



THE BOOK OF SONGS AND HEALTH CULTURE: INSIGHTS FOR MODERN LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Health preservation culture is an important component of traditional Chinese civilization. The Book of Songs, as the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, records early Chinese views on nature, life, diet, labor, and emotional well-being. However, limited studies have explored its health preservation wisdom from a multidimensional perspective and its relevance to modern life. **Objective:** This study aims to examine the historical development of The Book of Songs, explore its embedded health preservation wisdom, and investigate its implications for contemporary lifestyles. **Method:** A qualitative approach was employed using qualitative content analysis. Relevant textual materials, including The Book of Songs and related studies, were analyzed to identify and interpret health-related themes. **Results:** The findings reveal that The Book of Songs embodies a multidimensional health preservation culture grounded in harmony with nature and longevity ideals. Key dimensions include medical health preservation, dietary therapy, residential wellness, physical activity, and emotional regulation. A Health Preservation Framework from The Book of Songs was proposed to explain these interrelated dimensions. **Conclusion:** The study suggests that the health wisdom in The Book of Songs remains relevant to modern healthy lifestyles and contributes to the contemporary understanding of traditional Chinese health culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese health preservation, developed to prevent illness and prolong life, has been known by various names, with “yangsheng” being the most common, also referred to as shesheng, daosheng, weisheng, and baosheng. The term “yang” signifies maintenance and protection, while “sheng” refers to life. In essence, yangsheng aims to sustain and enhance human vitality. The term first appeared in the Spring and Autumn period in Guanzi. From an academic perspective, health preservation is rooted in Daoist thought. The Dao De Jing refers to it as shesheng, while later texts such as the Zhuangzi adopted the term “yangsheng.” The formal establishment of health preservation theory is marked by the emergence of Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon).

Health preservation culture has become an enduring cultural phenomenon in China. The Book of Songs, as the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, not only reflects “the Chinese way of life” but also serves as an important source for understanding the early stages of traditional Chinese health preservation theory (Wang, 2002)^[9] Compiled from the early Western Zhou to the mid-Spring and Autumn period (11th–6th century BCE), it consists of Feng (Airs), Ya (Eulogies), and Song (Hymns), containing 305 poems that reflect social life, customs, labor, rituals, and moral values.

The agricultural poems in The Book of Songs illustrate reliance on farming and harmony with natural rhythms, reflecting wisdom in coexistence with nature. The text also presents an objective view of life and death while expressing a strong desire for health and longevity. Moreover, it preserves early health-related concepts, including preventive awareness, balanced diet, emotional regulation, physical labor, and lifestyle practices.

Several studies have examined health preservation in The Book of Songs. Xie (2006)^[11] explored diet, emotional well-being, and longevity, while Yan et al. (2012)^[12] analyzed dietary health culture. Song and Huang (2010)^[8] discussed life philosophy and physical health. However, most previous studies treat The Book of Songs mainly as a historical or literary source and focus on isolated aspects rather than a multidimensional framework of health preservation culture. Therefore, this study applies qualitative content analysis to explore the health wisdom embedded in The Book of Songs and its relevance to modern life.

2. OBJECTIVES

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical background and development of The Book of Songs.
2. To explore the health preservation wisdom embedded in The Book of Songs and expand the scope of research on traditional health culture.
3. To investigate the insights offered by The Book of Songs for contemporary health practices and modern lifestyles.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The health preservation concepts in The Book of Songs are briefly addressed in health preservation histories and textbooks discussing pre-Qin practices. However, several academic studies have specifically

focused on this area. For example, in A Discussion on Health Preservation Thought in the Book of Songs (Xie, 2006)^[11] Taiwanese scholar Xie Xiuzhi provides a modern, poetic interpretation of the text, highlighting organic diet, emotional cultivation, and the role of moral virtue in promoting longevity. Similarly, A Study of Dietary and Health Culture in the Book of Songs by Yan Maohua et al (Yan et al., 2012)^[12] Offers an in-depth examination of dietary health preservation. In Concepts of Life in the Book of Songs and Their Implications for Physical Health Preservation (Song & Huang, 2010)^[8] Song Yingdong and co-authors explore the philosophical views of life in the poems and their relevance to physical health.

In addition to studies directly related to The Book of Songs, recent scholarship on traditional Chinese medicine and health culture provides a useful background for this study. Zhang et al. (2024)^[14] emphasized that traditional Chinese medicine culture is associated with health literacy and health practices, suggesting that health-related cultural knowledge remains relevant to contemporary life. Similarly, research on yangsheng describes it as a holistic approach to well-being involving physical, emotional, and environmental dimensions (Ng et al., 2024)^[6] which is consistent with the multidimensional health ideas reflected in The Book of Songs.

From a methodological perspective, qualitative content analysis provides an appropriate approach for examining meanings embedded in classical texts. Hsieh and Shannon (2005)^[3]; Elo and Kyngäs (2008)^[1] highlighted its usefulness for identifying themes and categorizing textual meanings, while Krippendorff (2018)^[4] regarded content analysis as a systematic technique for interpreting textual materials. These studies support the use of qualitative content analysis in examining health preservation wisdom in The Book of Songs.

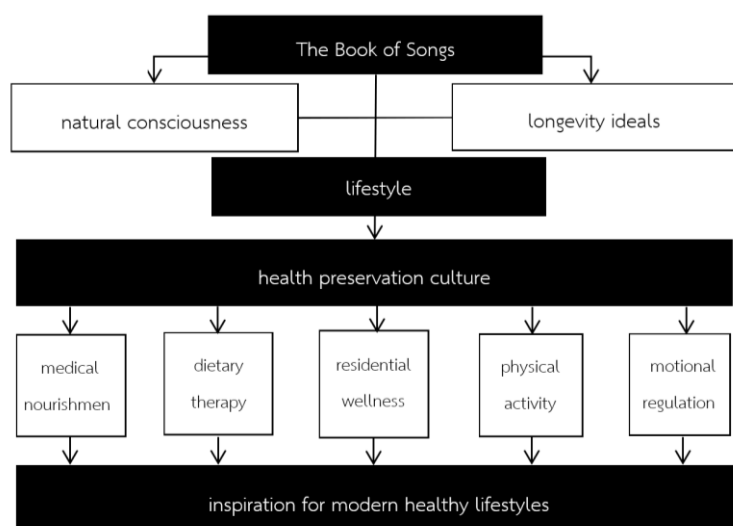
Although previous studies have explored health-related content in The Book of Songs from historical and cultural perspectives, most focus on isolated aspects such as diet, plants, or longevity. Few studies have systematically examined its health preservation wisdom through a multidimensional framework or explored its implications for modern healthy lifestyles. Therefore, further academic exploration remains necessary.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study. The framework illustrates how The Book of Songs serves as the primary cultural and textual foundation for health preservation wisdom. Through the dimensions of natural consciousness and longevity ideals, the text shapes a lifestyle-oriented understanding of well-being, which further develops into a broader health preservation culture. This culture is reflected in multiple aspects of daily life, including medical health preservation, dietary therapy, residential wellness, physical activity, and emotional regulation. Ultimately, these interconnected dimensions provide valuable inspiration for modern healthy lifestyles and contemporary approaches to well-being.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Source: Constructed by researcher

5. METHODOLOGY

1. Literature Review Method

The literature review method serves as the primary research approach in this study. By consulting relevant sources-such as the original text of The Book of Songs, annotated editions, and academic papers-this method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the health preservation culture reflected in the text, including its content, characteristics, and the underlying historical and cultural context. In addition, the study incorporates contemporary theories and methodologies from modern health preservation disciplines to interpret and analyze the wisdom embedded in The Book of Songs.

2. Qualitative Content Analysis

This study adopts qualitative content analysis as an analytical approach to systematically examine the health preservation wisdom embedded in The Book of Songs. Through close reading and textual interpretation of the poems, health-related content is identified, categorized, and interpreted according to recurring themes and meanings. The analysis focuses on major dimensions of health preservation reflected in the text, including harmony with nature, longevity ideals, dietary practices, medicinal knowledge, residential well-being, physical activity, and emotional regulation.

By organizing and interpreting these themes within their historical and cultural context, the study seeks to reveal how health preservation concepts were embedded in daily life during the pre-Qin period. Furthermore, the findings are interpreted in relation to contemporary health practices in order to explore the relevance and practical value of The Book of Songs for modern lifestyles.

6. RESULTS

The Book of Songs, as a literary masterpiece of the pre-Qin period, documents the social customs and everyday life of the people at the time. It reflects a deep sense of reverence and respect for nature, highlighting the importance of natural laws and the wisdom of harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world. It also conveys an objective understanding of the life cycle and human mortality, along with a profound pursuit of health and longevity. The health-related information and knowledge embedded in The Book of Songs faithfully mirror the lived realities of that era, demonstrating its unique research value in the context of health preservation culture. These insights offer valuable inspiration for modern life and contemporary approaches to well-being.

1.The History and Development of The Book of Songs

The Book of Songs marks the beginning of ancient Chinese poetry and stands as the earliest anthology of Chinese verse. It compiles poems from the early Western Zhou to the mid-Spring and Autumn period (11th century BCE to 6th century BCE), reflecting approximately five centuries of social life from the early to late Zhou dynasty. These works were primarily composed in regions along the Yellow River, extending south to the northern banks of the Yangtze River and covering present-day provinces such as Shaanxi, Gansu, Shanxi, Shandong, Hebei, Henan, Anhui, and Hubei

The authorship of The Book of Songs remains largely anonymous and untraceable. It is traditionally attributed to the collection efforts of Yin Jifu (ca. 852–775 BCE) and the editorial work of Confucius (551–479 BCE). During the pre-Qin period, it was known simply as The Book of Poems (Shi) or referred to by its total count as The Three Hundred Poems. In the Western Han dynasty, it was formally elevated as a Confucian classic and renamed The Book of Songs (Shijing), a title that has endured to this day.

The content of The Book of Songs is divided into three sections: Feng (Airs), Ya (Eulogies), and Song (Hymns). In terms of poetic techniques, it employs fu (straightforward narration), bi (metaphor), and xing (evocative imagery). The Feng poems are folk songs collected from various regions under the Zhou rule; Ya consists of courtly music in both Minor Ya and Major Ya subsections; and Song comprises ceremonial hymns used in ancestral sacrifices of the Zhou royal court and the noble clans, further divided into Zhou Song, Lu Song, and Shang Song.

Rich in content, The Book of Songs reflects all facets of Zhou society, including labor and love, warfare and conscription, oppression and resistance, customs and marriage, ancestral worship and banquets, as well as astronomical phenomena, geographical features, flora, and fauna. It serves as a mirror of the times and a comprehensive record of social life in the Zhou dynasty (Han,2021)^[2]

Confucius once summarized the moral essence of The Book of Songs as “without depravity” (uxia) and encouraged his disciples to study it as a foundation for proper speech and conduct. Numerous pre-Qin philosophers cited verses from the text to support their arguments, including Mencius (372–289 BCE), Xunzi (313–238 BCE), Mozi (476–390 BCE), Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE), and Han Feizi (280–233 BCE). During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, The Book of Songs was officially canonized by Confucian scholars and became one of the Six Classics and later the Five Classics.

As the origin of Chinese realist literature, The Book of Songs played a foundational role in shaping Chinese literary tradition and the cultural identity of the Chinese people.

2. Health Preservation Wisdom in The Book of Songs

2.1 Awareness of Harmony with Nature

As a cultural treasure of ancient China, The Book of Songs preserves a wide range of folk poetry from the pre-Qin period, offering vivid insights into the society and daily life of the time. Among its many themes, the awareness of living in harmony with nature is deeply embedded in the text. This awareness reflects not only the ancient people's reverence and respect for the natural world, but also reveals a profound sense of ecological aesthetics (Li, 2007)^[5]

Nature-centered thinking is a recurring concept throughout The Book of Songs, embodying the ancient Chinese aesthetic ideal of the “unity of man and nature” (tian ren he yi). The ancients valued nature, honored its rhythms, and adapted their lives accordingly believing that respectful coexistence with nature would bring abundant rewards. This worldview is evident not only in poetic depictions of the natural environment, but also in the lifestyles of early communities. Agriculture was central to their livelihood, supplemented by fishing and hunting, reflecting an intimate and dependent relationship with the natural world. Such proximity fostered a spontaneous ecological awareness and a way of life that was deeply attuned to environmental harmony.

2.2 The Prevalence of Longevity Ideals

From a developmental perspective, the formation of health preservation concepts has been a dynamic process. Yet, the precise point at which human beings moved beyond instinctual survival to a conscious pursuit of longevity remains uncertain. Based on the content of The Book of Songs, by at least the Zhou dynasty, people had already developed a relatively objective understanding of life and death. For example, in Minor Court Hymns – Chang Di, the phrase “the threat of death and mourning” conveys an acute awareness of mortality. In Tang Airs – Ge Sheng, the line “after one hundred years, return to one's chamber” suggests an awareness of the natural lifespan being about a century. In Cao Airs – Mayfly, the poet uses the ephemeral life of the mayfly to evoke the fleeting beauty of existence and the anxiety of inevitable decline, lamenting the brevity of life.

While expressing grief and lamentation, these poems also reveal the ancients' deep yearning for health and longevity, which had already become a widespread cultural sentiment. Numerous lines in The Book of Songs reflect this desire, such as: “may your long life not be forgotten” (Qin Airs – Zhongnan), “why not live ten thousand years?” (Cao Airs – The Dove), “this spring wine is offered for lasting longevity” (Bin Airs – July), “may your brow remain long-lived, your old age boundless” (Shang Hymns – Glorious Ancestor), “may this bring enduring longevity, and let it be forever safeguarded” (Zhou Hymns – In Full View), “you are divined to have boundless life” (Minor Court Hymns – Heavenly Protection), and “in return, I bestow great blessings and endless longevity” (Minor Court Hymns – Abundant Fields).

Across the entire collection of The Book of Songs, the phrase “ten thousand years” appears 13 times, “longevity” 3 times, “boundless longevity” 6 times, “long-lived brow” 7 times, and “long life and completion” 8 times. Expressions such as wan nian (ten thousand years), mei shou (long-lived brow), and

shou kao (longevity and completion) recur throughout the text. This clearly shows that the value placed on long life was already deeply rooted in society at the time. Longevity was not only a common blessing but also a central goal and motivation of health preservation practices. These references reflect the ancient people's earnest hope and pursuit of a long and healthy life.

3.The Practical Expression of Health Preservation Culture in The Book of Songs

In ancient China, people lived according to the natural rhythm of “working at sunrise and resting at sunset,” a lifestyle that deeply shaped the inseparable relationship between humans and nature. As the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, The Book of Songs faithfully records the Zhou dynasty's perspectives on longevity and life. Through recurring expressions of blessings for longevity and aspirations for enduring life, the text reflects society's emphasis on the continuation of life and the stability of social order. These notions not only demonstrate respect for life itself but also embody the core values and cultural traditions of that historical period.

From the standpoint of documented historical evidence, as early as the Shang dynasty, the concepts of disease prevention and health maintenance were already widely practiced. During illness or childbirth, people often prayed to ancestral deities for protection. They also frequently sought omens regarding health and well-being, performing various rituals to ward off misfortune. Oracle bone inscriptions from the Shang period contain references to personal hygiene (such as bathing and washing) and public sanitation (such as large-scale cleanups referred to as “kou jing”).

By the time of the Zhou dynasty, as reflected in The Book of Songs-spanning from the late Shang to the mid-Spring and Autumn period-the cultural connotations of health preservation had grown more comprehensive and diversified. These practices came to include multiple dimensions such as medical health preservation, dietary therapy, residential well-being, physical activity, and emotional regulation.

3.1 Medical Health Preservation in The Book of Songs

The origins and development of traditional Chinese medical health preservation closely parallel the period in which The Book of Songs was compiled. As such, the text contains a wealth of content related to early medical health practices, particularly through its frequent references to natural substances. Confucius (551 – 479 BCE) once remarked that studying The Book of Songs enables one to “become familiar with the names of birds, beasts, and plants” (Kong, ca. 463 BCE). Indeed, the text includes numerous references to plants that could serve medicinal purposes, making it one of the earliest extant sources to record specific pharmacological materials.

Among the 305 poems in The Book of Songs, there are references to as many as 152 different plant species. Some entries even note details such as the appropriate time for collection, distinctive characteristics, places of origin, and suitable seasons for use. Although the herbal knowledge presented in the text is relatively scattered, rudimentary, and lacks systematic precision, it authentically reflects the practical health preservation experiences of ancient Chinese society

While The Book of Songs rarely contains direct descriptions of using medicinal herbs for disease prevention or treatment, its poetic language often reveals implicit information about early health-related

knowledge. These scattered insights provide valuable glimpses into the foundational stages of traditional Chinese medicine and health culture (Wen, 1991)^[10]

3.2 Dietary Health Preservation in The Book of Songs

The concept of dietary health preservation in The Book of Songs is primarily reflected in the careful selection and balanced combination of foods. By this period, the food supply had become relatively stable and diverse, allowing people to move beyond the mere satisfaction of basic hunger toward more health-conscious and beneficial dietary choices. Traditional dietary practices emphasized a structure centered on staple grains, complemented by vegetables, meat, and fish—an approach consistent with the dietary health principles later articulated in the Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon).

Additionally, The Book of Songs highlights the dietary philosophy of “harmony as the ideal,” advocating for the balancing of the five flavors and nutritional moderation. This focus on culinary harmony aimed to support the body’s well-being and maintain internal balance, thereby achieving the purpose of health preservation (Yang, 2011)^[13]

3.3 Residential Health Preservation in The Book of Songs

The concept of residential health preservation in The Book of Songs is primarily reflected in the selection of housing sites and attention to environmental hygiene. In ancient times, people recognized that the choice of dwelling location should support physical well-being. Beyond proximity to water sources and farmland, environmental factors affecting human health were also taken into account. For instance, in Major Court Hymns – Gong Liu, the line “observe the balance of yin and yang, examine the flowing springs” illustrates the importance placed on favorable site conditions for human habitation.

Moreover, The Book of Songs also acknowledges the significance of environmental cleanliness. In Bin Ais – July, the description “fumigate to drive away mice, seal entrances with clay” depicts practices of using smoke to eliminate rodent infestations and maintain sanitary living conditions. These examples reflect early awareness of health-oriented living environments in Zhou society.

3.4 Physical Health Preservation through Labor and Exercise in The Book of Songs

In The Book of Songs, physical health preservation is primarily embodied in the emphasis on labor and physical activity as a means of maintaining well-being. For example, in Zhou South – Ju Ears, the line “Let me pour the rhinoceros-horn cup, only to ease lasting sorrow” reflects the importance of rest and relaxation after hard work. Similarly, in the poem Kan Kan Fells the Trees, the vivid depiction of tireless woodcutters diligently felling trees illustrates labor as a form of physical exercise.

Through such physical exertion, individuals were able to strengthen their bodies, enhance resilience, and prevent illness—ultimately achieving the goals of health preservation. These examples show that the ancient understanding of physical health was closely tied to daily work and bodily engagement with the environment.

3.5 Emotional Regulation and Mental Well-being in The Book of Songs

Emotional health preservation in The Book of Songs is primarily reflected in the pursuit of inner peace and harmonious coexistence. People of the time regulated emotions and released tension through singing, dancing, and other expressive activities as a means of maintaining well-being. As all the poems in

The Book of Songs were originally intended to be sung, they functioned as performable lyrics. Through musical expression, individuals could achieve emotional release, mental clarity, and renewed vitality-facilitating emotional balance and inner calm.

The text also emphasizes the importance of mental tranquility and acceptance of natural rhythms. For instance, in Minor Court Hymns – Che Xia, the lines “There are tall trees in the south, but one cannot rest beneath them; there are graceful women by the Han, yet one should not yearn for them” illustrate the value placed on following the natural order and not forcing desires. This reflects an early understanding of emotional restraint and alignment with nature as essential to mental and physical health.

Figure 2

Stone relief depicting music, dance, and banqueting scenes. Eastern Han Dynasty, Chengdu Museum.



Source: <https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/5044281310/12ca99fde02001st8p>

4. The Relevance of Health Preservation Culture in The Book of Songs to Modern Life

As the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, The Book of Songs not only preserves a wealth of historical and cultural heritage but also embodies profound health preservation wisdom. In the context of today's fast-paced lifestyle, how can we draw upon the essence of health culture from The Book of Songs to enhance modern quality of life?

4.1 The Book of Songs presents a health preservation culture with rich cultural depth and historical significance. As a treasured work of ancient Chinese civilization, its study offers valuable insights into traditional health concepts and practices. Through in-depth analysis of its health-related content, we gain access to the ancient wisdom of well-being, which can serve as a meaningful reference for promoting healthier lifestyles in the present day.

4.2 The health preservation culture in The Book of Songs shares intrinsic connections and complementarity with modern health practices. By interpreting and applying its content through a contemporary lens, we find notable parallels and integrations between ancient health wisdom and modern theories and methods. This suggests that combining traditional insights from The Book of Songs with modern

health approaches can contribute to more comprehensive and scientifically informed strategies for well-being.

4.3 The study and promotion of health culture in The Book of Songs play a significant role in the transmission and revitalization of traditional culture. Such efforts help strengthen cultural confidence and national identity, while also supporting the continuity and innovation of cultural heritage. Integrating the health preservation values of The Book of Songs with the needs and realities of modern society can infuse them with new vitality and relevance, allowing this ancient wisdom to shine anew in contemporary life.

7. DISCUSSIONS

The findings indicate that The Book of Songs embodies a multidimensional form of health preservation culture rooted in daily life, natural adaptation, and the pursuit of longevity. The results reveal that early health preservation in the pre-Qin period was not limited to medical treatment but was closely associated with natural consciousness, dietary habits, residential environment, physical activity, emotional regulation, and moral values. In this sense, health preservation in The Book of Songs reflects a lifestyle-oriented understanding of well-being that was deeply integrated into agricultural society and everyday practice.

The findings are generally consistent with previous scholarship on health preservation thought in The Book of Songs. For example, Xie (2006)^[11] emphasized the relationship between moral cultivation, emotional well-being, and longevity, which aligns with the present study's finding that emotional regulation and harmony with nature were regarded as essential dimensions of health preservation. Similarly, Yan et al. (2012) argued that dietary culture in The Book of Songs reflects an early awareness of nutritional balance and food selection. This is consistent with the present study, which identifies dietary therapy as one of the core practical expressions of health preservation culture. These similarities suggest that health preservation in The Book of Songs was already systematic in practice, despite the absence of later formal medical theories.

However, this study also differs from some earlier studies in several ways. Previous research has tended to focus on isolated aspects such as medicinal plants, dietary practices, or literary symbolism, often treating health-related content as supplementary historical evidence. In contrast, the present study adopts a qualitative content analysis perspective and proposes a Health Preservation Framework from The Book of Songs to systematically explain the interrelationship among natural consciousness, longevity ideals, and practical health dimensions. Therefore, rather than viewing health preservation merely as fragmented cultural knowledge, this study interprets it as an integrated cultural system that continues to provide meaningful inspiration for contemporary healthy lifestyles and holistic well-being.

8. ORIGINALITY AND BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

This study draws on authoritative annotated editions of The Book of Songs, relevant academic papers, monographs, and contemporary materials on health preservation as essential references. By reviewing the current state of research and its developmental trends, the study establishes a theoretical



foundation and source of comparison. It conducts a more in-depth analysis and interpretation of the health preservation concepts embedded in The Book of Songs.

Previous studies have typically approached the topic from narrow disciplinary angles, often citing the text merely as illustrative material. Few have examined the health culture of The Book of Songs from the perspective of lived experience or its relevance to modern life. This study thus fills a scholarly gap by using daily life as a central thread. The following are the key contributions and findings:

1. Revealing the health preservation wisdom in The Book of Songs

This study aims to uncover the underlying health-related principles and philosophies in the text, offering practical references for healthier modern living.

2. Expanding the research scope of health preservation culture

By engaging with The Book of Songs, the study broadens the scope of traditional Chinese medicine and health preservation studies, providing new theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.

3. Promoting the transmission and development of traditional culture

This research not only deepens our understanding of the cultural significance of traditional health practices but also contributes to the continued inheritance and innovation of traditional culture, reinforcing cultural confidence and a sense of national identity.

9. RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

First, further analysis is recommended to deepen the understanding of the concepts of nature and health preservation embodied in The Book of Songs. Through close textual interpretation of natural imagery and depictions of flora and fauna, one can uncover the ancient reverence for nature and explore how this worldview informed early health practices.

Second, the philosophy of life and its relevance to mental well-being in The Book of Songs deserves closer examination. The text's reflections on emotional expression and attitudes toward life can offer insight into how ancient people maintained psychological balance. These ideas may hold practical value today, particularly in exploring how poetic recitation and emotional expression can help alleviate modern psychological stress.

Finally, it is essential to explore the modern application of health preservation principles found in The Book of Songs. By integrating its wisdom into contemporary health practices-such as dietary habits, leisure activities, and emotional regulation-we may develop innovative strategies to promote holistic well-being and a balanced lifestyle suited to modern conditions.

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