

CULTURAL ECOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: HARMONIZING ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL CONSERVATION IN CHUXIONG AMID MODERNIZATION

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 3 February 2025

Revised: 17 February 2025

Published: 11 March 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the harmonization of environmental and cultural conservation within the sustainable development framework in Chuxiong, a region distinguished by its rich ecological diversity and ethnic heritage. Using cultural ecology as a guiding perspective, this study explores how traditional practices and local knowledge can be integrated into sustainable strategies that support both ecological health and cultural preservation in the face of modernization. Through qualitative data from community surveys, interviews, and a comprehensive literature review, the research reveals that Chuxiong's indigenous agricultural methods, architectural styles, and cultural rituals contribute significantly to environmental sustainability. However, challenges such as industrial expansion and cultural erosion due to urbanization emphasize the need for adaptive policies that balance development with conservation goals. This study highlights the importance of involving local communities in planning and policy-making to ensure that conservation strategies are both environmentally effective and culturally meaningful, providing insights for similar regions navigating the pressures of modernization. Furthermore, sustainable rural environmental design is crucial for maintaining Chuxiong's cultural landscape, with strategies such as revitalizing traditional architecture, eco-conscious spatial planning, and the integration of heritage elements into modern infrastructure offering practical solutions to balance modernization and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Cultural Ecology, Sustainable Development, Rural Environmental Design, Cultural Preservation

CITATION INFORMATION: Li, R., Puntien, P., Inkuer, A., & Mayusoh, C. (2025). Cultural Ecology and Sustainable Development: Harmonizing Environmental and Cultural Conservation in Chuxiong Amid Modernization. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(3), 54.

INTRODUCTION

Chuxiong, located in central Yunnan Province, China, is renowned for its ecological diversity and vibrant ethnic heritage, particularly as the cultural heartland of the Yi people. With its distinct environmental landscapes - from river valleys to mountainous plateaus—Chuxiong supports a variety of ecosystems that sustain not only local biodiversity but also deeply rooted cultural practices. Known as the "grand garden of Yi ethnic culture," the region has a rich tradition of cultural rituals, architectural styles, and agricultural methods shaped by its unique environmental conditions. However, Chuxiong now faces pressures of modernization, as rapid urbanization and industrialization bring both economic growth and environmental challenges, such as resource depletion, pollution, and erosion of cultural traditions.

This research addresses the need to harmonize Chuxiong's environmental sustainability with its cultural heritage preservation by exploring how principles of cultural ecology can inform sustainable development strategies. Cultural ecology provides a framework to understand the interdependent relationship between cultural practices and environmental settings, highlighting how traditional knowledge and customs can support conservation efforts and foster resilience in local communities. By focusing on traditional agricultural practices, local architectural forms, and community rituals, this study examines the ways in which these elements contribute to a sustainable rural design that respects both cultural identity and ecological health.

The central issue addressed in this research is the potential for integrating traditional knowledge with modern sustainable development practices in a way that preserves cultural heritage and supports environmental goals. Specifically, this study seeks to answer how Chuxiong's indigenous cultural practices can be adapted to modern development frameworks to achieve sustainable rural growth that respects local cultural and ecological contexts. The hypothesis guiding this research is that traditional practices in Chuxiong offer valuable insights and techniques that, if appropriately integrated, can enhance ecological sustainability and cultural preservation, even amid modernization pressures. This research has a broad scope, analyzing Chuxiong's environmental, cultural, and social dynamics, to offer insights into policy frameworks that promote sustainable development through community participation and cultural sensitivity.

Research Objectives

To analyze the application of cultural ecology in achieving sustainable rural development in Chuxiong, with a focus on environmental design strategies that support cultural preservation, continuity, and rural development.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The existing body of literature on cultural ecology and sustainable development offers a framework for understanding how traditional knowledge and practices can support rural sustainability. Specifically, this review explores studies related to cultural ecology, the conservation value of traditional architecture, the challenges of modernization, and case studies that demonstrate the integration of cultural and ecological considerations in rural development. This foundation supports the idea that Chuxiong's cultural heritage and environmental assets can be harmonized within sustainable development practices, even amid increasing modernization pressures.

Cultural Ecology and Sustainable Development

Cultural ecology, introduced by Julian Haynes Steward (1955), focuses on the interactions between cultural practices and environmental settings, particularly how communities adapt to their natural surroundings. This perspective is instrumental in understanding Chuxiong's context, where cultural practices of the Yi ethnic group and other local communities are closely linked to environmental conditions. The literature on cultural ecology, including works by Fikret Berkes and Carl Folke (1998) and Wen Zhou (2020), argues that traditional ecological

knowledge (TEK) provides valuable insights into managing natural resources sustainably. In Chuxiong, TEK is manifested in practices such as the strategic use of building materials, community land management, and water conservation, which are deeply embedded in the local culture and contribute to ecological resilience.

Traditional Practices and Environmental Conservation

Research on traditional construction methods within rural communities highlights their alignment with environmental sustainability. In Chuxiong, traditional architecture such as duomu (stilted wooden houses) and tuzhangfang (rammed earth houses) reflects a symbiotic relationship with the environment. According to Xinyi Li and Wei Tang (2019), duomu structures, typically found in lower-lying areas, are elevated on wooden stilts to provide ventilation, protect against humidity, and prevent flood damage. These designs are particularly effective in Chuxiong's varied climate, offering natural solutions that reduce energy use and environmental impact. Tuzhangfang buildings, common in the highland areas, use compacted earth that provides natural insulation, keeping interiors cool in summer and warm in winter. These structures are energy-efficient, durable, and cost-effective, demonstrating how traditional knowledge contributes to sustainable architecture.

Similar examples of sustainable architecture in other parts of the world reinforce the value of such practices. For example, traditional adobe houses in South America and rammed earth buildings in Africa showcase the advantages of using locally available materials for thermal regulation and durability (Coomes & Burt, 2001). These examples support the hypothesis that Chuxiong's traditional practices offer sustainable design principles that can serve as models in other ecologically sensitive areas.

Challenges of Modernization on Cultural and Environmental Sustainability

The pressures of modernization, particularly in rural China, often threaten both environmental sustainability and cultural heritage. As Yu Liu and Shaobo He (2020) and Xiaowei Wang and Lei Zhang (2019) have observed, industrialization and urbanization can lead to deforestation, pollution, and the loss of traditional cultural landscapes. In Chuxiong, these pressures have introduced new challenges, including resource depletion and the potential erosion of cultural practices as younger generations are drawn to urban centers. Political ecology research by Paul Robbins (2004) suggests that sustainable development in such regions requires an understanding of the political and economic forces that drive environmental degradation. Integrating community-based conservation efforts with local governance structures can help mitigate the negative effects of modernization by empowering local communities to protect their resources and cultural heritage.

Systems theory, as proposed by Howard Thomas Odum (1983), offers another valuable perspective, advocating for a holistic approach to understanding human-environment interactions. In Chuxiong, applying systems theory can reveal the interdependencies between cultural practices and environmental factors, such as the role of community rituals in maintaining social cohesion and supporting environmental stewardship. This interconnected perspective supports the development of policies that address the complex realities of rural modernization, balancing economic growth with conservation goals.

Case Studies on Sustainable Rural Design

Comparative case studies from rural regions around the world provide insights into sustainable rural design that respects cultural and ecological values. For instance, in Tuscany and Provence, rural tourism has been developed around heritage conservation, creating economic opportunities while preserving local traditions (Berti & Bellucci, 2016). Such models could inspire similar initiatives in Chuxiong, where cultural tourism focused on Yi heritage and ecological attractions could provide sustainable economic benefits. Additionally, Henry Sanoff (2000) emphasizes the importance of participatory design, where involving community members in the planning and decision-making process leads to development outcomes that

align with local values and needs. This approach is particularly relevant in Chuxiong, where community involvement in conservation projects could reinforce both environmental and cultural objectives.

Research in Southeast Asia also demonstrates the success of community-driven tourism as a strategy for sustainable development. Melanie K. Smith (2010) examines cases in Thailand where cultural and eco-tourism have provided local communities with economic alternatives that support conservation efforts. In Chuxiong, a similar model of eco-cultural tourism could highlight local traditions and promote environmental stewardship while creating economic opportunities that reduce reliance on unsustainable practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multi-faceted approach to systematically explore the interplay between Chuxiong's cultural heritage, environmental sustainability, and development pressures. The research focuses on various elements, including traditional architecture, geographic environment, folk customs, and ethnic culture, to understand how these factors collectively contribute to sustainable rural development. The methodology is divided into the following steps:

Step 1: Background Research and Theoretical Foundation

To provide a solid theoretical basis, an extensive review of literature on cultural ecology, sustainable rural development, and Chuxiong's unique environmental and cultural context was conducted. Sources included academic journals, historical records, and government reports, which helped contextualize Chuxiong's distinct geographic environment and ethnic traditions within broader cultural and ecological frameworks. This literature review revealed insights into the connections between Chuxiong's natural environment and cultural practices, informing the research framework for investigating the sustainable use of local resources.

Step 2: Field Investigation and Data Collection

Field investigation was a critical component of this study, providing firsthand empirical data on the interconnection between Chuxiong's cultural elements and environmental sustainability. This phase was structured into the following key activities:

- 1) Preparation of Research Tools: To ensure data accuracy and comprehensiveness, multiple documentation techniques were employed, including high-resolution photography, audio recording, direct field notes, and environmental measurement tools. These tools captured fine details of traditional architecture, agricultural techniques, and natural landscapes, preserving both quantitative and qualitative evidence.
- 2) Systematic Observations: Fieldwork targeted three representative village clusters, selected based on their varying degrees of modernization impact.

Table 1 Village Modernization and Cultural-Ecological Changes

Village Name	Traditional Architecture Preservation	Modernization Level	Cultural-Ecological Changes
Village A	Well-preserved traditional architecture, mainly rammed-earth houses and wooden structures	Minimal modernization influence	Cultural customs remain vibrant, with intact traditional festivals and rituals
Village B	Partial preservation; modern materials (e.g., concrete) are increasingly used	Infrastructure development in progress (e.g., new housing, cement roads)	Cultural practices are partially affected; younger generations are less engaged in traditions

Village Name	Traditional Architecture Preservation	Modernization Level	Cultural-Ecological Changes
Village C	Most traditional buildings replaced by modern constructions	Highly urbanized with full-scale infrastructure	Significant decline in traditional culture, with fewer cultural festivals and folk practices

Observations focused on construction materials, spatial organization, cultural significance, and ecological impact, with video recordings and structured field diaries used to ensure rigorous documentation.

3) Survey-Based Data Collection: To ensure diverse perspectives, surveys were distributed to 300 respondents, the survey questions were designed to measure:

Attitudes toward traditional knowledge and environmental conservation.

Perceptions of modernization's impact on cultural heritage.

Community engagement in sustainable development initiatives.

Step 3: Interviews with Local Stakeholders

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth qualitative insights from three key stakeholder groups:

Local Community Members (5 participants): To understand intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural resilience, and lived experiences of modernization.

Environmental and Cultural Experts (3 participants): To provide professional perspectives on sustainability policies, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), and conservation challenges.

Government and Policy Representatives (3 participants): To assess the role of local governance in cultural and environmental preservation.

Interview questions were designed around four major themes:

1) Traditional Knowledge & Environmental Sustainability: How do local customs contribute to ecological balance?

2) Modernization & Cultural Change: What are the key threats to traditional practices?

3) Community Engagement in Conservation: How involved are local residents in policy discussions?

4) Future of Cultural Heritage: What policies or strategies are needed for sustainable rural development?

Step 4: Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods:

1) Qualitative Analysis: Thematic coding was applied to interview and survey data to identify key themes related to cultural identity, environmental values, and traditional practices. Patterns were noted in responses about the role of Chuxiong's geography and customs in sustaining environmental balance and cultural identity.

2) Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics were used to analyze survey data, identifying trends in community attitudes toward cultural conservation and environmental sustainability. Quantitative analysis revealed general patterns of support for sustainable practices within the community, as well as areas of concern about the impact of modernization on local customs and resources.

Limitations and Generalizability:

While the study focuses on Chuxiong, the findings have broader applicability to other rural regions facing similar modernization pressures. However, regional cultural and environmental specificities must be considered when extrapolating results. The cultural values, economic conditions, and government policies of other regions may differ, influencing the feasibility of implementing similar conservation strategies.

Future research could expand the sample size and include comparative case studies from other ethnic minority regions in China and beyond. Investigating how different cultural groups approach environmental sustainability could provide deeper insights into cross-regional adaptation of cultural ecology principles. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track the impact of modernization on cultural and environmental conservation efforts over time, allowing for a more dynamic understanding of these interactions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of this study highlight the complex interrelationship between Chuxiong's unique environmental, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, showing how these elements can be integrated into sustainable rural development. Through an analysis of Chuxiong's geographical diversity, cultural heritage, and social dynamics, several significant findings have emerged, supporting the research's objectives and providing insights into the development of culturally and environmentally sensitive design strategies.

Interplay Between Geography and Cultural Practices

Chuxiong's diverse climate zones - ranging from arid-hot river valleys to cold highlands - shape not only the natural environment but also the cultural practices and settlement patterns of its inhabitants. Field observations and survey data reveal that traditional agricultural and architectural practices are directly adapted to these specific geographic conditions. For example, in the warm plateaus and semi-mountainous areas, traditional agricultural methods such as crop rotation and intercropping are practiced to optimize soil health and water use. These methods, which have been developed over generations, ensure sustainable food production while conserving local ecosystems. The results confirm the study's hypothesis that Chuxiong's geographic diversity has fostered unique, place-based practices that are environmentally sustainable and culturally significant.

Table 2 Chuxiong Cultural Ecology Distribution and Interaction Table

No.	Region	Cultural Practices	Environmental Features	Cultural-Ecological Interaction
1	Northern (River Valley)	Yi Traditional Festival: Torch Festival	Hot and humid river valley; supports agriculture	Torch Festival relies on open communal spaces; river valley environment supports agricultural activities, enhancing community cohesion.
2	Central (Plateau)	Bimo Rituals and Ceremonies, Traditional Rammed Earth Architecture	Warm and humid plateau; suitable for crops	Plateau environment accommodates rammed earth houses' insulation needs; rituals strengthen human-nature relationships and maintain ecological balance through ceremonies.
3	Southern (Mountainous)	Handicrafts (Silverwork, Woodcarving), Cultural Heritage Sites	Cold mountainous region; rich in biodiversity	Silverwork depends on local mineral resources, and woodcarving relies on sustainable forestry; mountain ecology provides inspiration for cultural resources while being impacted by craft production.

Role of Traditional Architecture and Interior Environments

Traditional housing, including duomu and tuzhangfang, demonstrates resource-efficient designs that align with Chuxiong's diverse climates. These structures utilize local materials, such as wood and compacted earth, minimizing environmental impact and providing natural insulation suitable for Chuxiong's range of climatic conditions. Furthermore, the interior design and layout of these homes often serve cultural functions, with spaces arranged for communal activities and the display of cultural artifacts, reflecting family hierarchy and social cohesion within the community. The study's findings suggest that these traditional architectural practices not only promote environmental sustainability by conserving resources but also reinforce cultural identity and social structure. This supports the objective of integrating environmental sustainability with cultural preservation, as these buildings serve as both functional dwellings and symbols of cultural heritage.

Table 3 Chuxiong Traditional Architecture

No.	Building Type	Material	Climate Adaptability	Cultural Function
1	Duomu (Log Stacked Timber House)	Locally wood	Good ventilation, moisture-resistant	Suitable for social gatherings and family activities
2	Tuzhangfang (Rammed Earth House)	Rammed earth	Strong insulation, cold-resistant	Suitable for ancestral heritage and ritual spaces



Figure 1 Duomu (Log Stacked Timber House)

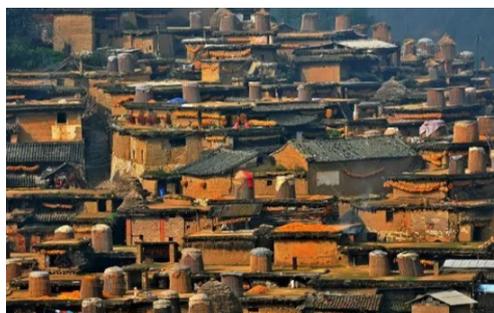


Figure 2 Tuzhangfang (Rammed Earth House)

Challenges of Modernization on Cultural and Environmental Sustainability

Modernization has led to improvements in infrastructure, economic growth, and living standards. However, these advancements have also introduced substantial environmental and cultural challenges, particularly as rapid urbanization and industrial expansion exert pressure on rural landscapes and traditional ways of life.

The environmental consequences of modernization include deforestation, resource depletion, and soil erosion due to expanding industries and urban development. Increased land use for construction and agricultural intensification has resulted in contamination of water sources, loss of biodiversity, and landscape alterations, impacting ecological stability. Additionally, the replacement of traditional Duomu (log-stacked houses) and Tuzhangfang (rammed earth houses) with modern concrete structures has led to the decline of sustainable, climate-responsive building techniques that were once integral to rural architectural traditions.

Cultural changes have also emerged as younger generations migrate to urban centers for education and employment, leading to a gradual decline in traditional agricultural practices, handicrafts, and communal festivities. The weakening of intergenerational cultural transmission threatens the long-term sustainability of heritage practices. Furthermore, while rural tourism has created economic opportunities, its rapid commercialization has raised

concerns about the authenticity and sustainability of cultural traditions, as some heritage sites have become commercial attractions rather than functioning as integral parts of community life.

Sustainable Strategies for Balancing Modernization and Cultural Heritage

Recognizing the challenges posed by modernization, both locally-driven initiatives and broader sustainability efforts have aimed to find a balance between economic growth and cultural and environmental preservation.

1) Cultural and Environmental Conservation Initiatives

Efforts to support cultural heritage conservation have included restoration of traditional villages, architectural sites, and sacred spaces while integrating modern functionality with traditional design principles. Sustainable building materials and construction techniques are being encouraged in rural housing projects to maintain architectural identity while addressing contemporary environmental concerns.

Green infrastructure improvements have also been emphasized, incorporating reforestation, ecological corridors, and sustainable water management systems to reduce environmental degradation. Sustainable tourism models have sought to balance economic benefits with cultural integrity, ensuring that cultural events and festivals maintain their historical significance rather than becoming overly commercialized.

2) Community-Driven Sustainable Development

Local communities have played a crucial role in shaping sustainable cultural and environmental practices. Community-led conservation efforts have focused on restoring traditional housing, preserving historical sites, and organizing participatory workshops where residents collaborate in cultural and environmental preservation.

In environmental design, local engagement has influenced the planning of public spaces, ecological parks, and sustainable tourism destinations, ensuring that development aligns with cultural traditions and ecological resilience. Economic revitalization efforts have also supported handicraft industries, such as embroidery, silverwork, and wood carving, promoting sustainability through cooperative business models that empower local artisans.

Additionally, heritage education programs in schools and cultural institutions have helped preserve traditional music, rituals, and farming techniques, ensuring that younger generations remain connected to their cultural identity while adapting to modern advancements.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reinforce the idea that integrating cultural ecology into rural development strategies can serve as an effective means of balancing modernization with cultural and environmental preservation. While modernization has presented challenges such as cultural erosion, environmental degradation, and loss of traditional knowledge, the study demonstrates that community-driven initiatives and sustainable design strategies can help mitigate these negative impacts.

One of the key takeaways is the importance of adaptive policies that incorporate traditional knowledge into modern development frameworks. This includes revitalizing traditional architecture using sustainable materials, promoting eco-friendly tourism, and encouraging local artisans to sustain traditional handicrafts. Moreover, fostering participatory decision-making allows local communities to take an active role in shaping their environments, ensuring that modernization efforts align with their cultural heritage and ecological needs.

However, challenges remain in bridging generational gaps in cultural transmission, as younger populations migrate to urban areas. Addressing this issue requires education programs, cultural initiatives, and economic incentives that make traditional knowledge and practices more appealing and relevant in contemporary contexts.

Ultimately, Chuxiong's experience provides valuable insights for other regions facing similar modernization pressures. By aligning cultural ecology with sustainable design principles, rural areas can develop resilient and culturally vibrant communities that support both economic growth and environmental conservation. This research underscores the necessity of integrating policy support, community engagement, and sustainable development strategies to create a model for cultural and environmental sustainability amid modernization.

Furthermore, future research will focus on developing sustainable rural environmental design strategies based on cultural ecology. This includes designing eco-friendly rural public spaces, adaptive reuse of traditional architecture, and landscape planning that integrates ecological conservation with cultural heritage. The implementation of sustainable village planning models, incorporating traditional design principles and modern sustainability practices, will serve as a key direction for practical applications, ensuring that rural development remains culturally rooted and environmentally resilient.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Researcher would like to express her sincere to the thesis advisor, Asst. Prof. Dr. Pisit Puntien for his invaluable help and constant encouragement throughout the course of this research. In addition, the researcher has to give thanks to all lecturers for their assistance: Asst. Prof. Dr. Akapong Inkuer, and Asst. Prof. Dr. Chanoknart Mayusoh. At the same time, the researcher gratefully thanks to Miss Kanyanee Phuangsua, Miss Sasanant Rattanapornpisit, Miss Visitha Chintaladdha, Mr. Chat Sukarin, and others who give great supports.

Finally, the researcher would like to express her gratitude to the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University for supporting in every aspect.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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