

# Study on the Interaction Between Agricultural Practices, Religious Activities, and Cultural Relics

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## ABSTRACT

Community participation and how socio-cultural practices in cultural landscapes affect the protection of cultural heritage and their importance in the field of heritage protection among countries in the Mekong River Basin. This is a case study based on qualitative research methods and the theoretical framework of the eco-cultural complex, which aims to explore how community groups in Jianchuan County, Yunnan Province, China, participate in the shaping and protection of the cultural landscape. The study shows that religious activities run through all stages of the agricultural cycle, and agricultural practices have a profound impact on their content and form. Religious activities promote the sustainable development of traditional agricultural practices through repeated rituals. Agricultural practices and religious activities do not exist in isolation but through dynamic interactions, jointly shaping a unique cultural landscape through various elements. Agricultural practices lay the material foundation for the structure of cultural landscapes and determine the cultural forms of the middle and upper layers. This dynamic synergy not only protects and continues the tangible and intangible cultural heritage but also ensures that community members can participate thoroughly in the protection of cultural heritage according to their material and spiritual needs.

**Keywords:** community participation, agricultural practices, religious activities, eco-cultural complex, cultural landscape

## INTRODUCTION

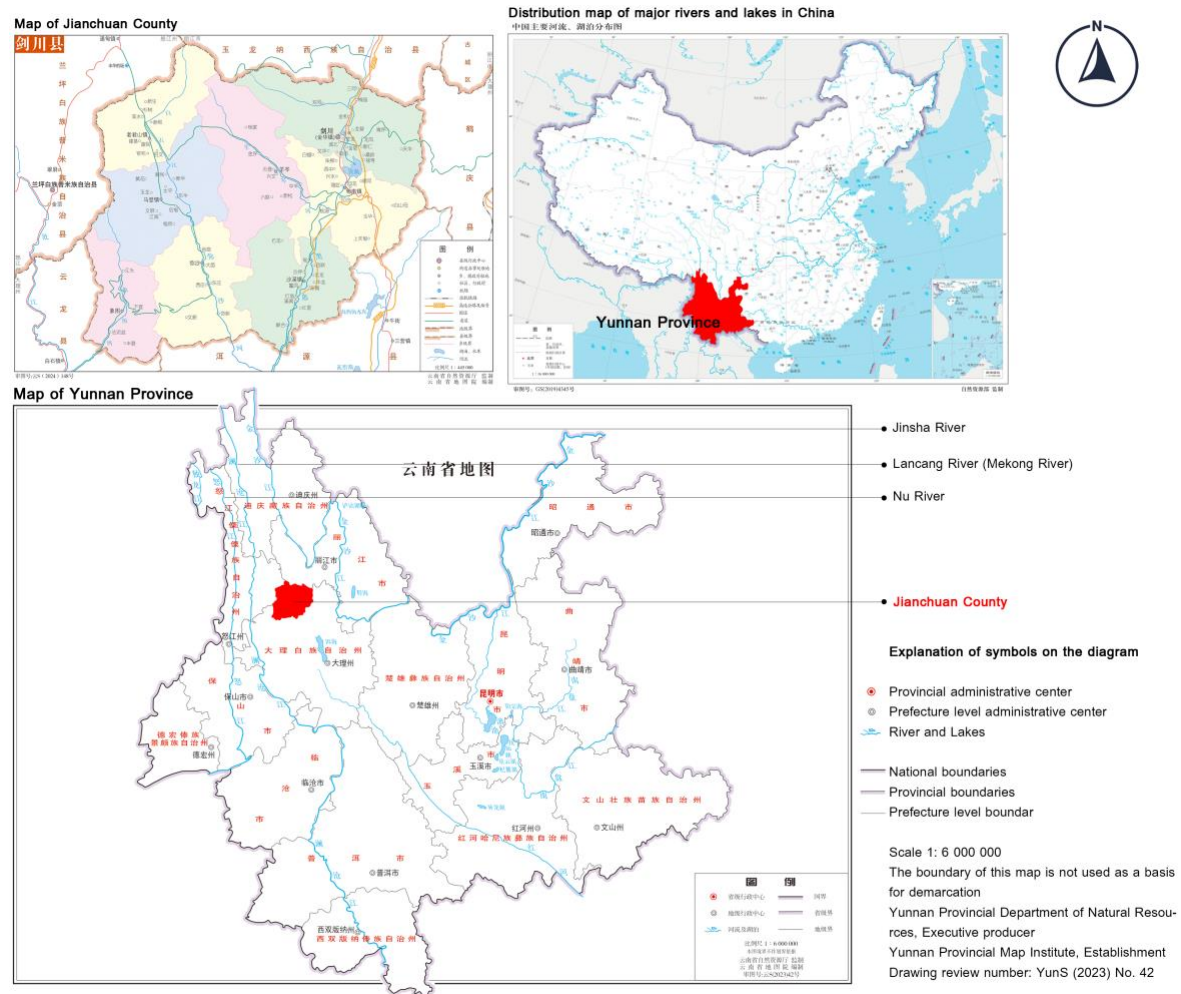
Jianchuan County is located in the northwest of Yunnan Province, on the southeastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the southern part of the Yunling Mountain Range of the Hengduan Mountains. The regional geology belongs to the middle section of the Sanjiang (three rivers) Fold Belt, with complex geological structures and diverse climates. Due to the high altitude and low latitude, a regional microclimate environment is formed in the county. Mountains account for more than 90% of the total area of the county. Jinhua Mountain and Manxianlin are adjacent to each other and located southwest of the county seat, with the highest altitude being 2,793 meters (Local Chronicle Compilation Committee of Jianchuan County, 1999). The area is also at the southern end of the Laojun Mountain area in the "Three Parallel Rivers" Conservation Area of Yunnan Province. The "Three Parallel Rivers" refers to the unique geographical landscape where the Jinsha River, Lancang River, and Nu River flow in parallel but do not intersect (Figure 1). The area appeared on the "World Natural Heritage List" in July 2003 (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003b). Due to the change in altitude and complex climatic conditions, different vegetation grows on the mountains, depending on the altitude. On these typical plateau mountains, the vegetation belts are clearly distributed vertically. They are the ecological green lungs of Jianchuan, balancing the ecosystem and maintaining biodiversity. Since ancient times, Jinhua Mountain and the Manxianlin area have been the center of beliefs and cultural activities for the local Bai people. In the past, many Taoist temples were built on the mountains, dating back to the Yuan Dynasty. The local Bai people share a deep cultural identity with these two mountains, and many festivals and religious ceremonies are held there. The two mountains are important carriers of Jianchuan's

history and culture and have irreplaceable ecological, cultural, and tourism value.

In the field of cultural heritage protection, community participation and how social and cultural practices in the cultural landscape affect the protection of cultural heritage are two important issues. These two issues are also of common concern to countries in the Mekong River Basin, especially in traditional rice-growing cultural areas, where the culture has continued for thousands of years and has become the core lifestyle of many communities. In the social context of rice-growing culture, the interaction between humans and the natural environment is very close, forming a unique cultural landscape. The protection of the cultural landscape in these areas not only involves agricultural production methods but also the continuation and inheritance of traditional cultural values, belief systems, and social organizational forms. This protection has important practical significance for the study and sustainable development of cultural heritage. For example, Chatakul and Janpathompong highlight the symbolic significance of plants in cultural heritage landscapes by identifying and analyzing plant species in historical murals (Chatakul & Janpathompong, 2022), Likitswat and Sahavacharin studied landscape change and ecosystem services in the peri-urban agriculture of Bangkok, revealing the impact of land use change on environmental sustainability and rural landscape conservation (Likitswat & Sahavacharin, 2023), and Aung compares encased stupas architectures in Thailand and Myanmar, highlighting the architectural elements in historical and cultural relics, and emphasizing the importance of traditional symbols and cultural values in the landscape (Aung, 2022). These are very instructive for understanding the traditional rice cultural area and the sustainable management and protection of the historical and cultural relics therein.

**Figure 1**

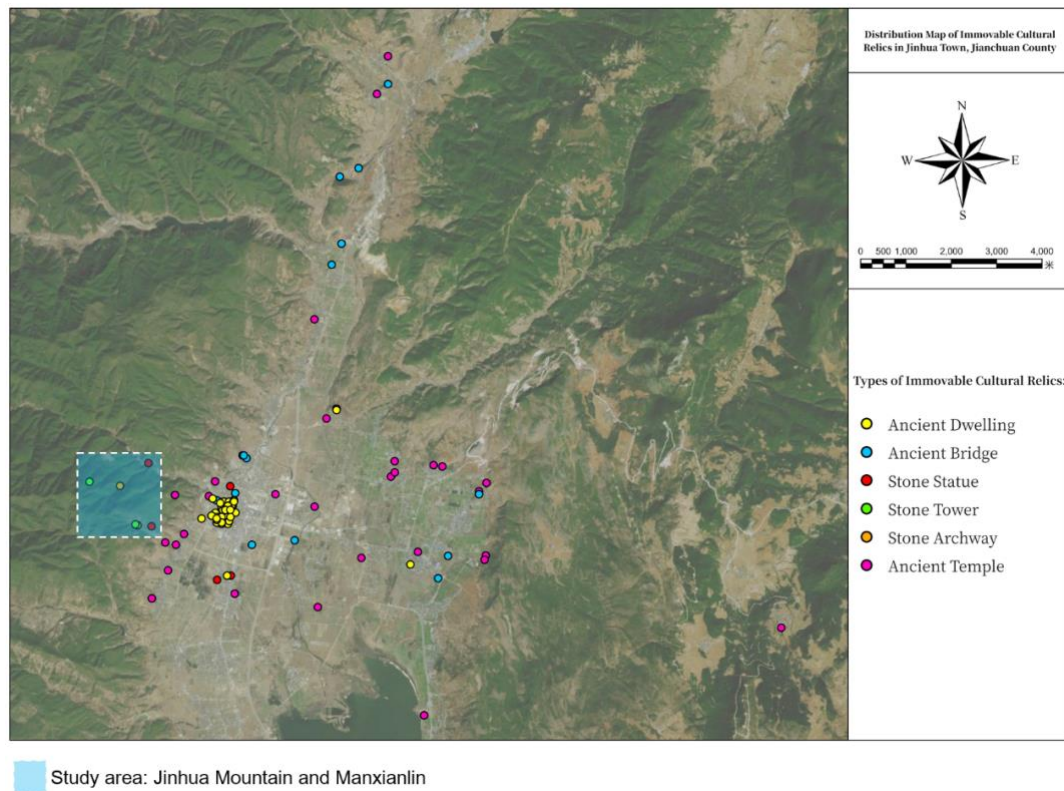
*Location of Jianchuan in Yunnan Province*



*Note.* The upper reaches of the Mekong River are called the Lancang River in China and flow into Southeast Asian countries after passing through Qinghai, Tibet, and Yunnan provinces. Adapted from *The Distribution Map of Major Rivers and Lakes in China, and the Standard Map of Yunnan Province and Jianchuan County*, by National Platform for Common GeoSpatial Information Services, 2025 (<https://www.tianditu.gov.cn/>), and *Yunnan Provincial Platform for common GeoSpatial Information Service*, 2025 (<https://yunnan.tianditu.gov.cn/MapResource>). Copyright 2025 by National Platform for Common GeoSpatial Information Services and Yunnan Provincial Platform for common GeoSpatial Information Service.

**Figure 2**

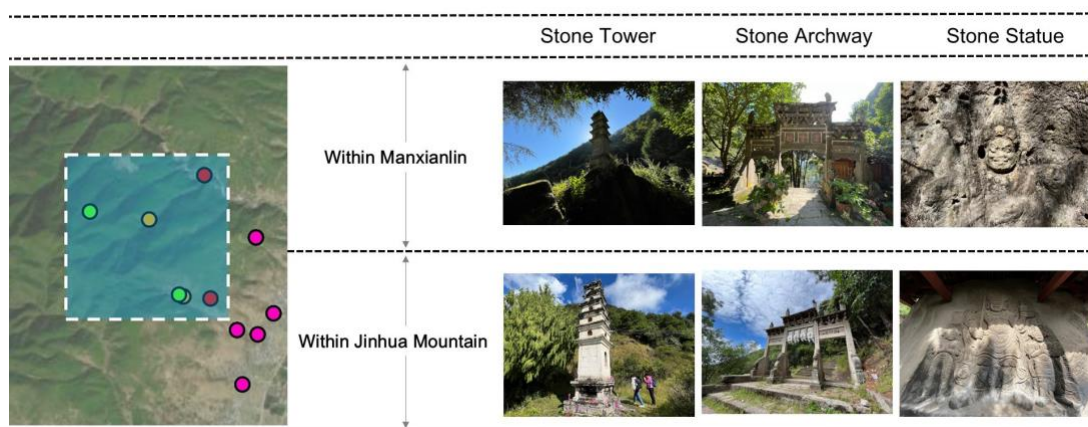
*Distribution Map of Immovable Cultural Relics in Jinhua Town, Jianchuan County, and a Schematic Diagram of the Study Area*



*Note.* GPS data was collected on-site by the author, and maps adapted from *Jinhua Town*, Jianchuan County [ArcGIS], by Esri Inc., 2024. Copyright 2024 by Esri Inc. This map were drawn and marked by the author (2024).

**Figure 3**

Type of Immovable Cultural Relics in the Study Area



Based on the survey of the current situation and literature review, this study proposes two research questions: (1) How can the community participate in the shaping and protection of cultural heritage in the study area? In the current

discussion of concepts, community participation is considered crucial, advocating for the inclusion of community experiences and needs as well as enhancing the community's sense of identity and enthusiasm for heritage protection. In the

discussion of how to implement it, community empowerment and the transfer of dominant rights are considered by community groups to be the main forces in cultural heritage protection since they enhance the adaptability and breadth of protection concepts and methods in special areas. (2) As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the immovable cultural relics in the study area are unevenly distributed over two mountains, with an average altitude of more than 2,400 meters. However, they have high historical and artistic value (Jianchuan County Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2013) and the special natural environment has increased the difficulty of heritage management and protection in the area. Based on the first topic, this study proposes a second research question: "How do community members in the area interact with the natural environment, and what kind of cultural landscape do they shape? The study further discusses how social and cultural practices in the landscape have become the internal driving force in heritage protection for community groups. The difficulties of heritage protection can, therefore, be addressed from a geographical and cultural perspective.

The objectives of this study are to (1) examine and analyze the main content and patterns of social and cultural practices in the study area; (2) analyze the interactive relationship between these social and cultural practices; (3) explain how social and cultural practices jointly maintain and shape the cultural and natural landscape in a specific area and form a unique cultural landscape according to the eco-cultural complex model, and (4) explain the importance of community participation in social and cultural practices in shaping cultural landscapes and protecting cultural heritage.

In the study area, a complex interactive relationship exists between agricultural practices and religious activities as social and cultural practices while jointly maintaining and shaping a cultural landscape with a unique eco-cultural complex model. The study emphasizes the ecological value of cultural heritage from the perspective of the overall cultural landscape and focuses on the role of community participation and social and cultural practices in cultural heritage protection. This would help improve and adapt to the difficulties involved in the government-centered maintenance of historical

heritage distributed in special environments. In particular, intangible cultural heritage is also likely to benefit from it.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of Cultural Heritage and Cultural Landscape

The definition of cultural heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is divided into two main parts: tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. According to the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, tangible cultural heritage includes buildings, monuments, sculptures, archaeological sites, etc., with historical, artistic, or scientific value (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1972). On the other hand, UNESCO further proposed the concept of intangible cultural heritage in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, covering oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festivals, and knowledge and skills related to nature and the universe (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003a). This definition highlights the importance of people's lifestyles, cultural identities, and collective memories, indicating that cultural heritage is not limited to tangible historical relics but also includes a wide range of human spiritual and social practices. Therefore, cultural heritage includes both real estate, such as historical buildings and archaeological sites, as well as activities and rituals of special social or cultural significance (Smith, 2006).

The cultural landscape refers to a collection of natural and artificial environments with cultural significance. It is closely related to human activities and history and is regarded as an integral part of cultural heritage (Taylor, 2008). In 1992, UNESCO included cultural landscape in the World Heritage Convention and defined it as a landscape formed by the joint action of nature and humans, reflecting the process of adaptation and development of a specific culture in a specific environment (The United Nations



Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1992). Cultural landscape is not only one of the manifestations of cultural heritage but also shows the dynamic relationship between humans and nature (Fowler, 2003).

## The Role of Communities in Cultural Heritage Protection

Community participation is considered an important way of protecting heritage. Community members often have rich local knowledge, which contributes to the sustainable management of heritage (Waterton & Smith, 2010). For example, in many Asian countries, religious rituals and festivals are not only forms of cultural expression but also an important part of cultural heritage. These social and cultural practices provide a dynamic and living context for heritage, which goes beyond simple material preservation (Byrne, 2008). The community plays a vital role in the protection of cultural heritage. Community participation not only enhances the effectiveness of protection measures but also ensures that cultural heritage retains its social and cultural significance during the inheritance process (Smith, 2006).

The deep feelings and local knowledge of community members concerning heritage sites are irreplaceable resources in cultural heritage protection, helping to develop more inclusive and sustainable protection strategies (Harrison, 2012; Mason, 2002). Cultural heritage is not only a witness to history and art but also a symbol of community cultural identity. By protecting and maintaining their heritage, communities strengthen their collective identity and maintain cultural continuity during the process of modernization (Ashworth, 1991; Lowenthal, 2015). The active participation of community members and their recognition of the significance of heritage can effectively transform cultural heritage into the continuation of a lifestyle (Smith & Waterton, 2020).

The Yuanyang Rice Terraces are located in the Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefectures of Yunnan Province. They have a history of more than 1,300 years, with the cultural landscape being created by the Hani people through long-term agricultural practices and interaction with the natural environment. Studies have shown

that the active participation of the community plays a key role in the protection and management of the terraces. The establishment of a cooperative mechanism and supporting policies can help promote effective interaction between the community and the government (Ma et al., 2022). Improving community awareness and participation can effectively promote the sustainable management and utilization of resources (Yan et al., 2017). Through policy guidance and community mobilization, the government can promote the effective protection and utilization of cultural heritage and help achieve ecological and environmental sustainability (Miao, 2014). Through these processes, community participation not only enhances culture but also protects the cultural landscape, making it more endogenous, ensuring the interdependence and long-term preservation of both culture and landscape.

## The Impact of Social and Cultural Practices on Cultural Heritage Protection

Sociocultural practices have a profound impact on heritage conservation, especially in local communities. These practices include daily habits, religious rituals, traditional crafts, and festivals, all of which give lasting social and cultural significance to cultural heritage (Harrison, 2012; Smith, 2006). Through these practices, community members not only protect the material form of heritage but also continue the intangible cultural values behind it (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). Cultural customs play a key role in the heritage protection process. For example, in some communities, religious rituals and traditional festivals not only help maintain the collective memory of heritage but also inspire people's emotional attachment to heritage, thereby enhancing their motivation to protect it (Harrison, 2012). These customs make heritage protection a part of the community's daily life rather than just a responsibility imposed by the outside world (Lowenthal, 1998). When communities view heritage as part of their identity, they are more likely to take the initiative to participate in conservation efforts and resist potential external threats (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000; Smith, 2006).

There is a close relationship between the cultural diversity of rice and the ecological environment in Yunnan Province. The diversity of rice culture helps promote ecological protection and maintain biodiversity (Zeng et al., 2012). The traditional knowledge and practices of the Hani people in Yunnan concerning the management and use of terraces are of great significance in the protection and inheritance of the agricultural landscape (Zheng, 2018). This is because its unique terrain and water conservancy systems have resulted in the formation of a diverse ecological environment, promoting biodiversity and soil protection and providing a new perspective for understanding the relationship between traditional agriculture and ecosystem services (Liu, 2022). Traditional knowledge and religious beliefs are integrated into irrigation management. Studies have shown that this sustainable agricultural practice helps communities cope with changes in the natural environment and enhances people's awareness about the protection of natural resources (Bouchery, 2017). The traditional agricultural management methods of the Hani people not only help maintain the ecological balance but also promote the sustainable development of the community, providing valuable experience and inspiration in response to climate change (Yang, 2015).

In the Mekong Basin, rice plays a central role in farmers' lives, not only as a source of food but also as a core element in social and religious rituals (Hatsadong & Gibson, 2006). Rice cultivation and related religious rituals play an important role in the Khmu community in northern Laos. The Khmu people use their cultural and religious resources to maintain survival and development in the face of state policies and economic pressures. This process not only deepens community cohesion and identity but also highlights the importance of the interaction between agriculture and religion in deepening the understanding of the relationship between the state and ethnic minorities (Ramkumar, 2015). The Mueang Fai community in northern Thailand has enhanced its sense of responsibility and collective cooperation in the irrigation system through traditional religious rituals and beliefs. These rituals not only promote people's respect and cherishing of water resources but also effectively maintain the functionality and sustainability of the irrigation system (Sarawut,

2020). Cultural adaptation and livelihood security in response to the agricultural transformation of Swidden communities in northern Laos, and how communities are adjusting their beliefs and practices to cope with future challenges (McAllister, 2015).

The foregoing cases highlight the close relationship between agricultural practices and religious activities. This relationship is not only reflected in the management of agricultural resources but also in the community's respect for natural resources and the power of faith in promoting ecological protection. These studies emphasize the diverse functions of religious beliefs in agricultural production, from maintaining ecological diversity to enhancing community cohesion and even adapting and implementing survival strategies in the face of external economic and policy pressures. These factors have a profound impact on the method and effect of heritage protection.

## Eco-Cultural Complex

The eco-cultural complex (ECC) is formed by the close interaction between natural ecosystems and human cultural activities in a geographical area. The ECC embodies the symbiotic relationship between natural and cultural elements and is the product of human activities in the natural environment (Norgaard, 2006). The ECC usually includes traditional land use methods, religious or belief systems, cultural landscapes, and social structures related to the environment (Maffi, 2004). It is not only the intersection of biodiversity and cultural diversity but also the core of local knowledge and ecological practices (Berkes, 2008). In this framework, the protection and management of the ECC needs to take into account the sustainable use of natural resources and the inheritance of cultural heritage (Pretty et al., 2009). Therefore, the ECC is key to understanding and maintaining the dynamic relationship between humans and nature (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2013).

The ECC is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates the social-ecological system, cultural landscape, eco-cultural diversity, sustainable development, co-management, and ecosystem service theories, providing a

comprehensive analytical framework for understanding and managing complex landscapes where ecology and culture are closely intertwined. It aims to understand the interaction and symbiotic relationship between ecological and cultural systems. This theory emphasizes that a complex and mutually beneficial relationship exists between the natural environment and cultural practices, which together shape and maintain the ecological balance and cultural characteristics of a specific region (Berkes, 2012; Plieninger & Bieling, 2012). Through this interdependent relationship, the health of the ecosystem and the continuity of culture can be maintained simultaneously (Pretty et al., 2009). In the cultural landscape, the interaction between ecosystems and cultural practices is at the core of the ECC. These interactions are reflected in a variety of cultural activities, such as agriculture, forest management, and traditional architecture. These activities not only affect the structure and function of the ecosystem but also maintain the cultural identity of the community through intergenerational inheritance (Plieninger & Bieling, 2012; Pretty, 2011).

Although the ECC provides an important framework for understanding the interaction between ecological and cultural systems, future research is still required to further explore its application and challenges in different cultural contexts and ecological environments (Berkes, 2012; Plieninger & Bieling, 2012). How to best use the ECC theory to guide sustainable development policies and practices remains an important issue that needs to be addressed (Folke et al., 2004; Pretty, 2011).

"Community empowerment" responds to and summarizes the value of the ECC in the context of a theoretical model while also responding to the inherent logic or essence of community participation. The research and practice led by the ECC ultimately focus on the core issue of community participation. As the main force in cultural heritage protection, the community can transfer the power of cultural heritage protection from the government to members of the community. "Community empowerment" is a feasible and highly suitable method for communities and groups of different cultural backgrounds to work together. The transfer of power in cultural heritage protection, that is, the

transfer of management rights from the government or external organizations to the local community, is one of the core strategies of community empowerment (Waterton & Smith, 2010). It can use the community's sense of identity and belonging to cultural heritage to improve participation and initiative (Smith, 2006). Therefore, community empowerment also emphasizes the organizational and advocacy obligations of community management, which include mobilizing community members to participate in conservation projects, striving for resource support, and communicating and coordinating with external stakeholders to effectively integrate resources from all parties and ensure project sustainability (Labonte & Laverack, 2001).

## METHODOLOGY

### Case Study

#### Participant Observation and Fieldwork

This study takes the cultural landscape of Jinhua Mountain and the Manxianlin area in Jinhua Town, Jianchuan County, as the case study object (Figures 2 and 3) and mainly uses participatory observation to collect qualitative data (see Figure 5 for details). Secondly, combined with fieldwork, empirical data such as the status of cultural relics and geographical information were collected.

#### Interviews

The interviews were divided into four groups, each with different formats, objectives, locations, times, and number of participants (Figure 4). Only the number of interviewees who provided key information were included in this study, equating to approximately 95 people.

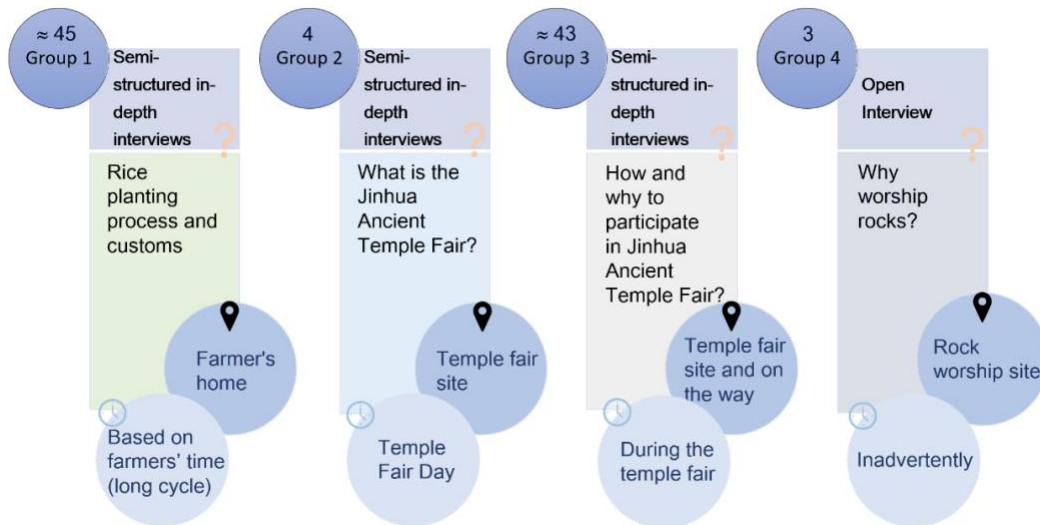
#### Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

Thematic analysis was applied to the coding of data from participant observations, field investigations, and interviews (Figure 5). Secondly, based on the ECC, the "cultural landscape level" was introduced to analyze the levels and characteristics of cultural landscapes (Figure 14).



**Figure 4**

*Interview Design: Interview Format, Objectives, Location and Time, and Number of Interviewees*



**Figure 5**

*Key Information in the Data*

Theme 1 Socio-cultural practices-1: Traditional agricultural activities	Rice planting process (Figure 7)			
Theme 2 Socio-cultural practices-2: Religious worship activities	Rice fields	Collective (fixed time and place)	Rice planting customs	During the planting cycle (Has fixed and specific content)
	Jinhua Mountain			Agricultural off-season (Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair)
		Collective (fixed time)	Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair (Route 1)	
			Ancestor worship, Qingming Festival and Zhongyuan Festival (Jinhua Mountain Ancient Tombs)	
			Worship the land on the first and fifteenth day of every lunar month (the land temple at the foot of the mountain)	
	Personal (non-fixed time)	Family-Ancestor Worship (Jinhua Mountain Ancient Tombs)		
	Sacrifice to the sky (Wenfeng Tower) at the highest point between the two mountains (fixed time)			
	Manxianlin	Collective (fixed time)	Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair (passing by Wenfeng Tower)	(Route 2)
Personal (non-fixed time)		Worship the God of Wealth (Temple of the God of Wealth)		
		Worship rocks, stone statues, stone towers, stone archways (whenever you encounter them, necessary or customary)		
Theme 3 Other Social-cultural practices (agriculture, forestry, specialty products)	Jinhua Mountain (foot and mid-mountain)	Corn, vegetables, chestnuts, walnuts, fruits, wild food, etc.		
Theme 4 Cultural landscape	Cultural landscape level analysis (Figure 14)			

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Socio-Cultural Practices-1: Traditional Agricultural Activities

The soil type in the study area is paddy, so the most widely planted crop in the area is rice, followed by corn. There is a long history in Jianchuan of rice cultivation. In the local Bai language, rice is pronounced "god." The first, second, and third unearthed cultural relics at the Jianchuan Haimenkou site include carbonized rice remains. According to C14 dating, from about the thirteenth to the fourth century BC, the ancestors in the area possessed the traditional habit of planting rice (Xue et al., 2022). Ancient records dating back as far as the late Han Dynasty to the early Tang Dynasty, Jianchuan show "hoe farming" tools, while in the middle and late Tang Nanzhao until the Ming and Qing Dynasties, cultivation techniques such as seed selection, seedling cultivation, and transplanting were mastered (Local Chronicle Compilation Committee of Jianchuan County, 1978–2005).

Following a review of the literature, in-depth interviews, and long-term observation, almost every link to rice cultivation in this area was found to be accompanied by one or more related cultivation customs (Figure 6) and some traditional experiences, preserved and passed down in the form of oral sayings. Over a long period of time, Jianchuan farmers have summarized a set of scientific and complete traditional local cultivation practices, as shown in Figure 7.

In addition, the abundant forestry resources make forestry-related products such as seasonal wild plants important economic sources in the region. For example, there are more than 20 varieties of wild edible fungi, such as matsutake, wood ear, boletus, shiitake mushrooms, miscellaneous fungi, white azalea, pine buds, bamboo vegetables, bracken, toon buds, tree flowers, etc. (Local Chronicle Compilation Committee of Jianchuan County, 1999). The growth of edible wild plants provides multiple benefits for the ecological environment, while the yield of edible wild plants can be used as an important indicator for testing the quality of the ecological environment to a certain extent.

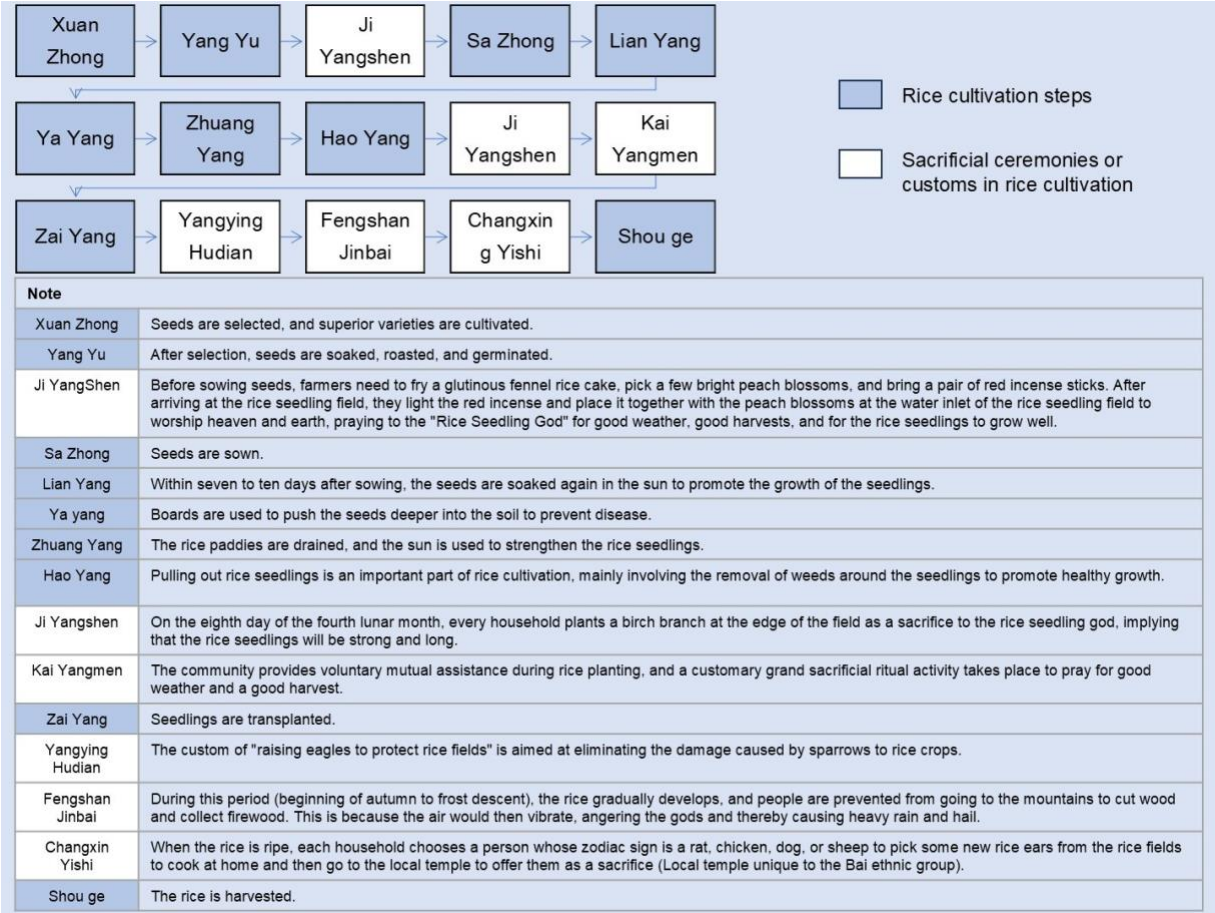
**Figure 6**

*The Traditional Custom of "Opening the Rice-Planting Gate". (i.e. the custom of "Kai Yangmen" in Figure 7)*



*Note.* From *Local Chronicles of Jianchuan County, Yunnan Province: 1978-2005*, by Local Chronicle Compilation Committee of Jianchuan County, 1978–2005 (p. 66), Yunnan Publishing Group. Copyright 1978–2005 by Local Chronicle Compilation Committee of Jianchuan County.

**Figure 7**  
*Customs During Rice Cultivation*



*Note.* The data were collected from in-depth interviews with 15 households in five villages around the study area, involving approximately 45 people, as well as a literature review, and then finally analyzed and coded by the author (2024).

**Socio-cultural practices-2:  
Religious worship activities**

Religious worship activities in this study mainly include the Jinhua Mountain Temple Fair and planting customs. The Jinhua Mountain Temple Fair is a traditional religious worship activity in Jianchuan but also has a wider scope. The Jinhua Ancient Temple was first built in the late Yuan Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty. In the 1980s, local people raised funds and rebuilt it on the original site. The temple includes Laojun Hall, Sanqing Hall, Sanguan Hall, Wanghai Tower, Yuhuang Pavilion, Tudi Temple, etc., which are essentially Taoist. However, for a long time, it has been integrated with the primitive religious views of the Jianchuan Bai people to form a religious place with regional and ethnic characteristics. It is very

inclusive and accommodates planting customs. The concepts and rituals of the local traditional planting customs are based on primitive religion. During the two temple fairs, the same regional ethnic background brings the wishes contained in the customs to the Taoist places.

The Jinhua Ancient Temple in Jianchuan holds two grand "Chaodouhui" every year, commonly known by locals as the Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair. "Chaodouhui" is recorded as "zhul fvx dex" in the Bai language, originating from the worship of the "Northern Dipper" and "Southern Dipper" by ancient Chinese ancestors. Since the Qin and Han Dynasties, historical records show that worshipping the Northern Dipper and Southern Dipper can prolong life and avoid disasters (Xiao, 2015). The temple fair is held twice a year, from the first to the sixth day of the sixth lunar month,



commonly known as "Chao Nan Dou," which means worshipping six stars, and from the first to the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, commonly known as "Chao Bei Dou," which means worshipping nine stars. At that time, every household in the community near Jinhua Mountain would bring incense, bouquets of flowers, rice cakes, fragrant oil, and other worship items to the Jinhua Ancient Temple to participate in the ceremony (Figure 8).

Both temple fairs were held during the off-farm season in the study area to allow people time to go up the mountain to worship. Some villagers would stay in the temple for a few days to help handle various matters pertaining to the temple fair until its conclusion.

1. Local oral statement-1: "In the sixth lunar month, rice planting is completed. At this time, we will pray for good weather and good crops to grow. In the ninth lunar month, rice will mature. During this period, we will pray for a good harvest and smooth distribution." (Farmer, Xizhouguan Village, Jinhua Town, on the first day of the sixth

lunar month in 2023)

2. Local oral statement-2: "I came on my own to help this year. Every year, someone organizes it. It is spontaneous and voluntary." (Farmer, Wenhua Village, Jinhua Town, on the third day of the sixth lunar month in 2023).

3. Local oral statement-3: "Many people participate in the temple fair. They must eat vegetarian food in the temple at noon. This year, I brought a lot of vegetables that I had grown myself and gave them to everyone for free." (Farmer, Zhongdeng Village, Jinhua Town, on the fifth day of the ninth lunar month in 2023)

4. Local oral statement-4: "Many people come to worship, and some come to help. Everyone is accumulating merits and praying for good luck." (Farmer, Beimen Village, Jinhua Town, the host of the temple fair, on the fifth day of the ninth lunar month in 2023)

5. Two routes can be taken to reach the Jinhua Ancient Temple, either of which enables people to pass through all the cultural relics and

**Figure 8**

*Community Members Visit the Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair, Worshipping Cultural Relics Along the Way*



temple fairs at Jinhua Ancient Temple (Figure 9). The main reasons are as follows:

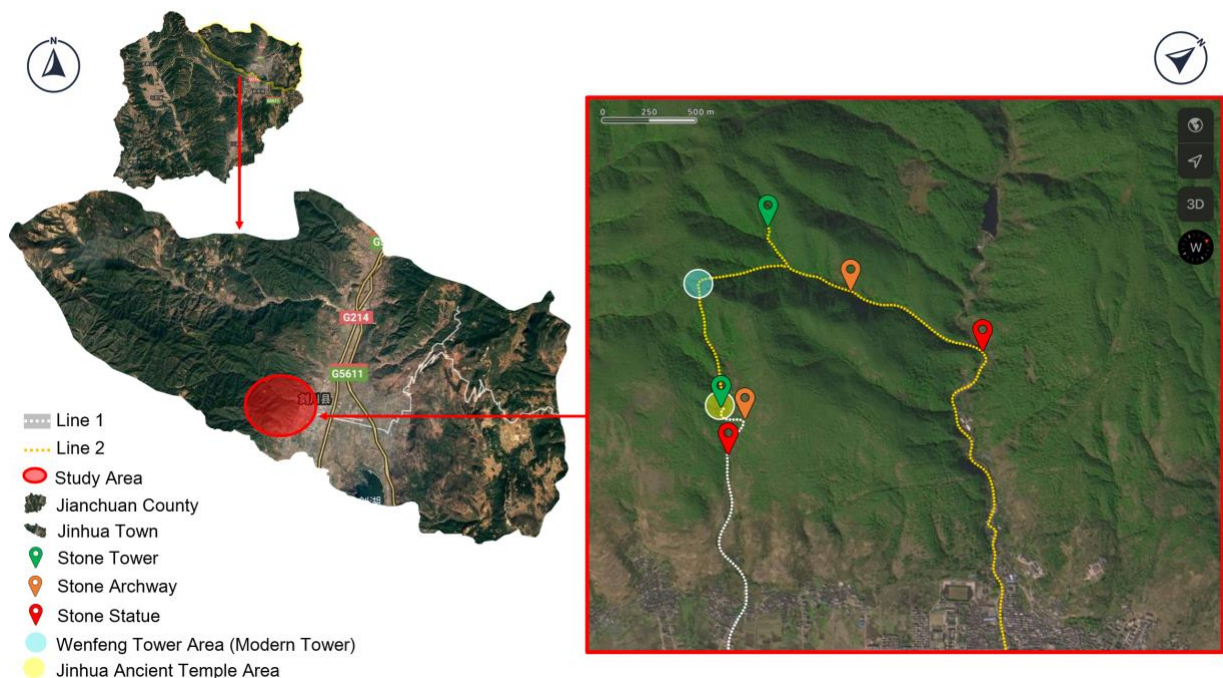
1. People taking the second route can reach Wenfeng Tower before reaching Jinhua Ancient Temple and complete the ceremony of offering sacrifice to the sky.
2. People who take the first route to the Jinhua Ancient Temple usually return from the second route to worship at the cultural relic sites on Manxianlin Mountain. If one returns by the same route, one will miss the important ceremony of offering sacrifices to the sky and be unable to worship the relics in the second route.
3. Sacrificing to the sky and the tower. More than 90% of the population of Jianchuan County is of the Bai ethnic group. In the traditional belief system of the Bai ethnic group, offering sacrifices to the sky and earth is the first of the sacrificial activities. Offering sacrifices to heaven requires finding a place with high terrain and a wide view (Chen et al., 2002). The terrain environment of Wenfeng Tower is the best place to offer sacrifices to the sky. In addition, in Chinese,

"wen" means culture, and "feng" means mountain peak. Therefore, offering sacrifices to the pagoda built in a high place implies a high academic achievement or fame. Since the two sacrificial routes finally intersect at Wenfeng Tower, the local government rebuilt Wenfeng Tower in 2001 in response to folk beliefs and the need for worship. These cultural relics are endowed with a sense of place and divinity (Figure 10).

4. The way people in Manxianlin worship cultural relics is very special. Manxianlin is a famous local tourist attraction. Only worship and sacrifice can take place in the scenic area. Since fires are prohibited, incense and candles cannot be used for worship here. However, the lack of fire in the traditional worship method has promoted and activated the continuation of another simple form of worshiping behavior. As shown in Figure 11, the Manxianlin Stone Pagoda is built on the top of a huge natural rock. People usually bring or pick up a wooden stick nearby and insert it between the cracks of the rocks.

**Figure 9**

*Two Routes Leading to the Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair and the Locations of Cultural Relics Along the Way*

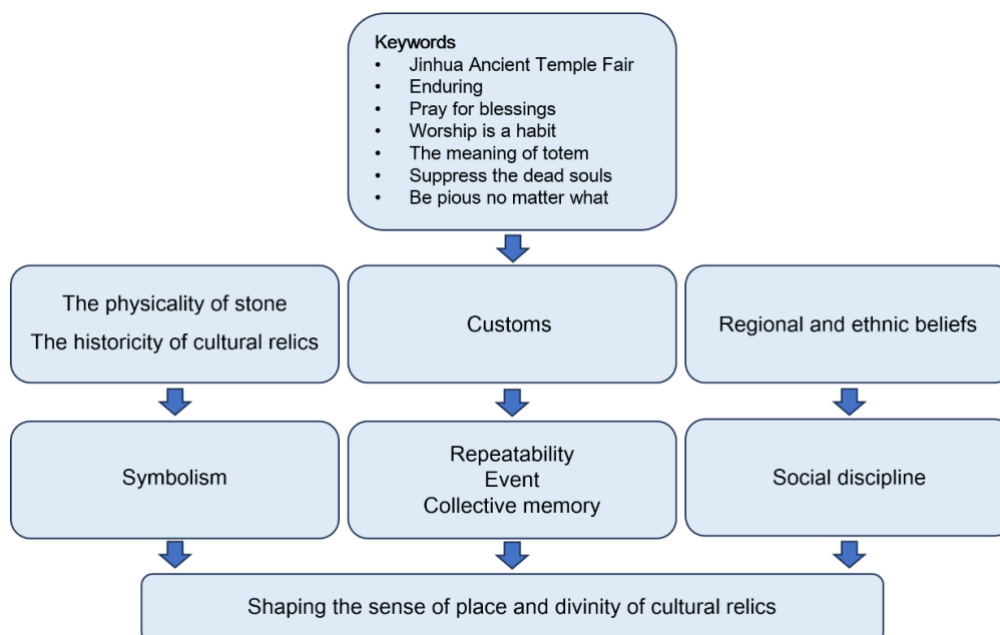


*Note.* Adapted from *The Map of Jinhua Town, Jianchuan County*, by Apple Maps and BIGEMAP, 2025. Copyright 2025 by Apple and BIGEMAP, marked by the author.



**Figure 10**

*Analysis Based on Local People's Oral Descriptions of the Reason for Worshipping Cultural Relics*



*Note.* The data were collected and extracted by the author from two Jinhua ancient temple fairs in 2023 and interviews with 43 local people who worshiped on the mountain, and then finally analyzed and coded by the author (2024).

**Figure 11**

*The Manxianlin Stone Pagoda and How People Worship at the Stone Pagoda and Natural Rocks*



This activity is carried out "in the hope of receiving blessings from the gods living in the rocks" (oral-1). The wooden stick has the visual effect of supporting the rocks, meaning "relying on the gods" by using it as one's "backer" (oral-2). "The wooden stick should be strong to ensure the 'backer' is reliable" (oral-3). (Note: all three narrators are local villagers.)

People regard the wooden stick as a kind of sustenance. This worshipping behavior originates from the animism of the Bai people in Jianchuan's natural worship. Animism is a deep-rooted belief of the Bai people. According to the Jianchuan County Chronicles, "Heaven, earth, animals, plants, stones, water, fire, etc. can all be used as objects of sustenance or worship" (Local Chronicle Compilation Committee of Jianchuan County, 1999).



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Dynamic Interaction Between Agricultural Practices and Religious Activities

Most agricultural sacrificial activities have developed from traditional agricultural practices and continue to this day. Figure 12 shows the agricultural cycle formed in the study area under the influence of factors such as rice, climate, and topography, as well as the timing of religious activities formed within the cycle. From crop planting to land maintenance, one cycle equates to about a year. The study findings reveal that the Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair is held twice a year. According to the international calendar and taking 2024 as an example, the corresponding Gregorian calendar dates are July 6–11 and October 3–11. Around July, farmers work to maintain crops that are about to mature. People are eager for a good harvest. In this less busy time, people's enthusiasm for sacrifice is particularly strong. Around October, people have just harvested their crops, and Jianchuan gradually enters the cold winter. The idle period gives the land enough time to recover. Therefore, this period has become the second slack season of the year. People thank the gods for this year's good harvest and pray for a good harvest, which once again ignites the enthusiasm of local people for sacrifice.

In the study area, there is a dynamic interactive relationship between agricultural practices and religious activities. The results show that the role of religious activities in agricultural practices is not necessarily limited to sacrifices or prayers for a good harvest but runs through the entire agricultural cycle, from sowing and farming to harvesting, with every key step influenced by religious rituals and beliefs (Figure 7). This influence not only regulates the timing and operation of agricultural practices but also passes on traditional agricultural knowledge from one generation to another through repeated rituals. Agricultural practices, in turn, influence the form and content of religious activities to a certain extent. For example, this includes rice customs and the location of worship ceremonies (Figure 7). This dynamic interactive relationship shows that agricultural practices and religious

activities do not exist independently but interact with each other to construct a cultural ecosystem jointly.

### Agricultural Practices and Religious Activities Shape the Cultural Landscape

Agricultural practices and religious activities jointly shape the cultural landscape with a unique ECC (Figures 13 and 14; Table 1). The structure of this cultural landscape can be divided into three levels: the top layer, middle layer, and bottom layer. This visualized landscape structure demonstrates how cultural practices, beliefs, and historical elements are intertwined with the ecosystem, ultimately creating a dynamically balanced ecological and cultural system (Spirn, 1998).

The "layers of cultural landscape" concept helps one to analyze and understand the components of the cultural landscape and their connections. However, no book is completely dedicated to this concept, although some classic works have analyzed the layers of the cultural landscape in the process of exploring the cultural landscape, cultural geography, and the relationship between humans and nature. Carl O. Sauer's classic book "The Morphology of Landscape" (1925) laid the foundation for cultural landscape research. Although Sauer did not explicitly propose the "layers of the cultural landscape" concept, he advocated understanding the landscape from multiple perspectives, laying a theoretical framework for layered analysis (Sauer, 1925). Jackson's "Discovering the Vernacular Landscape" (1984) explored in depth the shaping of the landscape by daily life and ordinary people. His work emphasizes the different layers of the landscape, especially the importance of "bottom-level" elements in the formation of the cultural landscape (Jackson, 1985). In *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984), Cosgrove regards the landscape as a "symbol" and analyzes how humans give different levels of meaning to the landscape from a social and cultural perspective. Although there is no clear concept of "level," his research has important implications for understanding the multi-level characteristics of cultural landscapes (Cosgrove, 1998). Kenneth Taylor and Jane Lennon's

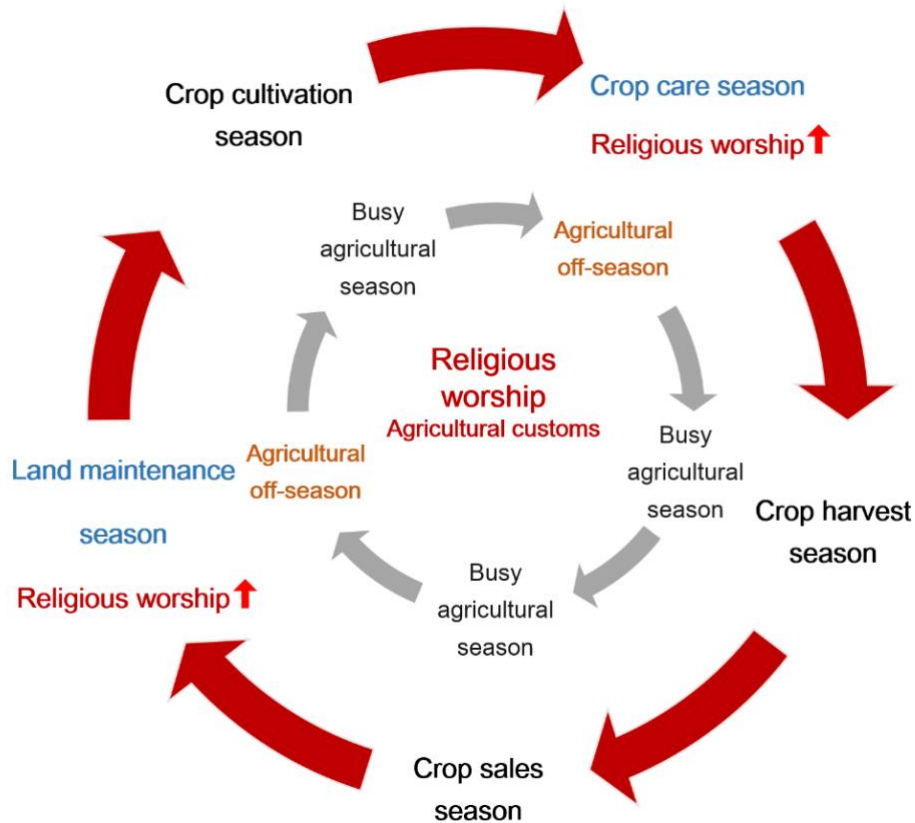
Cultural Landscapes: A Bridge Between Culture and Nature (2011) focuses on the role of cultural landscapes as a bridge between nature and culture, providing a relatively systematic analysis of the different levels of the cultural landscape. It is an important reference for understanding the levels of cultural landscapes (Taylor & Lennon, 2011). David Lowenthal's *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1998) mainly discusses cultural heritage but also involves the protection and utilization of different levels in cultural landscapes, especially how top-level symbolic relics play a role in cultural identity (Lowenthal, 1998). Although these works do not focus entirely on the "levels of cultural landscapes," they

provide theoretical support and inspiration for understanding the ECC by exploring the complexity, multidimensionality, and multi-level nature of cultural landscapes.

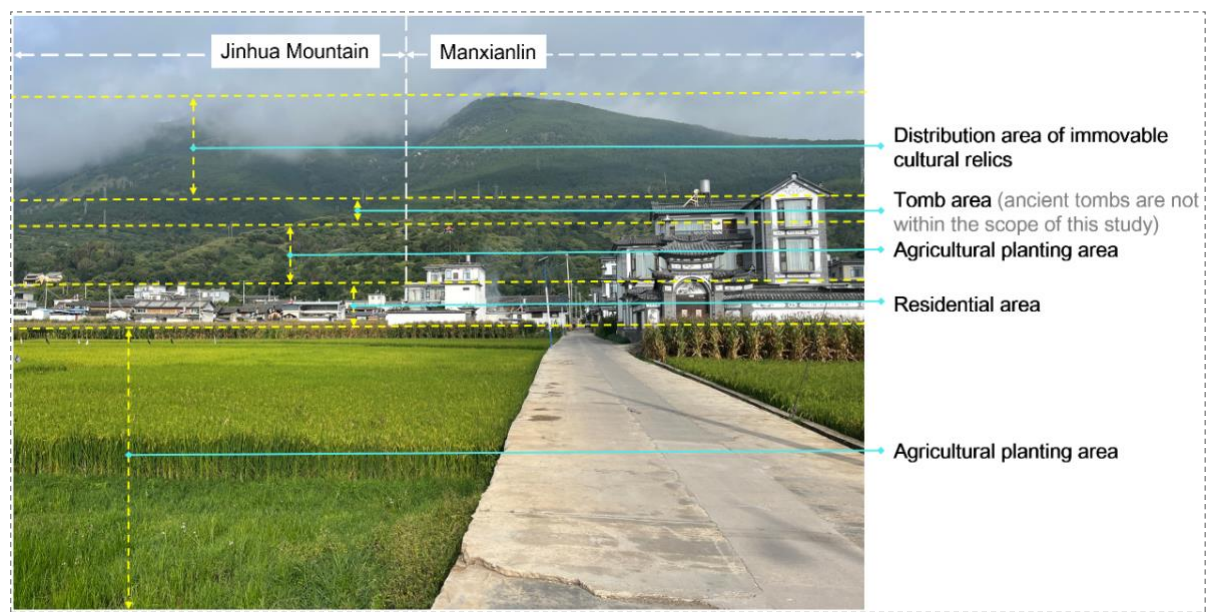
Figure 14 shows eight key elements: stone towers, stone archways, stone statues, wild food, ancient tombs, agricultural and forestry crops, communities, and crops, along with the geographical distribution characteristics from top to bottom. Community members living here have gradually created these elements under the trend of material and spiritual needs, thus forming an interdependent natural and cultural environment.

**Figure 12**

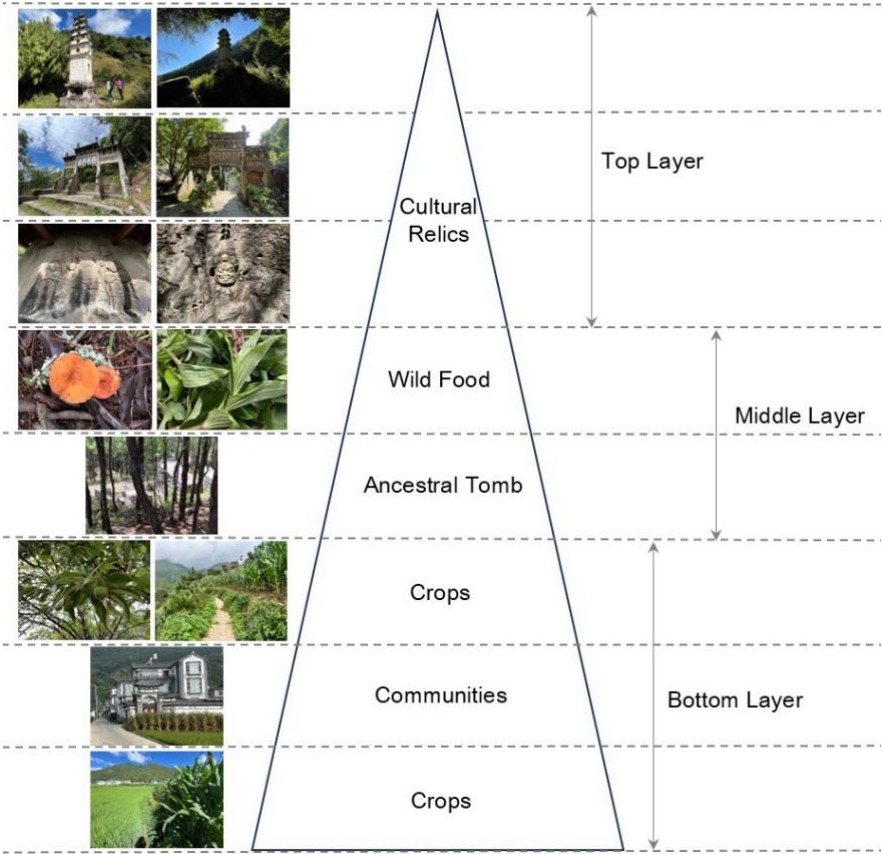
*The Agricultural Cycle in the Study Area and the Timing of Religious Activities Formed Within the Cycle*



**Figure 13**  
*Surface Layer of the Cultural Landscape in the Study Area*



**Figure 14**  
*The Composition of Regional Cultural Landscape Elements and the Eco-Cultural Complex*



**Table 1***How Agricultural Practices and Religious Activities Shape the Cultural Landscape*

<b>Layers of the cultural landscape</b>	<b>Analysis and discussion</b>
Top layer	<p>Its existence enriches the content and form of religious activities.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It has led to the formation of two conventional routes for participating in the Jinhua Ancient Temple Fair.</li> <li>2. In the slack season it provides more places for the worship of "agricultural vision" by local people, which means that crops have more gods to bless them.</li> </ol>
Middle layer	<p>The middle layer plays an important role in maintaining the natural and cultural ecological balance of the area, providing a continuous guarantee for the social and cultural activities of the upper and lower layers.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Under the influence of the primitive concept of "all things have spirits," wild plants are both food and spiritual things.</li> <li>2. Under the influence of ancestor worship, out of awe for the ancestors, the mountains and forests around the ancient tombs have avoided over-development, providing a healthy natural environment for the growth of wild food.</li> </ol>
Bottom layer	<p>This is the foundation of the eco-cultural system. The form of geographical space is determined by the economic base and reacts to the social production mode, affecting the cultural structure of community members (Harvey, 2020). The bottom layer is equivalent to the economic foundation of society, mainly composed of agricultural and forestry practices and the residences of community members. Agricultural practice activities are the basic form of material production. They not only provide economic support for the community but also lay the material foundation of the social structure and directly determine the social system and cultural characteristics of the upper layer (Engels &amp; Untermann, 2021). Religious beliefs and festivals largely reflect beliefs and customs related to nature and agricultural production. Therefore, the agricultural activities at the bottom have a profound impact on the cultural arts and religious beliefs of the upper layer, thus shaping the characteristics of the entire cultural landscape.</p>

## The Role of Agricultural Practices and Religious Worship in the Protection of Cultural Heritage

Religious worship activities allow communities to participate in the protection of cultural heritage. Religious sites and worship rituals are often closely linked to specific natural landscapes and historical relics, becoming an important part of the community's collective memory and identity

(Figure 10). Through the regular custom of temple fairs, communities not only establish spiritual connections with historical and natural landscapes but also promote the continuation of other cultural heritage through the renovation of religious sites. The material and spiritual needs of the community ensure that it can participate thoroughly in the protection of cultural heritage. The external manifestation of this internal demand is the deep interaction between agricultural practices and religious activities.

The religious festivals—two temple fairs held regularly every year in Jinhua Ancient Temple provide an important opportunity to maintain and repair religious buildings and landscapes. The reconstruction of the Jinhua Ancient Temple and Wenfeng Pagoda has not only helped to continue traditional religious practices but also strengthened the understanding of the importance of heritage among community members. External shocks such as tourism and forest fire prevention have led to changes in the way the Manxianlin people worship stone towers and natural rocks. However, driven by their enthusiasm for agricultural sacrifices and other sacrificial motives, people have turned to using tree branches instead of incense and candles. Compared with incense and candles, wooden sticks are more environmentally friendly and not only allow an ancient folk worship method to continue but also help to prevent forest fires. They are interdependent in a dynamic cultural ecosystem, and these complex relationships work together to influence the development and protection of cultural heritage.

Community empowerment is a strategy for community participation in cultural heritage protection. Cultural heritage protection is not only the responsibility of the government and experts but also represents the spontaneous behavior of the community through daily practice and belief inheritance. Through empowerment, community groups, as the main forces in cultural heritage protection, are deeply involved in actual operations, which is the key to achieving effective protection. The process of social and cultural practice is the most effective way to achieve this protection strategy.

## CONCLUSION

In Jianchuan's unique geographical and ethnic background, there exists a complex interactive relationship between agricultural practices dominated by traditional rice culture and religious activities. Religious activities run through the entire agricultural cycle, and agricultural practices affect the form and content of religious activities. This dynamic interactive relationship shows that agricultural practices and religious activities do not exist independently but interact through

repeated rituals and continuous agricultural traditions to construct a social and cultural ecology jointly.

The ECC cultural landscape reflects the profound connection between human activities and the natural environment. Agricultural production and religious activities complement each other, ultimately shaping a unique cultural landscape. Religious activities largely reflect beliefs and customs related to nature and agricultural production. The cultural landscape level shows that agricultural practice is the basic form of material production. It not only provides economic support for the community but also lays the material foundation of the cultural landscape structure and directly determines the cultural form of the middle and upper layers. This synergy not only protects and continues the tangible and intangible cultural heritage but also promotes the sustainable development of the cultural ecosystem.

This study shows that considering the ecological value of cultural heritage from the perspective of the overall cultural landscape and paying attention to the role of community participation as well as social and cultural practices in cultural heritage protection can help communities improve and adapt to the difficulties of government-centered maintenance of immovable cultural relics distributed in special natural environments from which intangible cultural heritage will also benefit. Community empowerment is a strategy in cultural heritage protection that achieves the effect of deep participation in actual operations by emphasizing community groups as the main driving force. Community groups are the main force in agricultural practices and religious activities, and community empowerment is a key entry point to achieving this conservation strategy.

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