of separate disciplines. Modern semiotics, emerging in the 1960s based on modern linguistics, structuralism, and cultural anthropology, has become a prevalent interdisciplinary and comprehensive discipline (Abikenov & Kudaibergenov, 2022). While a substantial amount of recent semiotics design research has concentrated on areas like brand advertising, packaging design, and product creative design (Bambang et al., 2022; Hong & Shi, 2023; Vallverdu-Gordi & Marine-Roig, 2023), there has been a noticeable gap in applying semiotics to the study of ethnic costumes. Especially notable is the scarcity of scholarly endeavours focusing on semiotic analyses of the Naxi ethnic group's seven-star sheepskin shawl. It is crucial to use semiotics to study the Naxi seven-star sheepskin shawl, as it not only aids in unravelling the cultural connotations behind the garment but also establishes a theoretical foundation for the modern design of ethnic costumes.

Therefore, this study will explore the semiotics of the seven-star sheepskin shawl of the Naxi people. From a design perspective, the study will focus on the seven-star sheepskin shawl of the Naxi people, analysing it at three levels: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been thousands of years since the Naxi people emerged and developed from primitive society. As witnesses of history and inheritors of culture, the Naxi people possess splendid artistic and cultural treasures. In 2009, the Naxi traditional costume was listed on the World Intangible Cultural Heritage List, and since then, it has gradually attracted extensive attention from scholars (Wang, 2019). As an important part of China's minority cultures, Naxi costumes have distinctive ethnic characteristics and reflect the traditional customs and aesthetic concepts of the Naxi people.

Currently, academic research on Naxi costumes focuses on cultural symbolism, change, inheritance and protection, and the development of costumes (Yang, 2021). For example, Sang (2021) studied the historical background and cultural connotation of Naxi traditional costumes, exploring their evolution and characteristics by analysing the impact of productivity progress, totem culture, and geographic

environment. Shang and Wang (2021) took Naxi costumes as the object of their study, conducting field research to explore the history of the development of traditional Naxi costumes, their cultural connotation and morphological characteristics, and offering insights into the development of Naxi costume cultural heritage. The above literature shows that current research on Naxi costumes mainly focuses on aspects of change and development, craftsmanship, and cultural symbolism. However, as an important symbol of Naxi culture, there is still a lack of analyses of the patterns, colours, and symbolism of Naxi costumes from the perspective of semiotics.

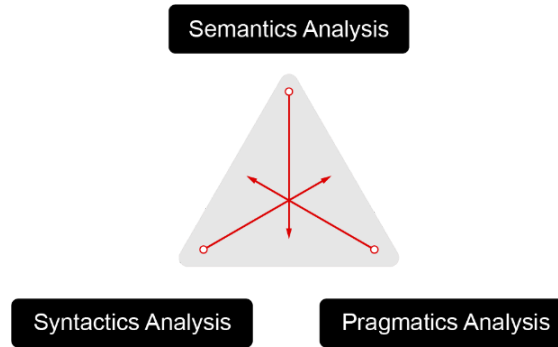
In addition, the seven-star sheepskin shawl, commonly known as 'wearing the star and the moon', has rich cultural connotations as a highly prestigious and unique national characteristic of the Naxi costume. As an important symbol of Naxi women's costumes, it is usually made from whole sheepskin, carefully selected from black or white sheep or goat skins. After cutting, the shawl presents a unique style in which the outline of the upper part is mainly square while the lower part is mainly curved. The shawl is wrapped around with a wide white band and knotted in front of the chest, with the entire piece draped on the back (Chen, 2005). The unique regional characteristics of the Naxi sheepskin shawl not only add practical functional value to the Naxi costume but also impart decorative artistic beauty. The integration of function and art into one form of dress is an important factor that has inspired people to explore and dedicate themselves to its inheritance.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Semiotic Theory

Semiotics has its roots in the Middle Ages, gaining significant theoretical frameworks in the early 19th century with the classifications proposed by American philosopher Peirce (1897): indicative, denotative, and symbolic. These classifications laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in semiotic theories. In the early 20th century, Swiss linguist Saussure introduced the concept of structuralist linguistics, which significantly influenced the trajectory of semiotics (Niu, 2020). In the mid-20th century, American scholar Morris (1971) further refined the semiotic system, elucidating the connections between linguistics, semiotics, and behaviour. Today, semiotics stands as a successful theoretical system that permeates various fields including culture, media, and the arts, providing a crucial theoretical foundation for diverse disciplines.

As a semiotics trailblazer, Morris posited that semiotics encompasses three dimensions: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). These dimensions are structured around the triadic relationship involving the sign vehicle, designatum, and interpretant, as depicted in Figure 1. It's noteworthy that Morris, in subsequent research, redefined pragmatics. He underscored the relationship between signs and sign interpreters, addressing the biological aspects of semiotics—specifically, delving into the psychological, biological, and social phenomena inherent in the role of signs. This redefinition laid the groundwork for the emergence and establishment of pragmatics (Niu & Dechsubha, 2022).



**Figure 1. Morris's three-dimensional model of semiotics**  
(Source: Author's drawing.)

To summarise, Morris's semiotic theory comprises three dimensions: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Within these dimensions, syntactics analyses various combinations of symbols, disregarding the specific meaning of symbols or their relationship to the behaviours they represent; semantics delves into the meaning of symbols across different representations; and pragmatics explores the origin, usage, and the roles symbols play when they manifest in behaviours. It's crucial to emphasise that Morris's semiotic theory not only establishes a theoretical foundation for the analysis and comprehension of symbols in design but also underscores the versatility of semiotics in diverse fields.

## Research Design

This study proposes to employ a semiotic analysis method using Morris's semiotic theory. Dress, as a representation of an ethnic group, is not merely a physical manifestation of ethnic culture but also functions as a symbolic system expressing that culture (Ermilova, 2020). Furthermore, the Naxi seven-star sheepskin shawl serves not only practical purposes like cold protection, durability, and decoration but also encapsulates the rich historical and cultural connotations of the Naxi ethnic group. Therefore, leveraging Morris Semiotics, this study aims to analyse the Naxi seven-star shawl through a case study, exploring the syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics dimensions. The purpose is to elucidate the stylistic art, cultural connotation, and functional scope of the Naxi seven-star shawl.

From the perspective of design Morris Semiotics, syntactics studies the formal composition between design symbols, involving formal aesthetics and structural theories such as modelling structure; semantics studies design symbols and their meanings, involving theories in design psychology; pragmatics studies the relationship between design symbols and their users, involving communication, behavioural and sociological aspects.

## FINDINGS

This section examines the Naxi seven-star sheepskin shawl through Morris's semiotics. Syntactics analysis covers style, pattern, and colour, while semantics explores totem worship and national beliefs. Pragmatics delves into the Naxi people's relationship with their cultural practices, detailed below.

## Syntactics Analysis

According to Morris's semiotic theory, syntactics composition studies the way symbols are combined into composite symbols (Niu, 2020). As one of the Naxi dress symbols, the seven-star sheepskin shawl is involved in the form of symbol composition as well as aesthetic and stylistic features. In the following, we will analyse the syntactics structure of the seven-star sheepskin shawl in terms of styles, patterns, and colour in turn.

### Styles

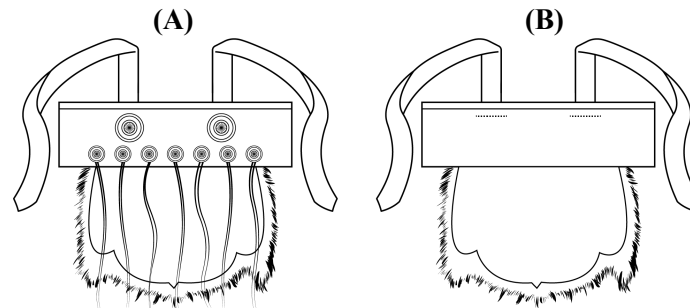
The seven-star sheepskin shawl is made of sheepskin and padded cloth sewn together, as shown in Figure 2. In terms of shape, the top one-third of the white sheepskin is covered with a rectangular black fabric, which is called the "sheepskin neck", or "you e jian" in Naxi. The upper edge of the sheepskin neck is symmetrically embellished with two pick embroidery embroidered with rows of auspicious motifs of the white cloth belt, these two cloth belts for the strap, the Naxi language called "you e huo", wear the sheepskin draped on the back, will be two long straps in front of the chest cross, and then circled back behind the lower end of the sheepskin fastened, as shown in Figure 2. On the lower edge of the sheepskin neck, seven small discs with a diameter of about ten centimetres are arranged in a line. These seven discs appear in the shape of a large circle within a small circle, hence the name "Seven Stars". Each "star" in the centre of each hanging two buckskin ropes, a total of 14, known as the "sheepskin beard", the Naxi language known as "you e beng". The lower edge of the white sheepskin is cut into a frog body shape comparable to the size of the human back is also an indispensable element of the seven-star sheepskin shawl.



**Figure 2. Seven-star sheepskin shawl wearing (A) Front view (B) Back view**  
(Source: Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology Museum.)

As shown in Figure 3, the style of the shawl is modelled in a T-shape, and the overall modelling contour presents the characteristics of roundness above and below and symmetry between left and right. There is a unique sense of rhythm: firstly, the shape is simple and interesting, balanced and symmetrical, the frog body at the bottom of the sheepskin is rounded, and the lines of the silhouette are hooked upwards from the two sides with a relatively small arc from top to bottom, and then continue to extend slowly downwards with a sharp corner, and finally pull out a small sharp corner downwards in the middle. The rounded arc contrasts with the sharp corner, giving the outline of the frog body of the shawl a certain tension and a strong sense of rhythm. Secondly, the combination of movement and static. The 14 thin

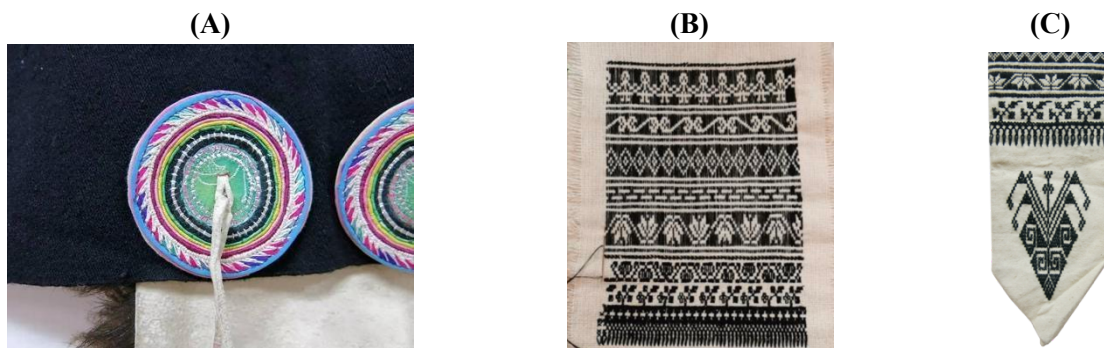
ropes on the "seven stars" will move with the movement of the person in the process of movement, which fully demonstrates the charm of the seven-star shawl.



**Figure 3. Seven-star sheepskin shawl style (A) Front view (B) Back view**  
(Source: Author's drawing.)

### Patterns

While the patterns of Naxi costumes exhibit richness and diversity, there are shared characteristics, specifically the integration of abstraction and figuration, along with neatness and orderliness (Li, 2019). As illustrated in Figure 4A, the "seven stars" feature concentric rings embroidered with radial patterns in coloured threads. The largest ring displays a swirling radial pattern, eventually encircled with coloured threads. The pattern elements within the "seven stars" are simple, yet through numerous repetitions and layers, the overall visual impression is straightforward yet not monotonous, and rich without being cluttered.



**Figure 4. Seven-star sheepskin shawl details. (A) "Seven stars" (B) Embroidery on straps (C) Bottom of straps**

(Source: Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology Museum.)

The tail of the white backstrap of the shawl is adorned with intricate embroidery featuring a small bipartite continuous pattern of rows, depicting hand-holding dance teams, balustrades, and flowers (Figure 4B). The large butterfly motif at the bottom is triangular, complementing the shape of the end of the fabric band (Figure 4C). The overall visual impression is symmetrical, balanced, and combines simplicity with richness.

## ***Colour***

In terms of colour, the front of the thickened rectangular piece of fabric in the upper part of the Seven Stars Shawl is generally crafted from a dense material in a more intense colour, such as black or dark blue. This creates a stark contrast with the white sheepskin in the lower part. The reverse side is typically lined with blue fabric, providing a strong contrast with the underside of the white sheepskin, which is made from black goat's wool. The two back straps are also in a pure white colour, contrasting with the darker pattern on the straps. There are no large blocks of extremely pure, bright colours; instead, there are small, colourful "seven stars" as accents. As a result, the entire shawl is simple and elegant, straightforward and substantial, with strong contrasts but without being ornate or cumbersome.

## **Semantics Analysis**

According to Morris's semiotic theory, semantics studies the meaning of symbols (Niu, 2020). As one of the symbols in Naxi attire, the seven-star sheepskin shawl is closely linked to the survival environment and the history and culture of the Naxi people. In the following sections, the semantics of the seven-star sheepskin shawl will be analyzed to the living environment of the Naxi people and the totem worship practices of the Naxi community.

## ***Naxi Living Environment***

The Qiang ethnic group, as the ancestors of the Naxi, resided in the Northwest Plateau of China, where animal husbandry was the predominant livelihood (Zhang, 2023). The cold climate of the Northwest Plateau is characteristic of plateau regions, making the skins and furs of sheep and cows highly sought-after materials for clothing. To adapt to a lifestyle of nomadic herding, conquest, and migration, their main clothing predominantly consisted of fur products. In the Tang and Song dynasties, both Naxi men and women "all wore sheepskin." Later, the Naxi people migrated to the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, which has a low-latitude plateau climate with large temperature differences between day and night, rainy summers, dry and windy winters, and strong ultraviolet radiation. Such a climate requires people to wear clothing with strong warmth and high heat absorption capacity. Sheepskin shawls, wool felt, and mainly black clothing colours are undoubtedly the most suitable clothing for this climate.

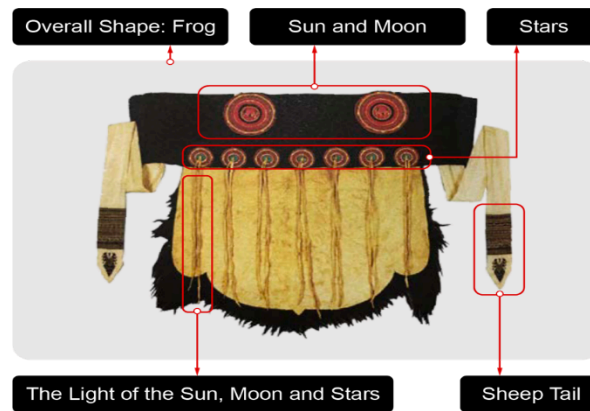
## ***Sheep Totem Worship***

The ancestors of the Naxi lived for an extended period in the highlands of northwest China and the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. The environmental conditions of these regions shaped the lifestyle of their ancestors, who were engaged in domesticating and herding sheep. In the uncomplicated life of ancient times, sheep served as a source for all their basic needs, providing sustenance and protection from the wind and cold. The close connection between the Naxi people's diet, clothing, and transportation with these animals led to their natural veneration of sheep as totems (Xue et al., 2021).

The Naxi people hold the belief in "San duo" (Li et al., 2020). "San duo" is considered the highest protective deity among the Naxi people, described in legend as riding a white horse, adorned in white armour, wearing a white helmet, and carrying a white spear. "San duo" is said to be born as a goat and serves as a shepherd, dedicated to safeguarding the Naxi people. The Naxi ancestors integrated the "san duo," representing protection and the sheep, combining both to enhance the spiritual power and strength of the "san duo." The manifestation of the sheep totem in the seven-star shawl is evident in the two straps



of the shawl. As depicted in Figure 5, the back strap of the seven-star sheepskin shawl vividly simulates a sheep's tail.



**Figure 5. Seven-star sheepskin shawl totem.**  
(Source: Author's drawing.)

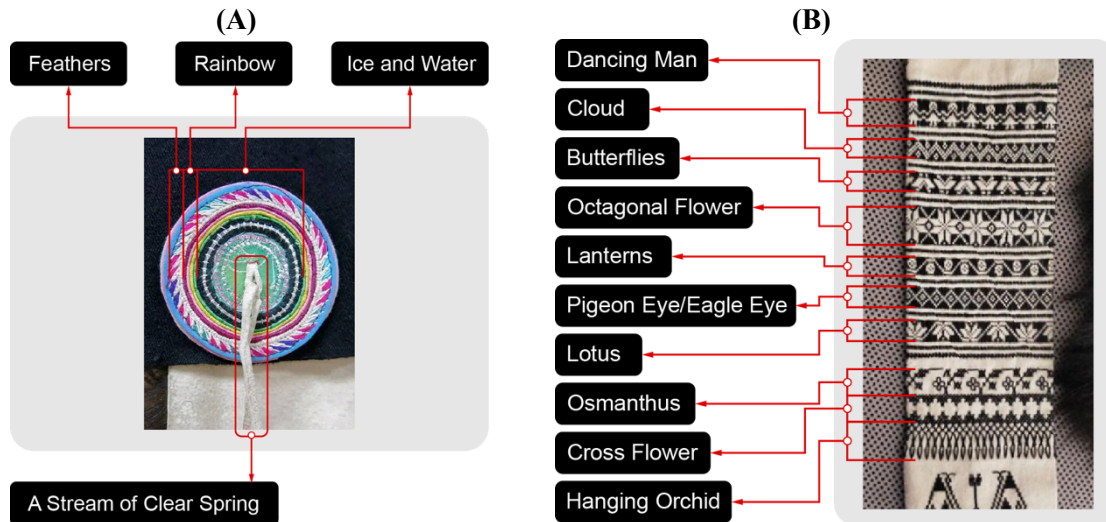
### ***Frog Totem Worship***

In Naxi folklore, frogs are considered the first creatures to emerge in the world, and the Naxi people refer to them as "wisdom frogs," symbolising wisdom (Qin, 2019). The sheepskin eyes of the shawl can be interpreted as the eyes of the frog. When combined with the shape of the frog's body at the hem, it gives the appearance of a frog lying on the back of a person, guarding them (Figure 5). According to folklore, the "mei li dong a jin shan" god, intended to bestow wisdom water upon the beings of the world. However, due to a miscommunication by crows, people ended up drinking the wisdom water. In response, numerous birds and beasts descended to pluck hairs from the man's body. While enduring the attack, the frog cleverly licked up the remaining wisdom water at the bottom of the bowl. With ingenuity, the frog feigned panic, pointing to the river and claiming that the wisdom water had been poured into it. Subsequently, the frog jumped into the river as if to drink the water, luring away the birds and beasts and rescuing the humans. In gratitude for the frog's rescue, the sheepskin shawl was cut into the shape of the frog's body—a token of respect for the frog. This tradition has been passed down through generations and has evolved into the unique aesthetic interest the Naxi people hold for this attire today.

### ***Celestial Worship***

The sheepskin eyes on the seven-star shawl symbolise the sun and the moon, while the seven small discs represent the seven stars. This signifies Naxi women metaphorically "carrying the sun and the moon on their shoulders, and the stars on their backs," celebrating the virtue of Naxi women's hard work from morning to evening. The 14 thin ropes on the "seven stars" symbolise the light of the stars, connoting the meanings of light and warmth (Figure 5). The "seven stars" motif on the shawl is intricately crafted, typically in the form of a sunburst pattern. The details hold traditional significance, with the outer circle representing the feather, the inner circle symbolising a rainbow, the blue colour on the inner side representing ice and water, and the sheepskin whiskers on the inner side. These elements not only symbolise the rays of the stars but also suggest a clear spring in the water (Figure 6A).





**Figure 6. Seven-star sheepskin shawl totem (A) "Seven stars" (B) Embroidery on straps**  
*Source: Author's drawing.)*

### ***Totem Worship of Other Motifs***

The pattern elements on the backstrap are rich, including animal patterns, plant patterns, celestial patterns and figure patterns, mostly common elements in life. Figure 6B shows the pattern of the Naxi seven-star sheepskin shawl straps, from top to bottom the 1st row of Naxi beating jumps, Naxi beating jumps are neat, requiring everyone to be in step. The 2nd row is a cloud pattern. The 3rd row is a small butterfly. There is a Naxi proverb that says: work as hard as a bee to live as beautiful as a butterfly. Therefore, the butterflies highlight the female people's inner expectations of life. The 4th row is the octagonal flower. The 5th row is a lantern, which symbolises a prosperous life. The 6th row is interpreted as pigeon's eyes or eagle's eyes, because Naxi embroidery is passed down from mother to daughter, and the understanding and interpretation of each pattern varies from region to region of the Naxi people. The 7th row is the lotus flower, a motif of Tibetan Buddhism, which the Naxi people believe in. The 8th row is the osmanthus flower, which means gold and jade. The 9th row is the crocus flower, which is very common in Tibetan areas and is also used by the Naxi because of its proximity to Tibetan areas. The 10th row is a hanging orchid, meaning a good harvest.

### **Pragmatics Analysis**

According to Morris's semiotics theory, pragmatics studies the effects of symbols (Niu, 2020). As one of the Naxi dress symbols, the seven-star sheepskin shawl has a close relationship between it and its users. In the following, the discourse use of the seven-star sheepskin shawl will be analysed sequentially in terms of protecting the Naxi people as well as beautifying the Naxi people.

### ***Protecting the Naxi***

The Naxi seven-star shawl is used in the body, and not only has the practical function of protecting the body but also the function of spiritual protection (Qiu et al., 2023). Naxi women carry heavy loads on their backs when they work, and use sheepskin to protect their backs, effectively reducing the damage

caused by the heavy loads, which is why the Naxi women's "seven-star shawls" are both aesthetically pleasing and have a practical function. In addition to its powerful functionality, after the degradation of its functionality, the shawl eventually rose to a spiritual level. Hanging totems and motifs on the body naturally creates a spiritual protective function. The shape of the imitation frog is a kind of protection by totem worship.

### ***Beautifying the Naxi***

The combination of totem and clothing has a significant decorative function and increases the beauty of clothing. The expression of formal beauty is important in clothing design, which not only expresses the basic laws of clothing design but also the basic laws that art should follow (Xie & Xiao, 2019). The seven-star shawl, on the other hand, fully embodies the Naxi people's incessant pursuit of beauty. The unique shape of the seven-star sheepskin shawl adds to the overall silhouette of the Naxi dress with its unique ethnic characteristics. For the "seven-star shawl", this pursuit is not only reflected in the form but also the pursuit of inner beauty, spiritual beauty. Just as the Naxi people worship the sun, moon and stars on the totem object sheepskin, reflecting the Naxi people's traditional virtues of "wearing the stars and the moon" and "hard-working and courageous".

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, the author uses Morris's semiotics theory to analyse the Naxi seven-star sheepskin shawl in terms of syntactics, semantics and pragmatics, and the results of the study show that the Naxi seven-star sheepskin shawl, as a kind of dress symbol, is reflected in the plastic art, cultural connotation and functional scope. To be specific, in the syntactics analysis, the seven-star sheepskin shawl exhibits a distinctive form and rhythm. Its left-right symmetry and simple design convey an overall sense of simplicity and elegance. The frog body contour adds tension and a dynamic rhythm to the shawl. The 14 thin ropes on the "seven stars" enhance its movement, contributing to the shawl's dynamic quality. The predominant solid colour imparts a sense of simplicity and weightiness, while the balanced and symmetrical local embellishments, rich in patterns, showcase the unique form of the seven-star sheepskin shawl with rhythmic elegance. In the semantic analysis, the seven-star sheepskin shawl not only reflects the Naxi people's reverence for animals, plants, celestial bodies, and figures but also conveys profound meanings and good wishes. In the pragmatic analysis, the relationship between the seven-star sheepskin shawl and the Naxi people is explored to delve into its practical protective function and aesthetic role. In general, clothing is not only a mere symbol but also has the deep connotation of its ethnic culture and its physical and spiritual functions behind the symbol.

This study not only helps researchers understand the cultural connotations behind the seven-star sheepskin shawl but also offers valuable insights and inspiration for modern costume design. Future research should explore the semiotic analysis of Naxi traditional costumes in a more comprehensive and in-depth manner. This approach can provide a more systematic understanding of the composition of Naxi traditional costumes and the meanings they imply, as well as offer theoretical guidance and a scientific basis for cultural protection and inheritance. Importantly, it can provide designers with new perspectives and fresh thinking to examine traditional costumes, aiming to translate the expressions, meanings, and spirits of traditional costumes into the language of modern costume design, thereby enriching modern costumes with deeper meanings and diverse forms of expression.

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