Local Knowledge, Educational Equity, Epistemic Justice, and Pedagogical Agency among Miao-speaking Rural Women in China

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Abstract

Educational equity in adult education concerns not only access to learning opportunities but also whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate. This qualitative case study examines how rural Miao-speaking women's local knowledge was recognised, translated, and repositioned within an adult education programme in rural southwest China. Drawing on 28 interviews with 24 participants, including four follow-up interviews, five observations, and programme documents, the study analyses a training initiative combining traditional weaving, herbal wellness, rural revitalisation, and intangible cultural heritage. The findings show that women's knowledge became educationally legitimate when translated into teachable curricula, market-oriented skills, public demonstrations, and measurable outcomes. The article develops the concept of conditional recognition to describe a form of epistemic inclusion in which the terms of recognition remain shaped by institutional legibility, economic value, and assessment requirements. Although the programme expanded learning opportunities and strengthened women's pedagogical agency, it marginalised embodied, relational, and culturally situated knowledge that resisted institutional translation. Educational equity requires not only participation but also greater knowledge-holder authority over curriculum, validation, and evaluation.

Keywords: educational equity; adult education; rural minority women; Miao women; epistemic justice; pedagogical agency

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Introduction

Adult education has long been presented as an inclusive response to social inequality. In rural and minority communities, adult learning programmes are commonly designed to improve literacy, vocational skills, livelihood opportunities, cultural participation, and community development. For women whose access to formal schooling and paid employment has been uneven, adult education is frequently framed through the language of empowerment: It is expected to increase confidence, income, visibility, and participation in public life. This logic is not without value. Adult learning can create spaces where women gain new resources and social recognition. However, it also contains an important tension. Adult education may widen access to learning while reproducing unequal assumptions about whose knowledge counts, whose experience is teachable, and who has the authority to educate others (Brookfield 2005; Freire 1970; Mezirow 1991).

This tension is especially visible in rural minority communities where women already possess complex local knowledge developed through everyday labour, intergenerational transmission, and place-based practice. In the village examined in this study, women's knowledge included embroidery and weaving techniques, herbal collection and processing, seasonal judgement, food preparation, household care, and ecological observation. Such knowledge was not organised around formal lessons or certificates. It was learned by watching grandmothers, working beside mothers and mothers-in-law, correcting mistakes in practice, and participating in community life. Women were already knowledge holders, although their practices were commonly described as "women's work", "what elders taught", or "the skills of daily life", rather than as legitimate knowledge in formal educational terms.

The central problem of this article is not whether adult education includes rural minority women, but how it recognises, translates, and repositions their existing knowledge. Inclusion alone does not guarantee epistemic justice. Local knowledge may become visible in adult education only when it can be converted into teachable modules, vocational skills, marketable products, cultural heritage displays, or project outcomes. Practices that are tacit, relational, ritualised, difficult to standardise, or locally restricted may remain marginal even when programmes claim to value community culture. Recognition is not simply present or absent. It is produced through conditions that are pedagogical, institutional, political, and economic.

Despite these contributions, less attention has been paid to the process through which rural minority women's local knowledge becomes educationally recognisable within adult education. Much existing work asks whether community knowledge is included in curricula or whether adult education empowers women. Fewer studies examine the institutional conditions under which such inclusion occurs, the translations it requires, and the epistemic hierarchies it may continue to reproduce. This gap is important because rural development, intangible cultural heritage protection, and community learning programmes increasingly draw on local knowledge while also requiring

measurable outputs, safe content, product development, and visual evidence of success. These requirements may make women's knowledge visible, but they may also narrow what is allowed to count as knowledge.

This article addresses that gap through a qualitative case study of a Miao women's traditional weaving and herbal wellness skills training project in a mountainous Miao-majority village in rural southwest China. The programme, launched in March 2024, combined rural revitalisation, intangible cultural heritage transmission, community learning, and women's skills training. Within the programme, rural revitalisation reporting emphasised quantifiable outputs such as trainee numbers, product development, and publicity, while intangible cultural heritage work favoured practices that could be demonstrated and displayed. These policy-linked requirements shaped which forms of local knowledge became visible in the educational setting. By July 2025, the programme had completed four six-week training cycles. The case is analytically useful because it does not represent simple exclusion. Women's local knowledge was actively invited into the programme. Elder women demonstrated embroidery and herbal practices, young, returned migrants learned product-making skills, and project documents celebrated the programme as a source of cultural preservation and income generation. The more difficult question is what kind of recognition this entailed.

The study is guided by three research questions. First, how do rural Miao women understand and narrate their local knowledge in relation to adult learning? Second, how is this knowledge selected, translated, and institutionalised within the adult education programme? Third, how does the recognition or marginalisation of local knowledge reshape women's identities as learners, knowledge holders, and pedagogical agents?

The article makes three contributions. First, it contributes to critical adult education by arguing that transformation should not be understood only as changes in learners' skills, confidence, or self-understanding. It should also involve transformation in the epistemic relations that organise curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation. Second, it contributes to epistemic justice scholarship by developing the concept of conditional recognition: a form of partial epistemic inclusion in which marginalised knowledge becomes visible only when it can be translated into institutionally legible forms. Third, it contributes empirically by foregrounding rural Miao women not as passive beneficiaries of training, but as situated knowledge holders whose practices both enable and unsettle adult education. The next section reviews the literature and develops the theoretical framework. The methodology section then explains the qualitative case study design, and is followed by findings, a discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Adult Education, Empowerment, and the Limits of Instrumental Inclusion

Adult education is often linked to social inclusion, lifelong learning, and community development. In policy discourse, it is commonly expected to improve employability,

livelihood security, and civic participation, especially among populations whose access to formal schooling has been uneven. The global adult learning agenda has similarly emphasised participation, skills, and the role of adult learning in sustainable development (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2022). Such aims matter in rural communities where women face limited educational opportunities, care responsibilities, and restricted income sources. In the present case, participants often valued the training because it offered opportunities to sell products, speak publicly, and receive recognition for their skills and contributions beyond the household sphere.

Yet critical adult education has long cautioned against treating education as a neutral delivery mechanism. Freire's (1970) critique of banking education remains central because it asks whether learners are positioned as objects of intervention or subjects of knowledge production. Brookfield (2005) similarly argues that adult learning must address power and ideology rather than simply improve skills. Transformative learning theory, associated with Mezirow (1991), foregrounds critical reflection and perspective transformation, but it has also been criticised for overemphasising individual cognition at the expense of structural and collective power. For rural minority women, this distinction is crucial. A programme may increase confidence and income while leaving intact the authority structures that define women's existing knowledge as informal or secondary.

The question, then, is not whether adult education can support empowerment, but what kind of empowerment it promotes and on whose terms. If empowerment is equated with acquiring institutionally valued skills, adult education risks reproducing deficit assumptions: Women are treated as lacking modern capacity. If empowerment is understood more critically, it includes the redistribution of knowledge authority. This study follows the latter view. It asks not only what women learned from adult education, but what adult education was willing or unwilling to learn from women.

Local Knowledge, Funds of Knowledge, and Institutional Translation

Local knowledge refers to situated forms of understanding developed through lived practice, ecological relationships, household labour, and social memory. It is often embodied, relational, and transmitted through observation, participation, and correction rather than formal instruction. The funds of knowledge tradition made a major contribution by showing that families and communities possess historically accumulated resources that can support teaching and learning (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Moll et al. 1992). This approach challenged deficit views of underrepresented learners and remains influential in culturally responsive education. Later reviews have shown that the concept of funds of knowledge has travelled across educational fields and has been used to connect schooling with community practices, sustainability, health, and social justice (Llopart and Esteban-Guitart 2018).

However, the educational use of local knowledge is not automatically emancipatory. The move from community practice to institutional curriculum involves translation.

Knowledge that is tacit, oral, slow, relational, or locally restricted may need to be selected, simplified, standardised, and documented before it can become teachable. Recent reviews of indigenous knowledge integration in education identify a recurring tension: Integration may challenge dominant knowledge hierarchies, but it may also reduce knowledge systems to cultural content or decontextualised resources (da Silva, Pereira, and Amorim 2024). Moges et al. (2024) similarly show that adult education programmes can incorporate indigenous knowledge for sustainable development, but the educational form of that incorporation matters. The issue is not only whether local knowledge is included, but how it is made institutionally legible.

This problem is particularly relevant for intangible cultural heritage and rural revitalisation programmes. Heritage projects often value local practices because they can be displayed, photographed, standardised, commodified, or linked to tourism and market development. Studies of Miao tourism and heritage practices have shown that gendered cultural labour can create opportunities while also reshaping women's roles around display, performance, and market value (Feng 2013; Schein 2000). Recent work on Miao embroidery and cultural heritage further illustrates the growing interest in digital design, heritage revitalisation, and product development (Jiang, Cai, and Yin 2025; Yu, Tao, and Wang 2025; Zhang and Sharudin 2024). These studies provide context for the present case, but they rarely ask how adult education reorganises women's authority as knowers.

Rural Minority Women and Epistemic Marginalisation

Rural minority women often occupy intersecting social positions shaped by gender, ethnicity, rurality, class, language, and uneven access to schooling. Development and education projects may recognise them as disadvantaged subjects who need training and support. This recognition can be important, but it becomes limiting when it obscures women's existing knowledge and agency. Much of women's knowledge is located in feminised labour: planting, harvesting, caring for relatives, preparing food, weaving, collecting herbs, judging seasons, and maintaining community relations. Because these practices are considered ordinary and are often unpaid, they may be naturalised rather than valued as knowledge.

Epistemic marginalisation refers to more than lack of access to education. It concerns unequal credibility, interpretive resources, and authority. Fricker (2007) identifies testimonial injustice, in which speakers are given less credibility because of prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, in which groups lack shared interpretive resources to make their experiences intelligible. Dotson (2011, 2012) extends this analysis by showing that epistemic oppression can be persistent, structural, and resistant to simple inclusion. Medina (2013) further argues that epistemic injustice is sustained through social imagination and unequal habits of attention. In education, recent scholarship has applied these ideas to classrooms, curriculum, and institutional practices (Battaly 2023; Dunne 2023; Veñegas et al. 2025).

In the present study, epistemic marginalisation does not take the form of complete silencing. Women are invited to speak and demonstrate. Yet their credibility is uneven. They are trusted when they show a stitch, identify a safe herb, or perform culture for visitors; they are less authoritative when deciding on curriculum, assessment, or what should remain private. This form of partial authority requires a concept that can capture recognition without assuming justice.

Conditional Recognition: A Conceptual Framework

This article develops conditional recognition as its central analytical concept. Recognition theory is useful because it shows that justice is not only material but also concerns status, dignity, and social esteem (Honneth 1995). However, Fraser (2000) cautions that recognition without redistribution may leave unequal structures intact. The findings of this study bring these perspectives together. Women gained respect when their knowledge was included, but respect did not always redistribute authority over curriculum or evaluation.

Conditional recognition refers to a selective form of epistemic inclusion in which marginalised knowledge becomes visible and valued only when it can be translated into institutionally acceptable forms. It differs from exclusion because the knowledge is not ignored. It differs from full recognition because the terms of recognition are not controlled equally by the knowledge holders. Conditional recognition is especially useful for analysing adult education programmes that appear inclusive yet continue to decide which parts of local knowledge are teachable, safe, marketable, or reportable.

Conditional recognition is related to, but distinct from, selective inclusion and tokenism. Selective inclusion describes the restricted incorporation of particular content, while tokenism permits visible participation without substantive influence; conditional recognition identifies both the institutional conditions under which knowledge becomes legitimate and the unequal authority to set those conditions. It also differs from contributory injustice, in which marginalised groups' interpretive resources are not adequately taken up by dominant knowers (Dotson 2012): Here, women's knowledge was taken up, but only after being reshaped into institutionally legible forms. Nor does the concept necessarily imply cultural appropriation, although appropriation may occur when translated knowledge is used without community consent or control.

Translation and recognition refer to different analytical processes. Translation is the conversion of situated knowledge into teachable, assessable, or reportable forms through selection, simplification, and standardisation. Recognition is the legitimacy and authority that institutions subsequently grant to the translated knowledge and to those who hold it. Translation may enable recognition without giving knowledge holders equal control over its terms.

The conceptual framework has three linked stages. The first is naming: how certain practices are identified as knowledge, skill, culture, heritage, or ordinary labour. The

second is translation: how local knowledge is reorganised into lesson plans, training manuals, demonstrations, products, and assessment criteria. The third is pedagogical repositioning: how women move, or fail to move, from learner to demonstrator, co-teacher, or curriculum authority. This framework guides the empirical analysis by tracing how local knowledge moves from everyday practice into adult education, and by asking who controls that movement.

Methodology

Research Design and Case Selection

This study employed a qualitative case study design. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research focused on meanings, narratives, pedagogical interactions, and institutional processes rather than on measuring predetermined variables. Case study research is well suited to examining how social processes unfold in context, particularly when boundaries between community practice, educational activity, and institutional policy are porous (Yin 2018).

The research was conducted in a mountainous Miao-majority village in rural southwest China. The site is further anonymised because a small community could remain identifiable from combined administrative and programme details. The village had approximately 650 residents. Miao people accounted for about 85% of the population, with smaller numbers of Dong and Han residents. Daily communication involved a local Miao variety, Mandarin, and bilingual interaction. Many younger men had migrated for work, and women constituted a major part of the remaining agricultural and care labour force. Livelihood activities included rice and maize cultivation, traditional handicrafts, and limited ecological tourism. Women's everyday work involved farming, household care, embroidery and weaving, and herbal collection and processing. The article uses "Miao" because it is the official "ethnic" designation used in programme documents; it does not assume that this category is interchangeable with all Hmong and other community self-designations used across different locations.

The adult education programme examined here was a Miao women's traditional weaving and herbal wellness skills training project combining rural revitalisation, intangible cultural heritage transmission, and women's skills development. It was organised by the county women's federation, the rural revitalisation bureau, the community learning centre, the intangible cultural heritage protection centre, and a women's handicraft cooperative. The programme began in March 2024. Each training cycle lasted six weeks, with three sessions per week, and each session lasting three to four hours. By July 2025, four cycles had been completed, with 20 to 35 women participating in each cycle. The case was selected because it explicitly brought women's local knowledge into adult education while linking it to heritage, income generation, and project evaluation.

Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected between March and July 2025, with follow-up clarification in August 2025. Twenty-four participants took part in the study: 18 rural Miao-speaking women, four trainers, and two organisers. The women ranged from 27 to 62 years old. Their educational backgrounds ranged from no formal schooling to senior high school, with most having primary or junior secondary education. Four younger participants had migrated for work and returned to the village. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling identified women who had participated in the project or were recognised locally as knowledge holders. Snowball sampling helped identify elder women whose knowledge was informally respected but not always institutionally certified.

Table 1: Participant profile

Code	Category	Age	Education	Migration experience	Main local knowledge	Programme cycles attended
W1	Woman/knowledge holder	55	Primary	No	Weaving + herbal	3
W2	Woman participant	48	Primary	No	Weaving	2
W3	Woman participant	51	None	No	Herbal	1
W4	Young participant	29	Junior high	Returned from urban migration	Weaving (learning)	1
W5	Young participant	32	Junior high	Returned from urban migration	Weaving + herbal	2
W6	Woman participant	47	Primary	No	Weaving	1
W7	Woman/knowledge holder	61	None	No	Herbal	0
W8	Woman participant	42	Primary	No	Weaving	2
W9	Young participant	27	Senior high	Returned from urban migration	Weaving	1
W10	Woman participant	53	Primary	No	Herbal	1
W11	Woman participant	49	None	No	Weaving	2
W12	Knowledge holder	62	None	No	Herbal	1 (limited participation)
W13	Woman participant	45	Primary	No	Weaving + herbal	3
W14	Woman participant	38	Junior high	Yes	Weaving	1

W15	Woman participant	57	Primary	No	Herbal	2
W16	Young participant	31	Junior high	Returned from urban migration	Weaving	1
W17	Woman/knowledge holder	59	None	No	Weaving	0
W18	Woman participant	44	Primary	No	Herbal	2
T1	Trainer herbal	39	College	-	Herbal instructor	-
T2	Trainer weaving	44	College	-	Weaving instructor	-
T3	Trainer/facilitator	36	Bachelor	-	General skills	-
T4	Trainer marketing	41	College	-	Product development	-
O1	Organiser	51	College	-	Project coordinator	-
O2	Organiser/cooperative	47	Senior high	-	Community leader	-

Note. “Programme cycles attended” refers to formal enrolment in the six-week training cycles. A value of 0 indicates that W7 and W17 were not formally enrolled but participated in interviews and observed activities as locally recognised knowledge holders. “Returned from urban migration” refers to participants who had previously worked outside the village and subsequently returned. Interview languages included Mandarin, Miao-Mandarin bilingual interaction, and Miao-dominant interviews assisted by a local bilingual research assistant. Interview lengths ranged from 40 to 65 minutes.

The study included three participant groups because each group illuminated a different dimension of conditional recognition. Women’s interviews addressed how local knowledge was learned, named, and valued. Trainers’ interviews addressed how knowledge was translated into teachable modules and safe or marketable content. Organisers’ interviews addressed how policy, reporting, and project outcomes shaped recognition. Across the fieldwork, 28 interviews were conducted with 24 participants, including four follow-up interviews with women. The total audio-recorded interview time was approximately 21 hours, with most interviews lasting 40 to 65 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, in bilingual Miao-Mandarin form, or primarily in Miao with assistance from a local bilingual research assistant.

Five observations were conducted. The first was a weaving foundation class at the community learning centre on 28 March 2025, with 28 participants and three hours of observation. The second was a weaving workshop and product-making session on 12 April, with 26 participants and four hours of observation. The third was a herbal identification and wellness tea session on 8 May, with 22 participants and three and a half hours of observation. The fourth was a product display and tourist interaction event at the cooperative exhibition room on 15 June, with 19 participants and two and a half

hours of observation. The fifth was an intergenerational learning activity in the field and community centre on 3 July, with 24 participants and three hours of observation. Field notes recorded who spoke, who demonstrated, how knowledge was framed, how participants responded, and how visual publicity and assessment shaped the activities.

Document analysis included three course outlines, four training manuals, three project reports, nine public WeChat publicity posts, five assessment forms, and approximately 80 photographs and short videos used only as auxiliary material for analysing classroom dynamics and knowledge representation. The documents were analysed to identify how local knowledge was described: as skill, culture, heritage, livelihood resource, product, safety knowledge, or women's development.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis followed qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021). The analysis combined inductive coding with theory-informed interpretation. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were read repeatedly. Open coding generated 187 initial codes related to knowledge narration, elder learning, translation, simplification, standardisation, dignity, marketability, decision-making, safety, cultural meaning, and pedagogical agency. Second, these codes were clustered into 32 sub-themes. Third, the sub-themes were consolidated into four major themes: naming the unnamed, making knowledge teachable, recognition with conditions, and becoming pedagogical agents.

Manual coding supported by Excel was used because the dataset was moderate in size and required close attention to local terms and translation choices. A doctoral peer familiar with adult education independently reviewed and coded a purposively selected subset of interview, observation, and document materials. We compared code definitions, discussed areas of overlap and disagreement, and revised several code boundaries before the full dataset was consolidated into sub-themes. This process was used as interpretive dialogue rather than as a test of mechanical coding reliability; its purpose was to examine whether the developing analysis remained grounded in the data and whether plausible alternative readings had been considered.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Tracy 2010). Member checking was conducted with six women participants (W1, W4, W5, W12, W13, and W15), selected to include older knowledge holders, younger returned migrants, and women with different levels of programme participation, together with one local assistant. They were asked to comment on the accuracy of the emerging interpretations of recognition, simplification, and decision-making rather than to endorse the analysis as a whole. Participants confirmed the accuracy of key interpretations, especially the idea that their knowledge had been "seen" but also partly simplified. Some cultural expressions were revised after member checking. By the final interviews, recurring patterns around simplification,

recognition, marketability, and limited decision-making had become analytically saturated.

Ethical Reflexivity and Knowledge Protection

Ethical approval and local permission were obtained through institutional and community procedures. All participants gave written or oral informed consent in Mandarin or Miao. They were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and how audio recordings and notes would be used. Pseudonyms and codes are used throughout. Identifying details about the village and participants have been removed.

Knowledge protection was central. The study did not record or publish detailed herbal prescriptions, ritual meanings, or restricted techniques. The analysis focuses on how knowledge was recognised and transformed, not on extracting protected knowledge itself. This distinction matters because research on local knowledge can become extractive if it makes community knowledge publicly available without community control (Smith 1999; Tuck and Yang 2012). Quotations were translated by the authors and checked with the local assistant where necessary. Where a Miao expression lacked a stable Mandarin or English equivalent, its contextual meaning was discussed with the assistant and recorded rather than replaced automatically by a single standardised term. Particular care was taken with kinship address, seasonal judgement, and categories of restricted practice, whose meanings depended on social relationships and context.

Researcher positionality was also part of the analysis. As Han outsiders and education researchers, we entered the field through the women's federation and the community learning centre. This institutional introduction helped access but may have encouraged participants to present positive accounts at first. Repeated visits, participation in everyday activities, and reflexive field notes helped identify more ambivalent views. The researchers' academic status also shaped the process: Asking about "knowledge" could itself encourage participants to reclassify everyday practices. The analysis treats the research encounter as part of the politics of recognition rather than as a neutral window onto local knowledge. Academic writing itself also participates in translation: Rendering embodied practices and culturally specific categories in analytical English may reproduce some of the simplification examined in this article. Translation was treated as an epistemic practice requiring reflexive attention rather than as a neutral technical step.

Findings

Naming the Unnamed: Local Knowledge before the Classroom

The first finding concerns how women narrated their local knowledge before it entered adult education. Many participants did not initially use abstract terms such as knowledge, expertise, or pedagogy. They described what they knew as "what elders taught", "what women should know", or "ways of living". W1, a 55-year-old knowledge

holder who had participated in three project cycles, explained: “I learned from my grandmother when I was seven, going up the mountain for herbs and sitting by the loom. These things are work passed down by Miao women. Before, no one in the village called it ‘knowledge’. It was just what elders taught and what women did to live.” Her statement shows that knowledge existed, but its status as knowledge was unstable.

Observation confirmed this pattern. During the intergenerational learning activity on 3 July 2025, W7 and W17 demonstrated herbal identification and embroidery patterns to younger women. They did not frame their explanations in formal instructional language. Instead, they used expressions such as “this is how you recognise it correctly” and “embroider it as the elders did”. Learning occurred through gesture, correction, repetition, and embodied attention. The activity looked less like a classroom lesson than a relational practice in which younger women learned how to see, touch, remember, and judge.

Neither W7 nor W17 was formally enrolled in a training cycle, yet younger women treated them as credible knowledge holders during the activity. Their authority came from long community experience rather than programme certification. Their participation shows that local epistemic authority existed outside the programme, even though formal adult education determined when and how that authority entered the learning space.

Women’s local knowledge was valuable because it was practical and relational. Herbal knowledge helped families respond to minor illness and seasonal discomfort. Weaving and embroidery carried aesthetic, historical, and familial meanings. Farming knowledge connected women to weather, soil, and crop cycles. Yet these practices were often undervalued precisely because they were seen as ordinary. W12, a 62-year-old herbal knowledge holder, said: “When I go up the mountain, I look at the leaves, smell them, and know which grass can be used for rheumatism. This is ancestral experience, not the kind of knowledge from school.” Her distinction between “ancestral experience” and “school knowledge” reveals a local hierarchy in which school-based knowledge has higher public legitimacy.

The data also showed internal variation. Older women tended to describe local knowledge as inheritance and responsibility. Younger returned migrants were more ambivalent. W5, aged 32, said: “After joining the training, I now think these are also our knowledge. We can teach others and earn money from it. Before, I felt it was too rustic; now it feels different.” For W5, adult education did not simply recognise existing knowledge; it changed the language through which she could value that knowledge. This finding answers RQ1 by showing that women narrated local knowledge as embodied, relational, and practice-based, while also revealing that recognition required an institutional vocabulary that many women had not previously used.

Making Knowledge Teachable: Translation into Adult Education Content

The second finding concerns how the programme translated women's local knowledge into teachable content. Adult education did not incorporate local knowledge in its full everyday form. It reorganised it into modules, steps, demonstrations, manuals, and products. In the weaving workshop observed on 12 April 2025, a trainer used a PowerPoint presentation to teach a "five-step simplified embroidery method". Elder women were invited to demonstrate traditional needlework and correct younger participants, but the structure of the lesson remained with the trainer. Complex patterns associated with family stories or ritual meanings were simplified into product templates for bags and scarves.

Training manuals confirmed this translation. The weaving manual broke techniques into standardised steps with pictures and checklists. The herbal manual listed only a small number of common and safe plants for wellness tea, avoiding complex formulas and seasonal restrictions. The second-cycle course outline converted herbal knowledge into a "family wellness tea module", while the project report described the process as the transformation of "local experience into practical skills". Local knowledge became teachable by being made safe, repeatable, and assessable.

Trainers acknowledged the necessity of simplification. T2, the weaving trainer, explained: "Traditional weaving is too complex and takes too long. We have to make it into teachable modules. Tourists and the market like simple and beautiful patterns, so we focus on parts that can quickly become products." T4, the marketing trainer, defended standardisation more explicitly: "Standardisation simplifies things, but it helps more young women start quickly. That is a good thing." These comments show that translation was not simply imposed in bad faith. It was connected to time limits, market orientation, and pedagogical practicality.

At the same time, translation narrowed meaning. Knowledge that could not be demonstrated quickly, photographed easily, or linked to sales was less likely to appear. Seasonal judgement, ritual restrictions, local language categories, and the meanings of older patterns were often left outside the lesson. The issue was not that the programme ignored local knowledge; it made local knowledge institutionally legible. This finding answers RQ2 by showing that recognition depended on translation into forms adult education could teach, assess, and report.

Recognition with Conditions: The Ambivalence of Inclusion

The third finding concerns the ambivalent effects of recognition. Many women experienced the programme as affirming. Being invited to demonstrate embroidery or herbal processing made their knowledge visible beyond household and kinship settings. W1 said after the April workshop: "Before I was only a participant. Now sometimes they rely on me to explain the meaning of old patterns. I feel I am useful." Several

women described similar feelings of dignity and confidence. Younger women also reported that training gave traditional practices new economic and social value.

However, recognition was selective. W12 explained: “The training only asked me to demonstrate wellness tea. They did not let me talk about herbs for serious illness. They said it might cause problems and it was not easy to write into the report. Complicated things were left outside.” Her account captures the boundary between visible and excluded knowledge. The programme recognised herbal knowledge when it could become safe wellness practice, but not when it involved complex therapeutic judgement, responsibility, or restricted community knowledge.

W12’s account suggests that the restricted demonstration reduced her knowledge to a small, publicly acceptable fragment. What troubled her was not simply that some content remained outside the session, but that programme staff retained the authority to decide which parts were credible and teachable. Her experience shows how a woman could be publicly recognised as knowledgeable while experiencing the form of recognition as incomplete.

The product display event on 15 June 2025 made this conditionality particularly visible. Women wore “ethnic” clothing and demonstrated weaving for visitors. The displayed objects were mainly scarves and bags suitable for sale. Special patterns with ritual meanings were not shown. Photographs were taken for publicity, and the activity was framed as cultural preservation and rural revitalisation. Women were respected as cultural demonstrators, but the event’s structure, timing, and meaning were controlled by organisers. O1, a women’s federation coordinator, stated: “The project must respond to rural revitalisation and intangible heritage assessment indicators. We prioritise knowledge that can be photographed, sold, and written into reports. Things that are too rustic or too private are not suitable for now.”

Different voices complicate a one-sided critique. W9, a 27-year-old participant, welcomed the product orientation: “I like it this way. We can make products for tourists and earn money. If it is simplified, that is fine. Practical use matters most.” T1, the herbal trainer, also defended restriction: “We teach only the safe parts. This is responsibility to women and learners, not intentional limitation.” These voices matter because they show that conditional recognition was not experienced only as oppression. It created real opportunities. Yet it also meant that local knowledge was recognised on terms shaped by safety, marketability, and reporting requirements. This finding answers RQ2 and RQ3 by showing that recognition enhanced visibility while preserving institutional control over what counted as legitimate knowledge.

Becoming Pedagogical Agents: Shifting But Bounded Authority

The fourth finding concerns women’s shifting identities within adult education. Although women were officially described as trainees or participants, some became pedagogical agents in practice. During the April weaving workshop, W1 and W13

corrected younger women's needlework and demonstrated traditional techniques that the trainer could not fully explain. During the herbal activity, W12's judgement about plant identification carried authority because participants trusted her long experience. These moments unsettled the conventional distinction between trainer and learner.

T3, a facilitator, acknowledged this dependence on local expertise: "Some techniques and seasonal judgement are better known by local aunties than by us teachers. When they demonstrate, learners understand faster. We sometimes invite them to co-teach." Pedagogical authority emerged from embodied practice and community recognition rather than formal credentials. Adult education created moments in which women were not only receiving training but shaping how learning happened.

For women, this repositioning could be meaningful. W4, a 29-year-old returned migrant, said: "I can now teach my younger sisters simple embroidery, but the content and direction are still decided by teachers and cadres. We can give suggestions, but they may not adopt them." Her statement captures the partial nature of pedagogical agency. Women gained authority in demonstrations and corrections, but they rarely controlled curriculum aims, assessment criteria, or project design.

These distinctions are important. Pedagogical agency refers here to women's capacity to shape particular moments of teaching and learning; epistemic authority refers to their recognised credibility to define valid knowledge; and curriculum authority refers to the power to decide what is taught, omitted, and assessed. Women gained the first and sometimes the second, but rarely the third.

Some participants preferred trainer-led standardisation. W16 said: "I like the teacher using PPT [PowerPoint presentation] step by step. It is clear and easy to follow. If aunties talk freely, it can be too slow and scattered for those who want to earn money quickly." O2, the cooperative leader, similarly argued: "It is already good that women demonstrate. If they also design the course, it will be too messy; project time is limited." These views show that redistribution of authority is not a simple solution. Adult education must balance clarity, safety, livelihood needs, and local authority. Still, the findings indicate that women's pedagogical agency remained bounded. They could shape learning moments, but not necessarily the structure of learning. This finding answers RQ3 by showing that recognition repositioned women as knowledge holders and informal teachers, but not fully as curriculum authorities.

Discussion

From Access to Epistemic Authority in Adult Education

The findings complicate accounts of adult education as necessarily empowering. Adult education did increase women's visibility, confidence, and opportunities to teach others. In this sense, the case partially confirms humanistic and transformative traditions that emphasise agency, participation, and changed self-understanding (Knowles 1980;

Mezirow 1991). Yet the findings also support critical adult education's concern with power. Women's confidence increased, but authority over curriculum and evaluation remained limited. This distinction matters because transformation cannot be reduced to psychological empowerment.

Freire's (1970) critique of banking education is relevant, but the present case adds complexity. Women were not merely treated as empty vessels. Their knowledge was invited into the programme. The problem was subtler: The terms of invitation were controlled by trainers, organisers, market demands, and policy reporting. The programme asked women to speak, demonstrate, and teach, but largely within a structure already defined by others. This suggests that adult education can be dialogic at the level of classroom interaction while remaining hierarchical at the level of institutional design.

The study extends critical adult education by shifting attention from access to epistemic authority. It is not enough to ask whether rural minority women participate in adult education. We must ask whether they can influence what counts as knowledge, who can teach, and what learning outcomes are valued. This argument also responds to recent lifelong learning debates that call for plural knowledge systems and multiple educational actors (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2022). Plurality becomes transformative only when it changes educational authority, not merely when it enriches programme content.

Local Knowledge, Funds of Knowledge, and the Politics of Translation

The study supports the funds of knowledge tradition by showing that rural households and communities contain complex intellectual resources (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Moll et al. 1992). Miao women's embroidery and herbal practices involved memory, technique, ecological judgement, aesthetic interpretation, and social responsibility. They were not inferior substitutes for school knowledge. However, the findings also point to a limitation in celebratory applications of funds of knowledge. Community knowledge does not enter institutions unchanged. It is translated.

This translation process extends recent reviews of indigenous knowledge integration in education. da Silva et al. (2024) show that integration can enrich education but may also decontextualise knowledge. Moges et al. (2024) similarly argue that indigenous knowledge in adult education can support sustainable development, but must be incorporated with attention to community participation and meaning. The present study adds a processual account: Local knowledge became teachable by becoming simplified, modular, safe, visible, and reportable. Translation made recognition possible, but also introduced loss.

The politics of translation is especially visible in heritage and market contexts. Recent research on Miao cultural heritage and product development highlights the role of design, tourism, and cultural display in revitalising local traditions (Jiang, Cai, and Yin

2025; Yu, Tao, and Wang 2025; Zhang and Sharudin 2024). Such work often foregrounds innovation and sustainability. The present study does not reject these possibilities. Young women such as W9 valued product-making because it generated income and public respect. However, the findings show that market-oriented translation can privilege the beautiful, safe, and saleable while marginalising meanings that are slow, private, ritualised, or difficult to standardise.

Conditional recognition was also experienced differently across generations. Older knowledge holders such as W12 were more concerned that simplification separated herbal or textile practices from seasonal judgement, inherited meanings, and responsibility, whereas younger returned migrants such as W9 and W16 often valued standardisation because it made learning faster and products easier to sell. These differences should not be reduced to a contrast between cultural preservation and economic interest: Age intersected with migration experience, livelihood needs, and participants' positions in intergenerational transmission. Conditional recognition was not a uniform experience among women, but a negotiated response to different material and cultural priorities.

Conditional Recognition and Epistemic Justice

The main theoretical contribution of the study is the concept of conditional recognition. Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice helps identify the wrong involved when people are harmed in their capacity as knowers. Dotson (2012) and Medina (2013) further show that epistemic oppression can be structural and sustained through habits of attention. The present study shows that epistemic injustice in education may operate not only through silence or exclusion, but through partial and selective recognition. Women were heard, but not equally. Their knowledge was credible when it became safe tea, marketable embroidery, or reportable cultural heritage. It was less credible when it remained tacit, complex, restricted, or resistant to standardisation.

Conditional recognition differs from simple non-recognition. It is a form of epistemic inclusion that appears progressive and may indeed produce dignity, but it remains incomplete because the conditions of legitimacy are set elsewhere. This insight extends recent educational work on epistemic injustice. Dunne (2023) argues that education is deeply implicated in how people are formed as knowers. Veñegas et al. (2025) show that indigenous education can be affected by epistemic injustice when dominant frameworks dismiss indigenous knowledge. This study adds that dominant frameworks may also accept local knowledge selectively, thereby producing inclusion without full epistemic justice.

Across the case, this process moved through the three analytical stages identified earlier: Everyday practices were first named as knowledge, then translated into teachable and reportable forms, and finally used to reposition some women as demonstrators or informal teachers. The stages were connected, but progression through them did not guarantee equal epistemic or curriculum authority.

Recognition theory sharpens the point. Honneth (1995) helps explain why public acknowledgement matters to women's dignity and self-esteem. Fraser (2000), however, reminds us that recognition without redistribution can leave structures unchanged. The findings support both positions. Recognition improved women's confidence, but without redistribution of pedagogical authority it remained bounded. Conditional recognition names this tension: Recognition can be meaningful and insufficient at the same time.

Transformative Adult Education as Redistribution of Pedagogical Authority

The study suggests that transformative adult education should be understood as the redistribution of pedagogical authority. Women's movement from learner to demonstrator or informal teacher resonates with situated learning theory, which views learning as participation in social practice rather than the transmission of abstract information (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Yet the findings also show the limits of participation. Women could correct a stitch, identify a plant, and explain a pattern, but they rarely co-designed curriculum or assessment.

This echoes critiques of participatory development, which warn that participation can become a managed process rather than a redistribution of power (Cooke and Kothari 2001). In the present case, women's participation was real but structured. They could contribute knowledge where it improved training, product quality, or publicity, but they had less authority over which knowledge should be protected, excluded, slowed down, or taught differently. Transformative education requires more than participatory activities; it requires shared governance over knowledge.

This argument has practical implications for adult education programmes linked to rural development and heritage. If local knowledge holders are treated only as demonstrators, programmes risk extracting knowledge while praising community culture. If they are involved in curriculum design, co-teaching, evaluation, and knowledge protection protocols, adult education can become a more reciprocal epistemic space. Such reciprocity does not mean rejecting all standardisation. Safety, clarity, and market access matter. Rather, it means that decisions about simplification and protection should be made with knowledge holders, not merely about them.

One practical mechanism would be a curriculum consensus meeting before each training cycle, bringing together elder knowledge holders, younger learners, trainers, and project organisers. The group could identify which practices should be preserved intact, which may be simplified for teaching or product development, and which should remain restricted. Co-teaching roles and evaluation criteria could then be agreed in advance, with community knowledge holders retaining the right to withdraw protected content.

Conclusion

This article examined how rural Miao-speaking women's local knowledge became recognised, translated, and repositioned within an adult education programme in Yunnan, China. Rather than asking only whether adult education included marginalised women, the study investigated the conditions under which women's existing knowledge became educationally visible. The findings show that women possessed rich embodied and place-based knowledge, but this knowledge was often unnamed as legitimate knowledge before entering institutional learning spaces. Adult education made it visible by translating it into teachable modules, safe herbal wellness activities, product-oriented embroidery skills, and reportable project outcomes. Recognition enhanced dignity and confidence, but it also simplified and selected knowledge according to institutional, pedagogical, and market expectations. Some women became pedagogical agents in practice, yet their authority remained limited in curriculum design, programme governance, and evaluation.

The article contributes to critical adult education by arguing that transformation should not be understood only as changes in learners' skills or self-understanding. Transformative adult education must also involve changes in the epistemic relations that organise learning. The article contributes to epistemic justice scholarship by developing conditional recognition, a concept that captures the middle ground between exclusion and full recognition. Conditional recognition explains how marginalised knowledge may be welcomed into education while still being valued only when it becomes teachable, marketable, safe, assessable, or institutionally legible.

Practically, the findings suggest that adult education programmes should move beyond treating local knowledge merely as cultural content or a resource for livelihood development. Programme designers should develop participatory curriculum processes in which knowledge holders help decide what should be taught, what may be simplified, and what should remain private. A pre-cycle curriculum consensus meeting can involve elder knowledge holders, younger learners, trainers, and project officials in making these decisions. Co-teaching arrangements can redistribute pedagogical authority between trained educators and local experts. Evaluation criteria should include dignity, intergenerational transmission, community control, and knowledge protection, rather than relying only on attendance, products, and income indicators. Where herbal, ritual, or community-specific knowledge is involved, programmes should establish clear knowledge protection protocols.

The study has limitations. It is based on one qualitative case and does not claim statistical generalisability. The findings are shaped by a particular Miao village, adult education programme and policy context of rural revitalisation and intangible cultural heritage protection. Translation also limited the analysis. Meanings attached to seasonal judgement, ritual categories, embodied technique, and relationships of responsibility could not always be fully rendered in Mandarin transcripts or analytical English. Although translations were checked with a local assistant, some meanings inevitably

became more explicit and bounded than they were in practice. For this reason, the study focused on the politics of recognition rather than disclosing protected herbal or ritual knowledge.

Future research could compare conditional recognition across different minority communities, adult education programmes, and national contexts. Longitudinal studies could examine whether women's emerging pedagogical agency leads to durable changes in curriculum, income, social status, or intergenerational knowledge transmission. Further research could also explore how younger women negotiate local knowledge in relation to migration, digital media, and changing aspirations, or how policy actors, heritage institutions, and markets shape which knowledge becomes visible. Overall, the study argues that adult education becomes transformative not when local knowledge is merely included, but when knowledge holders gain authority over the terms of recognition. Inclusion matters, but inclusion without epistemic authority remains incomplete.

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