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Spatial and Temporal Dynamics of Public Behaviour in Diverse Cultural Landscapes: A comparative observational study in Xishuangbanna, China

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Abstract

Cultural landscapes reflect the dynamic interaction between human activities and the natural environment, expressed through physical forms, cultural values, and spatial practices. However, research on actual public behaviours and their spatial distribution remains limited. This study examines public behaviours across three cultural landscape sites in Xishuangbanna, China: Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park, Manting Park–Zongfosi Temple, and Mengjinglai. Structured non-participant observations were conducted over three consecutive days. The findings reveal the coexistence of daily activities, tourism, and cultural participation, highlighting variations in behavioural patterns and spatial preferences. The results inform visitor circulation, activity space planning, and landscape management.

Keywords: Cultural landscapes; physical forms; public behaviours; behavioural patterns

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1.0 Introduction

Cultural landscapes are the result of the long-term interaction between human activities and the natural environment, and their spatial forms and patterns of use are changing in response to social needs (Misni & Aziz, 2015; Antrop, 2005). Buildings, roads, and public spaces are the physical settings of these interactions. However, everyday life and cultural practices are also important elements of the landscape (Wang & Misni, 2026). The cultural values model proposed by Stephenson (2008) stresses the importance of the relationship between the physical forms, the connection between people and places, and the practical activities in the landscape values.

In areas where community life and tourism activities coexist, the space may be used for different purposes. The location and the time of occurrence of these behaviours reflect the actual usage of the space. In contrast to the attention to the physical forms and visual characteristics of landscapes, the real behaviours of public spaces and their spatial and temporal distribution need more systematic field observation (Gao & Misni, 2025a).

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Previous studies on public spaces have focused on behavioural observations at different times of the day to analyse the spatial distribution of activities and the patterns of use, which provide empirical evidence to understand the spatial use and inform the planning and design (Gao & Misni, 2025b; Vidal et al., 2022; Marušić, 2015).

Thus, this study aims to identify the characteristics of public behaviours in different types of cultural landscapes and to analyse the spatial distribution and the daytime variations. Descriptive statistics and comparative case analysis were used to analyse the observation results. The study uses Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park, Mengjinglai Scenic Area and Manting Park-Zongfosi Temple in Xishuangbanna, China as the observation site cases, which are different in functions (e.g., village life, religious activities, cultural exhibitions, public recreation) and can provide specific contexts to compare the spatial distribution and temporal variations of public behaviours.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Landscape and Public Behaviour

Cultural landscapes are closely related to the physical environment and social life. Human activities, social relations and the natural environment interact to form the cultural meanings of the landscape (Lu & Misni, 2024; Farahani et al. 2015; Taylor & Lennon, 2011). With the introduction of tourism activities, the daily activities of the residents and the experiences of the tourists become intertwined in the places, and the spatial use patterns become diverse. As pointed out by Prince (2019), the formation of tourism landscapes is not only related to the tourist experience but also closely related to the daily activities of the local residents. Zhang et al. (2016) found that the daily activities of the residents, cultural viewing and interaction with the tourists in the tourism settings of Beijing Grand View Garden, not only reflected the daily functions of the place but also became part of the tourist experience.

Different users of the same cultural site may have different activities and spatial needs (Zhang et al., 2024; Brook, 2016). Su and Wall (2015) observed that although residents and tourists shared the same heritage spaces at the Summer Palace in Beijing, their patterns of space utilisation differed. Huang (2024), in his study of public spaces in Hong Kong, also found that the activities and usage patterns of different groups could lead to everyday encounters and conflicts in the spatial usage. In addition, public behaviour also conveys social meaning in everyday life. Cattell (2008), in an investigation of public spaces in London, emphasised that activities such as lingering, observing, and socialising play significant roles in shaping people's experiences and patterns of place utilisation.

2.2 Spatial Distribution and Temporal Variations of Public Activities

The distribution of public behaviours in different spaces is closely related to the physical conditions and functional arrangements of the places. Mehta (2007) conducted field observations on three neighbourhood commercial streets and found that features such as seating, street width, and the surrounding commercial facilities are closely related to the activities of staying and social interaction. Goličnik and Ward Thompson (2010) applied behavioural mapping and spatial analysis techniques to further reveal the relationship between the location of the activities, the layout of the sites, and the local spatial characteristics of the urban parks. The movement routes of tourists at the cultural heritage sites also show spatial differences. Md Khairi et al. (2022) analysed the tourist activities at the Melaka World Heritage Site by using travel diaries and GPS tracking and found the association between the spatial behaviour patterns and the characteristics of the tourists to provide insights for visitor management at the heritage sites.

Cohen et al. (2011) pointed out the importance of properly scheduling observation times and periods in the case of frequent repeated observations of ten urban parks in the United States. Shan (2020) observed clear differences in the visiting times of the public in urban green spaces in Guangzhou and found differences in the periods of use between different age and occupational groups. Liu et al. (2024) investigated the changes in the vitality of public spaces in different locations and time periods by continuously monitoring tourism-oriented traditional villages and analysed the patterns of use in relation to the spatial functions and types of behaviours. These studies provide an empirical basis for the spatial and temporal analysis of public behaviour in order to further compare the actual characteristics of use of different types of cultural landscapes.

3.0 Research Methods

3.1 Study Areas

The study areas are located at Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park, Manting Park–Zongfosi Temple, and Mengjinglai Village in Xishuangbanna as observation cases. The observation sites have different functions, such as village

life, religious activities, cultural exhibitions, and public recreation. We set six observation points at each site based on the spatial composition, and the total number of observation points is 18 for the main public activity areas and the spatial use settings.

3.2 Field Observation

The observation points were set in spaces with different functions to record the actual behaviours and their frequencies, which were compared in relation to the functions of the sites. The method of behavioural observation was based on the recording of public space activity (Gehl & Svarre, 2013).

The field observations were performed for three days and for each day there were three fixed periods (08:30-10:00, 10:30-12:00 and 15:30-17:00), lasting 90 minutes each. The results of the observations were aggregated by time periods over the three days, and the original units of measurement were kept for each behaviour. The matrix for the observations of behaviours was structured, and the frequencies of the activities of the public at each observation point were recorded. The observed behaviours were: movement in spaces, daily activities, religious practices, cultural viewing, interactive participation, photography, commercial consumption, public recreation. For each observation point, the indicators of the observed behaviours were defined according to the actual functions of the space (Table 1).

Table 1. Behavioural observation matrix across three cultural landscape sites.

Observation Point	Observed Behaviour (Unit)
A1. Scenic Area and Village Entrance	Visitor entries (persons)
A2. Main Access Road	Visitor–resident interactions (person-times)
A3. Village Centre and Public Space	Resident staying, conversation and sales (person-times)
A4. Traditional Residential Area	Residents resting and chatting (person-times)
A5. Temple	Worship, prayer and circumambulation (person-times)
A6. Water-Splashing Square	Participation in water-splashing activities (persons)
B1. Park Entrance	Total visitor entries (persons)
B2. Main Path Junction	Pausing for wayfinding >10 s (person-times)
B3. Main Temple Hall	Worship and incense offering (person-times)
B4. Temple Surroundings	Circumambulation of stupas and temple halls (person-times)
B5. Waterfront and Rest Area	Sitting or resting >1 min (person-times)
B6. Performance and Commercial Area	Viewing performances and displays (person-times)
C1. Village Entrance	Visitor entries (persons)
C2. Village Centre and Public Space	Residents resting and chatting (person-times)
C3. Temple	Visitors entering the temple (person-times)
C4. Traditional Residential Area	Viewing houses >30 s (person-times)
C5. Fields, Channels and Drying Area	Residents farming and handling crops (person-times)
C6. Folk Craft Display Area	Participation in hands-on activities (person-times)

4.0 Findings

4.1 Public Behaviour Types and Their Basic Characteristics

Observations across 18 points in the three study sites identified four main categories of public behaviour: (1) movement and wayfinding, (2) daily activities and public recreation, (3) cultural viewing and interactive participation, and (4) religious practices and quiet staying. These categories represent visitors' movement patterns, everyday spatial use, cultural engagement, and religious or contemplative activities.

4.2 Spatial Distribution Characteristics of Public Behaviours

The entrance of Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park shows that 4,046 people entered the park; 2,421 of them went directly to the performance area, which is 59.8%. This shows that organized cultural performances have a strong influence on the movement path of the visitors.

Table 2. Circulation and wayfinding.

Site/Point	Recorded behaviour	Original unit	Morning 08:30–10:00	Midday 10:30–12:00	Afternoon 15:30–17:00
Ganlanba • A1	Visitor entries	persons	1,055	1,615	1,376
Ganlanba • A1	Heading to performance area	persons	655	917	849
Ganlanba • A2	Visitor–resident greetings/inquiries/trade	person-times	198	488	419
Manting • B1	Visitor entries	persons	1,570	2,210	1,630
Manting • B2	Heading towards Zongfosi Temple	persons	351	488	504

Manting • B2	Pausing to find direction (10 s)	person-times	404	540	610
Mengjinglai • C1	Visitor entries	persons	368	304	210
Mengjinglai • C1	Heading to folk display/commercial area	person-times	160	108	104
Mengjinglai • C1	Heading to village centre	person-times	85	63	48

The total number of people passing through the main visitor route node of Manting Park is 5,410, 1,343 of whom went towards Zongfosi Temple. This shows that religious spaces are specific cultural destinations in the park. At the entrance of Mengjinglai, the total number of movements towards the folk culture exhibition and commercial area is 372, and the total number of movements into the village centre is 196. This indicates that visitors primarily favour cultural exhibition areas while maintaining connections with the village's public spaces. Overall, cultural activity nodes serve as key attractions that influence visitor route selection and shape spatial circulation patterns (Table 2).

From the results of the daily activities and the public recreation activities of residents and tourists, we can find that the different types of cultural landscapes have different uses. For example, there were 738 instances of daily activities of residents and 342 instances of staying and shopping by tourists in the village centre of Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park, and there were 260 instances of resting and chatting by residents and 264 instances of staying by tourists in the village centre of Mengjinglai. The common usage of village public spaces by residents and tourists makes them serve the functions of community life and tourism. In the waterfront area of Manting Park, there were 2,164 instances of sitting and resting and 2,245 instances of using shaded spaces (Table 3). The results show that the vitality of public spaces in traditional villages is maintained by daily activities, and the recreational spaces in parks can help visitors stay by providing shade and rest. areas. Facilities and landscape environments reflect different usage patterns under different spatial conditions.

Table 3. Daily life and public leisure.

Site/Point	Recorded behaviour	Original unit	Morning 08:30–10:00	Midday 10:30–12:00	Afternoon 15:30–17:00
Ganlanba • A3	Residents staying, chatting and selling	person-times	185	255	298
Ganlanba • A3	Visitors staying and purchasing	person-times	88	118	136
Manting • B5	Sitting/resting (1 min)	person-times	600	880	684
Manting • B5	Using shaded spaces	person-times	686	830	729
Mengjinglai • C2	Residents resting and chatting	person-times	80	120	60
Mengjinglai • C2	Visitors staying (1 min)	person-times	120	80	64
Mengjinglai • C4	Residents resting and chatting	person-times	120	165	99
Mengjinglai • C5	Farming and crop tending	person-times	28	15	11

The number of people who were viewing and participating in interactive activities in the water splashing square of Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park was 1,286 and 1,135, respectively. In the handicraft exhibition area of Mengjinglai, the number of people who were viewing and participating in interactive activities was 336 and 263, respectively. The numbers of interactive activities in both places were relatively close to the numbers of people who were viewing. In the performance area of Manting Park, the number of people who were viewing and participating in interactive activities were 4,320 and 1,640, respectively. The number of visitors engaged in viewing activities was considerably higher than those participating in interactive activities (Table 4). Water splashing activities and handicraft experiences are more directly physical activities, while the performances emphasize the visual observation of cultural activities. The results show that the types of cultural activities affect the participation of the public; experiential activities promote the physical participation of the public, and performances emphasize the visual observation of the public. Both types of activities contribute to the experiences of the public in the cultural landscape.

There were similar usage patterns for the religious practices and the quiet staying behaviours for the three sites. For example, the temple in Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park had 314 instances of religious practices and 342 instances of quiet staying; the Buddhist Hall in Manting Park had 930 instances of religious practices and 1,113 instances of quiet staying; and the temple in Mengjinglai had 224 instances of religious practices and 302 instances of quiet staying. The number of quiet staying was higher than the number of ritual activities in all three religious' spaces. This is because the religious spaces serve both the ritual practices and the stationary activities (Table 5). The results indicate that the cultural functions of the religious spaces are reflected in both the actual Buddhist worship activities and the extended stays, which are characterized by ritual practices and a quiet atmosphere.

Table 4. Cultural viewing and portici.

Site/Point	Recorded behaviour	Original unit	Morning 08:30–10:00	Midday 10:30–12:00	Afternoon 15:30–17:00
Ganlanba • A6	Watching water-splashing performance	persons	315	499	472
Ganlanba • A6	Participating in water-splashing	persons	340	418	377

Ganlanba • A4	Residents' daily activities	person-times	51	38	44
Manting • B6	Watching cultural performances/displays	person-times	1,300	1,600	1,420
Manting • B6	Participating in interactive activities	person-times	500	600	540
Mengjinglai • C6	Watching folk craft displays	person-times	160	108	68
Mengjinglai • C6	Participating in hands-on craft activities	person-times	128	86	49
Mengjinglai • C5	Viewing farmland/water channels (>30 s)	person-times	22	11	6
Mengjinglai • C5	Participating in farming trial activities	person-times	0	0	0

Table 5. Religious practices and quiet salination.

Site/Point	Recorded behavior	Original unit	Morning 08:30–10:00	Midday 10:30–12:00	Afternoon 15:30–17:00
Ganlanba • A5	Worship, prayer and circumambulation	person-times	85	131	98
Ganlanba • A5	Quiet staying (1 min)	person-times	99	142	101
Manting • B3	Worship and incense offerings	person-times	280	320	330
Manting • B3	Quiet staying (1 min)	person-times	300	400	413
Manting • B4	Walking around the stupa / temple hall	person-times	208	390	403
Mengjinglai • C3	Worship, prayer, and circumambulation	person-times	89	72	63
Mengjinglai • C3	Quiet staying (1 min)	person-times	118	109	75

4.3 Temporal Variations in Public Behaviour and Cross-Site Comparison

Visitor numbers at Ganlanba Dai Ethnic Park and Manting Park peaked at midday (1,615 and 2,210, respectively), whereas Mengjinglai recorded its highest visitation in the morning (368), followed by a decline in the afternoon (210). Similarly, visits to Ganlanba's performance area peaked at midday (917), while the folk culture exhibition area in Mengjinglai attracted the most visitors in the morning (160). At Manting Park, visits to Zongfosi Temple increased slightly from 488 at midday to 504 in the afternoon (Table 2). These findings demonstrate that visitor flows and route preferences vary according to the timing, cultural attractions, and functional characteristics of each destination.

Daily activities and public recreation showed distinct temporal patterns across the three sites. Residents' activities in Ganlanba increased from 185 instances in the morning to 298 in the afternoon. In Mengjinglai, resting and social interaction peaked at midday (120 instances), while farming and crop-sorting activities were most frequent in the morning (28 instances). At Manting Park, sitting, resting, and using shaded areas were concentrated at midday (880 and 830 instances, respectively) (Table 3). These differences reflect the influence of spatial functions, available facilities, and users' daily routines on activity patterns in village and park environments.

In addition, cultural viewing and interactive participation demonstrated distinct temporal patterns across the three sites. At Ganlanba, both viewing and interaction at the water-splashing square increased towards midday (499 and 418 instances, respectively). Similarly, Manting Park recorded peak engagement in its performance area during midday (1,600 viewing and 600 interaction instances). In contrast, activities at Mengjinglai's handicraft exhibition area were concentrated in the morning (160 and 128 instances, respectively) before gradually declining (Table 4). These findings indicate that the timing and format of cultural activities influence public engagement, visitor participation, and the intensity of social interaction.

Religious activities exhibited distinct temporal patterns across the three sites. Buddhist worship, prayer, and circumambulation peaked at midday in Ganlanba (131 instances), in the afternoon at Manting Park (330 instances), and in the morning at Mengjinglai (89 instances). Quiet staying activities followed similar site-specific variations (Table 5). Notably, despite a decline in overall visitor numbers at Manting Park during the afternoon, religious practices and quiet staying at the Buddhist Hall increased, suggesting sustained use of religious spaces. These findings highlight how traditional rituals and contemplative activities contribute to the continuous use and cultural significance of religious spaces.

5. Discussion

The results show the relationship between the spatial functions and the public behaviour patterns. Cultural exhibition spaces promote the public's viewing or direct participation in different activities. The more experiential activities are more likely to promote physical interaction, while the organized performances attract people mainly to stop and watch. This is consistent with the results of Goličnik and Ward Thompson (2010) on the influence of the spatial characteristics on public behaviour. The religious sites are characterized by the coexistence of ritual practices and quiet staying, which reflects the combined influence of traditional activities and the spatial environment on the patterns of public use. Different cultural spaces have different behavioural patterns.

The public spaces in the traditional villages are used by the people for their daily life and for tourists' visits. In addition, the cultural value of the traditional villages is also manifested in daily life. The residents' social interactions, the agricultural activities, and the tourists' stay occur in the same places, while the scenes of daily life in the traditional residences are also seen by the tourists to learn about the culture. These usages reflect

the close relationship between the cultural landscape and daily life (Taylor & Lennon, 2011). In comparison with the organized cultural exhibition activities, the cultural experiences in the traditional villages are more dependent on the existing living spaces and their use.

The temporal distribution of behaviours allows us to better understand the usage of the spaces. The cultural exhibition activities show relatively concentrated periods of viewing and participation related to the tourist visit, while the daily activities of the residents and the religious practices have their own temporal patterns. Also, within the same site, the peak of the visitor flows and the peak of the usage of the specific activity spaces may happen at different times due to the diversity of the visiting purposes and the activity patterns. These observations indicate the dynamic characteristics of the cultural landscape in accommodating different activities at different times and provide a more detailed understanding of the spatial usage patterns based on actual behaviours.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings demonstrate that public behaviour is shaped by the spatial functions and cultural characteristics of each site. Different settings support distinct patterns of use, including cultural viewing and interaction, the coexistence of community life and tourism, and religious practices alongside quiet activities. Temporal analysis further reveals variations in visitor movement, residents' daily activities, and religious participation throughout the day. These findings highlight the dynamic relationship between cultural landscapes and public activities, providing empirical insights into spatial use patterns and their temporal variations across different cultural settings. Recommendations include improving visitor circulation while maintaining connections with community spaces, designing inclusive activity areas for diverse users, and implementing visitor management strategies based on peak activity periods.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to cultural landscape research by extending the focus beyond physical forms and visual characteristics to include actual public behaviours, spatial distribution, and temporal variations. Practically, the study offers evidence-based guidance for visitor circulation planning, public activity space design, cultural landscape conservation, and sustainable tourism management.

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