

FROM STATE MANDATES TO INDIGENOUS EXPRESSION

Cultural Ecology and the Evolution of Sanjiang Dong Farmer Life Paintings in Modern China

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Abstract. This study aims to analyse the association and educational inheritance of Sanjiang's cultural ecology through the lens of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings amidst modern social change in China. Employing a qualitative research method, the study focuses on Sanjiang County, Guyi Town, and Nanning City. The participants include the president and vice president of the Guangxi Art Association and Sanjiang County Art Association, the governor of Sanjiang County, the tutors and creators of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings, and the principals of primary and secondary schools in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in Guangxi. The findings reveal a dynamic evolution of the art form across three distinct periods. In the pre-1978 era, state mandates and socialist ideologies channelled artistic production into politically driven narratives. With the advent of reform and opening up, local cultural and natural influences began to reassert

themselves, resulting in an art form that increasingly celebrated indigenous aesthetics and rural life. In the contemporary 21st century, enhanced educational initiatives, interdisciplinary collaborations, and professional training have fostered an autonomous artistic vision that reflects historical continuity and contemporary dynamism. The study uses cultural ecology to interpret how visual form, compositional density, modelling practices, colour choices, and subject matter emerged through changing relations among state policy, local environment, ethnic craft traditions, artistic mentorship, and market conditions. The study therefore argues that Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings are cultural-ecological artefacts shaped by negotiation among political power, indigenous expression, and changing modes of production. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to cultural ecology theory and its practical implications for policymakers,

educators, and stakeholders seeking to safeguard and promote traditional art forms in an era of rapid social and technological change.

Keywords: Cultural Ecology, Educational Heritage, Sanjiang Dong, Farmer Life Paintings.

Introduction

The Sanjiang Dong are members of the Dong ethnic community living in the Sanjiang Autonomous County in Guangxi, Southern China. One of their most recognisable folk customs is the creation of paintings that portray the local farming lifestyle, hereinafter referred to as Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings. This form of art was included in the protection list of intangible cultural heritage of the Chinese autonomous regions in 2012 and reflects the ethnic identity of the Sanjiang Dong community (Luo, 2015). There are few direct studies on Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings, and most of these focus on technique, composition, colour, and commercialization, often overlooking the influence of the ecological and cultural environment on artistic processing and the reasons behind the creation of these paintings. This paper consequently intends to address the identified research gap. Explicitly, we were keen to discover: how do cultural ecology, government policies, and educational initiatives interact to shape the evolution, preservation, and educational inheritance of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings in the context of China's modern social change?

In this study, cultural ecology is used to describe the environment surrounding the paintings and as the central analytical framework for explaining how visual form and artistic practice changed as painters negotiated shifting relations among ideology, local ecology, ethnic material culture, mentorship, education, and the market. This approach allows us to examine how particular artistic features—such as realism, spatial compression, circular arrangement, decorative density, and generalized modelling—emerged from historically specific interactions between social and material conditions. Our central argument is that the evolution of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings must be understood as a cultural-ecological process in which state mandates, local craft inheritances, creators' agency, and changing circuits of circulation and value continually reshaped one another.

We adopted a qualitative research method, gathering data both in the field and from documentary analysis. We visited Dudong Village, Guyi Town, Sanjiang County Ethnic Experimental School in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, and Nanning City in Guangxi

to observe the creation and curation of these works of art, and to interview key stakeholders in their creation and sale. Interviews were held with the president and vice president of the Guangxi Art Association and Sanjiang County Art Association, the governor of Sanjiang County, the tutors and creators of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings, and the principals of primary and secondary schools. We adopted a content analysis method to interpret the visual and narrative elements present in both the artworks and the associated interview transcripts. This approach enabled us to identify recurring themes, symbolic representations, and narrative patterns that reveal the aesthetic qualities of the paintings and the underlying cultural and ecological influences that shape them. By correlating these insights with the historical and social contexts of the Sanjiang Dong community found in textbooks, academic journal articles and other related research, we were able to uncover how traditional beliefs, local farming practices, and environmental factors are interwoven into the creative process.

In applying cultural ecology analytically, we examined what the paintings depict and also how they organise visual space, colour, pattern, texture, and perspective in relation to changing social environments. We therefore treated artworks, interviews, and documentary materials as interconnected evidence for tracing how artistic production was shaped by the interaction of environmental setting, state discourse, ethnic craft traditions, pedagogical intervention, and creators' own interpretive choices. In doing so, our study offers a culturally and historically grounded interpretation of the evolution and significance of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings within the broader framework of intangible cultural heritage preservation.

A Brief History of Cultural Ecology Theory

In the 1950s and 1960s Julian Steward had a profound influence on the field of cultural studies by explaining cultural similarities between different communities as products of their interactions with the environment. For Steward, parallel development is an outcome of human cultural response to similarly structured surrounding environments. This perspective illuminated

the adaptive nature of cultural phenomena and highlighted the reciprocal relationship between environmental conditions and cultural expression. Steward also criticised the contemporarily popular unilineal frameworks of human cultural evolution as obsolete, arguing that not all societies underwent the same stages of evolution and that a multilinear approach was more applicable (Moore, 2004). By advocating for a multilinear framework, Steward opened up new avenues for analysing cultural diversity that account for multiple evolutionary trajectories. His 'cultural ecology' became "the study of the processes by which a society adapts to its environment. Its principal problem is to determine whether these adaptations initiate internal social transformations of evolutionary change" (Steward, 1968, p. 337). The three primary arguments of the concept were that 1) cultures in similar environments will develop in a similar manner, 2) cultural adaptation is ephemeral and continuous, and 3) cultural change can expand an existing culture or cause a new culture to form (Sutton & Anderson, 2020). For Steward, human ecology could be split into biological and cultural ecology, and the cultural aspect (influenced by technological development) set humans above the rest of their environment (Steward, 1955). Since this inception, the theory has undergone modification and expansion to reflect wider theoretical evolution in the social sciences (Porter, 2001).

Subsequent scholars have built on Steward's legacy, refining his ideas to incorporate a broader range of variables. The first wave of evolution of the cultural ecology concept in the 1960s, saw it framed in terms of a new systems ecology field. This enabled a more quantitative methodological approach by arguing that humans could be placed within scientific terms (Odum, 1964; Vayda & Rappaport, 1968). However, criticisms grew about the difficulties of modelling cultural change through data driven analyses (Evans, Norris & Benton, 2012). One parallel, empirically-driven derivative of this approach has been cultural materialism, which focuses on specific cultural outcomes rather than trying to chart cultural trends from ungeneralizable data (Harris, 2001; Milner, 2002). This shifted the focus towards concrete artifacts and practices, emphasizing the tangible ways in which material conditions influence cultural expressions. Steward's cultural ecology

theory has also led to other transmutations of the term, including the power dynamics of political ecology (Wolf, 1972), the dialectical historical ecology (Balée, 2006) and postmodern arguments questioning objective reality (Biersack, 2006).

More recent debates have interrogated the boundaries between nature and culture. Scholars now emphasize that cultural practices are dynamically interwoven with global processes, technological advancements, and digital media (Bailey, 2024; Piccardo & Canepa, 2021). For instance, the advent of globalization has reshaped the context in which cultures evolve, with transnational flows of information and capital contributing to hybrid cultural forms (Wormley et al., 2023). This perspective posits that local cultural adaptations are continuously redefined by global influences, leading to novel configurations of identity and practice (Lam, 2021). In addition, the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation have reinvigorated discussions within cultural ecology (Kamakaula, 2024; Meena, 2022). Contemporary researchers are exploring how communities reconfigure traditional practices to enhance resilience and sustainability, thereby positioning cultural adaptation as a critical component of environmental stewardship (Das, Piplani & Brar, 2023).

Emerging from these debates is an integrated approach that combines insights from posthumanism and new materialist theories, which stress the co-constitutive role of human and non-human actors. This framework suggests that technologies, infrastructures, and ecological phenomena are active participants in the cultural process, fundamentally altering how cultural narratives are formed and transmitted (Armouch, 2024; Lalouvière, 2021). Furthermore, the rise of digital cultural ecology has opened up new avenues for understanding how virtual environments interact with traditional ecological settings. Digital media now serve as platforms for the dissemination and transformation of cultural practices, creating hybrid spaces where traditional and modern influences converge (Jing, Tan & Zhang, 2021). These debates provide a theoretical framework for our study of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings by highlighting the multifaceted and ever-evolving interplay between environmental conditions, technological change, and cultural expression. Moreover, in their study of cultural and

creative ecosystems, de Bernard, Comunian and Gross (2022) advocate for research that emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, clarifies terminological distinctions, and integrates value debates and climate change discussions. This reinforces the necessity of the integrated approach that underpins the theoretical framework of this study. This means reading Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings as visual condensations of changing relationships among human and non-human environments, institutions, artistic training, ethnic craft vocabularies, and material conditions of production and circulation. Accordingly, cultural ecology is used here to ask three interrelated questions: what conditions made particular visual strategies possible; how did painters negotiate competing pressures from the state, mentors, local culture, and the market; and in what ways did these negotiations transform the form, meaning, and social function of the paintings across time?

Sanjiang Dong Culture in Guangxi

Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, located in the northern part of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region at the junction of the Gui, Xiang, and Qian provinces, features a complex topography and diverse geomorphology. The region is predominantly characterized by hills and low mountains, interspersed with high mountains, river valleys, depressions, and small flat dams. Situated in a low-latitude area, Sanjiang Dong experiences a mild climate within the middle subtropical, South Ridge humid climate zone. The area enjoys abundant rainfall, with distinct hot and cold seasons coinciding with the wet and dry periods.

The Dong people, historically situated in a relatively remote mountainous region, though never entirely separated from surrounding political and interethnic networks, have led a life centred around gathering and farming. Agricultural life, ritual practice, and local cosmology have long shaped community understandings of the relationship between people and the natural world. In emic terms, this is often expressed through ideas of harmony between man and nature; analytically, however, such values should be understood as historically produced cultural interpretations rather than automatic outcomes of environment alone.

While local topography, agricultural life, and climatic conditions form an important part of the setting in which Dong cultural practices developed, these practices emerged historically through ongoing interaction among livelihood patterns, social organisation, ritual life, state incorporation, interethnic contact, and the community's own interpretive traditions. The idea of harmony between man and nature thus functions as a cultural value articulated through belief, performance, architecture, and everyday practice. Influenced by this concept, the Dong people developed religious beliefs in the spirit of all things, alongside cultural practices such as the great song culture and Dong opera, as well as distinctive architecture and cuisine. At the same time, Dong society has been shaped by longer histories of interaction, negotiation, and unequal power relations with outside institutions and neighbouring populations. Over time, the community developed a strong collective consciousness and sense of solidarity.

One particularly salient cultural artifact through which aspects of Dong rural life, cultural memory, and local identity have been visually articulated are the Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings. These paintings emerged in the mid-20th century within the broader development of Chinese farmer painting (*nongminhua*), which is generally traced to its initial formation in Peixian County, Jiangsu in 1957, before expanding across rural and ethnic regions of China (Sun, 2021). They are created predominantly by local farmers, serve as visual chronicles of daily agricultural life and vibrant expressions of cultural values, traditions, and an enduring respect for the natural world. Drawing on both local craft inheritances and historically changing artistic influences, the Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings capture the simplicity, resilience, and communal spirit of a people whose existence has long been intertwined with the rhythms of the land. They also register changing relations between local identity and wider political, pedagogical, and commercial structures.

The paintings are primarily executed using gouache and brushwork on white paper, although artists also employ other water-based pigments (such as propylene) and apply their techniques to alter-

native substrates including Dong cloth and walls. The thematic content of these works predominantly encompasses the production activities, daily life, festivals, customs, and other culturally significant aspects of the farming community. The expressive techniques are chiefly characterized by the application of flat line filling and uniformly coloured blocks. Additionally, some painters incorporate dry-brush methods to achieve a rubbed texture, while the perception of spatial depth is created through the strategic shading of forms and colour gradations. Collectively, these paintings are designed to evoke a distinctly decorative aesthetic that reflects both traditional artistic sensibilities and the cultural ethos of the Dong people.

ternation or ethnically specific stylisation. The use of realism, proportionality, and perspectival coherence can be understood as part of a broader pedagogical and political environment in which art was expected to communicate collective socialist values clearly to public audiences. In this sense, the formal organisation of the paintings participated in the remaking of that world by disciplining vision in accordance with state priorities.

Category	Content
Theme	Mainly political and character subjects
Type	Belongs to public art, not the artist's subjective feelings towards life
Features	Lacks local and ethnic characteristics
Technique	Incorporates Chinese brush and ink techniques, emphasizes proportion, perspective and structure
Style	Strives for realism in depicting characters and landscapes with attention to detail

Table 1. *Pre-1978 Sanjiang Dong Farmer Life Paintings*

Sanjiang Dong Farmer Life Paintings pre-1978

During the period of social construction in China, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in Guangxi experienced significant socio-political changes, including the founding of New China, the land revolution, the agricultural cooperative movement, the Great Leap Forward, and the establishment of people's communes. During this time, state policies and ideological directives were intensely focused on aligning art and culture with socialist ideals. Cultural production was heavily influenced by political imperatives that promoted themes of workers, peasants, and soldiers, resulting in artistic expressions that both reflected and reinforced the socialist vision (Boden, 2022). Guided by the national line of literature and art, the county adhered to the direction that literature and art should serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers, and should aim to achieve the unity of political content and art. This period saw efforts to align artistic expression with political ideology. During this time, the content of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings was primarily divided into political themes (Figure 1) and human figures (Figure 2). Artists chose these subjects to reflect and promote the political and social ideals of the time.

From a cultural-ecological perspective, this shift was thematic and formal. The dominance of political subjects corresponded with visual strategies that privileged legibility, order, and ideological clarity over local pat-



Figure 1. *Female Militia by the Gwan-Dong Art Group (left) and Embroidering the Red Sun to Shine on the Waiting Township by Yang Puruyun (right). Source: Fieldwork documentation collected by Yang Na in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, China. Original creator(s): Gwan-Dong Art Group and Yang Puruyun. Copyright and permissions: Images reproduced with permission from the local community and cultural custodians.*

In works such as *Female Militia*, collective action is foregrounded through orderly figuration and a composition that emphasises social coordination rather than local environmental texture. In *Embroidering the Red Sun to Shine on the Waiting Township*, symbolic allegiance to the Communist state structures the image more strongly than specifically Dong visual references. In both cases, the visual field is organised to privilege ideological clarity over local specificity: figures are proportionally stabi-

lised, spatial relations remain controlled, and decorative patterning is subdued. These paintings therefore reveal how the cultural ecology of the period was shaped by an uneven hierarchy in which state ideology defined the terms of artistic legitimacy, while local cultural resources remained present but visually subdued.



Figure 2. *Conscious Learning* by Yip Sai Yin. Source: Yang Na fieldwork collection, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, China. Original creator(s): Yip Sai Yin. Copyright and permissions: Images reproduced with permission from the local community and cultural custodians.

Intriguingly, the Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings emerged during the socialist cultural system of New China, at a time when farmers were heavily restricted from engaging in non-agricultural activities, which suggests a more uneven local field in which official control, minority-area governance, and local cultural practice did not fully coincide (Lu, 2020). The art was shaped by three key forces: the power of the government, the power of the mentors, and the power of the creators. However, these forces did not operate in a fixed hierarchy or with identical aims. State institutions sought ideological clarity and collective legibility; mentors translated those imperatives into teachable

pictorial forms, but also exercised professional judgment; and creators worked within these constraints while still filtering subject matter through local experience and available visual memory. Even in this earlier period, therefore, the paintings should be understood as outcomes of mediated negotiation within an asymmetrical structure of power.

The Power of Government

With the founding of New China, the Chinese revolution transitioned from an era dominated by armed struggle to one focused on production and construction. The main leaders of the Communist Party began to consider the development path for literature and art under the new regime, establishing socialist literature and art policies and cultural systems to ensure the Party's overall leadership in the ideological field. The state aimed to cultivate a common knowledge base shared by all citizens, promoting the directive of art for workers, farmers, and soldiers within the fields of literature and the arts. Yet, policy operated through local institutions, cadres, exhibition systems, and pedagogical channels that interpreted national directives unevenly. In practice, state influence set the permissible horizon of subject matter and form, but it still required mediation by local actors to become effective.

The Power of the Mentors

Mentors of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings typically possessed fine arts experience and belonged to the intellectual elite within the art world, in contrast to the less formally educated farmers who created the paintings. The influence of these mentors on the creation of the paintings was significant. Their artistic guidance was often contextualized within production and everyday life. They trained the Sanjiang Dong people on basic painting techniques, including light and dark, perspective, symmetry, and proportion, and emphasized professional art practices. The mentors encouraged the use of Chinese painting forms to realistically depict contemporary Sanjiang Dong life. Sanjiang Dong farmer

life paintings therefore incorporate techniques from Chinese painting, including brushwork, colour usage, composition, the relationship between black and white, figure proportion, and perspective. This attention to detail in figures and landscapes enhances the paintings' realism and ceremonial quality. At the same time, mentors occupied an intermediary position between institutional expectations and local makers. Their professional authority enabled them to normalise particular visual standards but this was also a selective process of translation. In other words, mentors did not simply impose technique from above; they filtered official expectations through art-world conventions and decided which elements of local life could be rendered visible within an acceptable pictorial language. This makes mentorship a site of negotiation as well as discipline.

The Power of the Creators

Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings primarily originate from the Dong villages in Sanjiang, where the creators are mainly farmers with relatively low education levels, having attended only primary and secondary schools. Although most creators lacked formal art training, their visual resources derived from daily labour, local built environments, ritual life, and vernacular craft practices, even if these did not always appear in explicit or dominant form. Their autonomy was constrained by both ideology and professional art techniques. From the founding of New China until the period of reform and opening up, government influence was predominant. The government directive limited the content and concept of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings. Mentors played a crucial guiding role, focusing on improving the farmers' techniques from a professional art perspective. However, this guidance often overlooked the development of the farmers' intrinsic artistic qualities. The key point, however, is that creators still contributed situated knowledge to the works and their agency was partial rather than wholly absent. This interpretation is also consistent with the interview material gathered for this study, in which participants repeatedly described the impor-

tance of local experience, observation, and everyday familiarity in the making of the paintings.

Sanjiang Dong Farmer Life Paintings post-1978

With the successful convening of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) from December 18 to December 22, 1978, Chinese society entered a new period of reform and opening up. This shift encouraged the literary and artistic circles to reassess the lines and policies from the previous 30 years, leading to a movement focused on exploring the essence of aesthetics and liberating artistic creation from the tools of political propaganda. In this context, the creators of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings aligned with the national farmer painting movement, delving into local folk art to retain its essence while discarding outdated elements. They integrated their folk-art training and the artistic characteristics of folk art into the farmers' paintings, imbuing them with local flavour, ethnicity, and folklore. In this period of reform and opening up, Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings can be categorized into three main content areas: paintings of the natural environment, paintings of traditional ethnic culture, and paintings of daily life (Figure 3).

This transition marked a reconfiguration of the cultural ecology of artistic production, in which local visual resources became newly available for formal experimentation and self-representation. However, painters, mentors, and local institutions renegotiated the visual terms of the genre by selectively drawing on Dong brocade, embroidery, paper-cutting, architecture, and everyday rural experience as structuring principles of composition, modelling, and ornament. This produced a shift away from the strict legibility of socialist realism toward a new balance among loosening state oversight, mentor mediation, and creators' efforts to revalue local motifs within broader artistic circuits. Formally, this shift can be seen in the increasing density of compositions, the reduced dependence on single-point perspective, and the stronger integration of decorative pattern into the structure of the image itself.



Figure 3. *Beautiful Dong Village* by Yang Gongcun (left), *Dong Doye Dance* by Yang Xiankao (centre), and *Playing Oil Tea* by Liang Peimei (right). Source: Yang Na fieldwork collection, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, China. Original creator(s): Yang Gongcun, Yang Xiankao, and Liang Peimei. Copyright and permissions: Images reproduced with permission from the local community and cultural custodians.

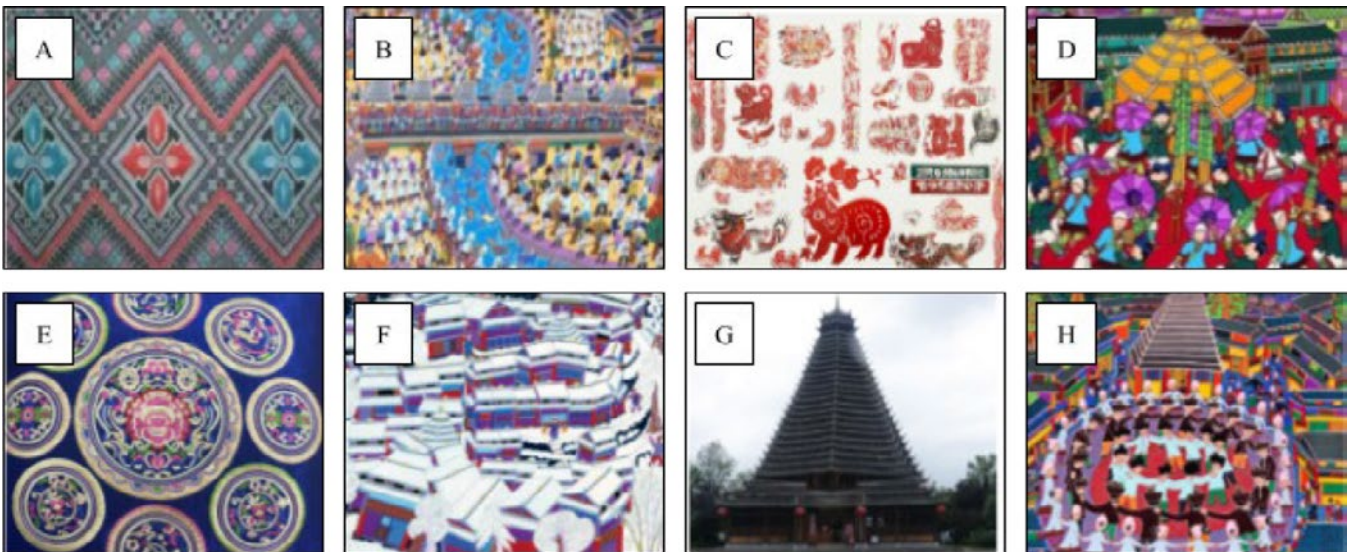


Figure 4. Dong brocade embroidery (A) reflected in *Celebrating 100 Years of Wind and Rain Bridges* by Yang Gongguo (B); Dong paper-cutting (C) reflected in *Drum Tower Doye* by Yang Gongguo (D); Dong embroidery (E) reflected in *Winter Solstice* by Yang Gongguo (F); and traditional Dong drum tower (G) reflected in *Joyful Dong Village* by Yang Gongguo (H). Source: Yang Na fieldwork collection, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, China. Original creator(s): Yang Gongguo (B, D, F, H) and Yang Na (A, C, E, G - photographs). Copyright and permissions: Images reproduced with permission from the local community and cultural custodians.

The Power of Government

Over the past 30 years, the literary and artistic circles have reassessed the lines and policies since the founding of the country, leading to a liberation from using art solely as a tool for political propaganda. Government influence that

was historically a driving force behind the development of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings, playing a leading role during the social construction period, began to wane during the reform and opening up period. Despite this, state ideology continued to impact Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings. During the reform and opening-up period, the

consolidation of cultural leadership and the development of socialist cultural productivity were key historical tasks. During this time, Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings specifically represented the ethos of literature and art serving the people and socialism.

The Power of the Mentors

In response to state directives, Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings evolved rapidly from a tool for political propaganda to one emphasizing vernacular and national characteristics. Mentorship in farmer painting diverged from traditional art college teaching concepts, focusing instead on three key points:

Inspirational teaching - Wu (1987) has emphasized the importance of mentors understanding and familiarizing themselves with farmers' lives, emotions, aesthetic habits, ideals, and interests to help them articulate their artistic language clearly. His research found that mentoring no longer involves imposing professional art training on farmers and instead nurtures their innate artistic imagination and creativity. This enables the farmers to reproduce the simplicity, innocence, and vitality of human expression. Unlike the realism of government-driven paintings, this approach emphasizes the essence of the characteristics, focusing on resemblance, simplicity, and the generalization and refinement of an object's form.

Return to ethnic and local roots - Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings now express natural scenery, rural life, and folk activities, influenced by the sense of native land and Dong ethnic culture. The teaching method focuses on reconnecting with ethnicity and lifestyle, impacting the composition of the paintings (Cao, 2016). To influence their teaching, the mentors collect and study crafts such as Dong brocade, paper-cutting, and embroidery. By extracting the essence of these traditional arts and discarding outdated elements, they can apply their art training to the artistic characteristics of Sanjiang Dong folk art and ensure the unique style and character of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings retains the local flavour and ethnicity of the Dong minority (Figure 4). From the perspective of cultural ecology, this pedagogical shift is significant because it shows that local environment and ethnic tradition were actively mediated through mentors, who select-

ed, reframed, and translated elements of Dong visual culture into painterly conventions that could circulate within broader art worlds. This reading was supported by interviews with mentors and educators, who consistently emphasised the importance of reconnecting painters with local craft forms and everyday village life.



Figure 5. *Dong Opera* by Yang Xiangsan. Source: Yang Na fieldwork collection, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, China. Original creator(s): Yang Xiangsan. Copyright and permissions: Images reproduced with permission from the local community and cultural custodians.

Subjective expression - The composition of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings is sympathetic and not constrained by space, perspective, or objective phenomena. It reflects subjective intentions and imagination. When depicting objects, artists prioritize their own imagination and wishes over strict adherence to reality and logic, leading to bold and imaginative creations. Returning to the essence of folk art influences the layout, modeling, and arrangement of the paintings. Dong brocade, for instance, emphasizes a dense and full design with no blank spaces, where embroidery patterns completely cover the base, featuring fine, orderly stitching that is dense yet not overly complex. This characteristic is mirrored in the newer Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings, which

exhibit fullness and density. The composition is packed, incorporating all important elements without clear distinction between primary and secondary elements or sparse and dense areas (Figure 5). These formal changes can be read culturally and ecologically. The dense filling of pictorial space, circular arrangements, and disregard for single-point perspective reflect the interaction of embroidery logic, paper-cut visuality, mnemonic observation, and rural social experience. Cultural ecology therefore helps explain why these works look the way they do: their formal language emerged from a specific environment of making in which material craft traditions, embodied observation, and loosening political control converged.

The Power of the Creators

The creators of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings are still primarily farmers, mostly residing in Sanjiang Dong village, with relatively low levels of formal education, primarily in primary and secondary schools. These artists have not systematically studied art in colleges and universities. As native farmers, the creators are deeply familiar with their surrounding scenery. They do not use traditional sketching methods; instead, they memorize by observing with their eyes and hearts. When observing an object, they do not fixate on a single viewpoint but move around to observe from multiple angles, incorporating their own imagination and reasoning to conceptualize the object's characteristics. This results in a generalized modelling approach in their paintings. For example, the mouths of buckets and tanks are depicted as round, the bottoms as flat, and the overall shapes include heights, representing a form of generalized modelling. As indicated by the field interviews, this way of working was described by participants as a practical and experience-based mode of visual recall.

The creators of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings typically do not have professional art education, which results in their use of original and unrefined colours. They apply colours based on their own preferences rather than a reflection of reality. This method reflects the farmer painters' perception of colours, connecting their thoughts, conceptions, and emotions to create a unique imagery of colour.

During the reform and opening-up period and into the 21st century, the influence of the government on Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings gradually weakened. Counsellors focused on exploring and enhancing the artistic potential of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings while respecting the independent creation of the painters. As a result, the creators became more autonomous, expressing the aesthetic characteristics of vernacular, ethnic, and folk art. A summary of the new identity of the Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings is depicted in Table 2.

Category	Content
Theme	Mainly natural landscapes, folk customs and daily life
Type	Primarily personal art, representing the artist's subjective feelings towards life
Features	Exhibits a local atmosphere, ethnic characteristics, and the aesthetics of folk art
Composition	Sympathetic composition
Layout	Full and balanced. No obvious hierarchy or density variations within the 'fullness'
Character Modelling	Characters are highly summarized, emphasizing simplicity over complexity
Object Modelling	Comprehensive
Color	Primary and natural colour usage
Arrangement	Circular

Table 2. *Post-1978 Sanjiang Dong Farmer Life Paintings*

Contemporary Sanjiang Dong Farmer Life Paintings in the 21st Century

At present, Dong society is undergoing a phase of what is described in official cultural policy as a phase of "intensified cultural leadership," with the national agenda framed as prioritising the establishment of a robust socialist cultural identity. Amidst rapid urbanization, the production of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings has diversified significantly, embodying the ethos of the hundred flowers campaign. The evolving art market now plays a pivotal role in shaping these works. Moreover, as the primary creators gradually transition from rural settings to urban centres, there has been a comprehensive enhancement in the cultural sophistication and aesthetic sensibilities of this artistic community.

In cultural-ecological terms, the contemporary period is marked by a complex field of negotiation. State heritage discourse, tourism development, market demand, professionalisation, and local cultural memory now intersect in ways that both enable and constrain artistic autonomy. Painters operate within a multilayered environment in which indigenous expression can be amplified, but also selectively packaged, curated, and aestheticized for institutional and commercial circulation. This means that one form of asymmetry has partly given way to another. Earlier state-centred discipline has been supplemented by heritage branding, market preferences, tourist expectations, and professional aesthetic norms, which reorganise local agency by rewarding some kinds of ethnic visibility, decorative density, and compositional polish more than others. Interview material from creators and educators supports this interpretation, particularly in their repeated emphasis on exhibition opportunities, training, and changing expectations regarding what counts as recognisably Dong visual culture.

The traditional folk culture of the Sanjiang Dong has been marketed as a tourism project and gradually landscaped through the collaborative efforts of local residents, the government, tourism development groups, and tourists. This process has expanded visibility and economic opportunity, but it has also reshaped the conditions under which local culture is represented. As a result, contemporary Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings should be understood not simply as survivals of tradition, but as negotiated cultural forms produced within heritage, tourism, and market economies.

The Power of Government

During this national renaissance, the influence of the government on farmer painting has weakened. However, national ideology continues to play a significant role. This era is focused on deepening and perfecting cultural leadership, with the primary task to build a strong socialist, cultural country. In this context, Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings are positioned within policy discourse as representatives of cultural consciousness, expected to embody socialist culture with local characteristics.

The Power of the Mentor

In the market economy, mentors emphasize that Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings should be rooted in the countryside, returning to national and life culture and folk art. This foundational principle must be maintained, allowing for the integration of modern elements and contemporary painting language and form. Influenced by the thought processes of the Dong people, Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings often feature sympathetic composition. This characteristic is intensified by changes within the group of painters. The content in Dong farmers' paintings is not limited by space, perspective, or objective phenomena, nor by time, allowing for free imagination and creativity. For example, Wu Jianchun's *Monthly Performance of Folk Customs* places scenes from different times and spatial perspectives within the same picture, a manifestation of thinking that is not temporally-constrained.

The Power of the Creators

The creators of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings retain full autonomy, which allows them to express the aesthetic characteristics of vernacular, ethnic, and folk art. The comprehensive artistic process involves integrating traditional techniques and contemporary innovations, ensuring that Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings remain culturally significant while adapting to modern artistic standards and practices that are deemed suitable for meeting market demands. By studying and adapting methods from traditional crafts, artists create works that reflect both historical continuity and modern innovation.

During this period, many farmer artists now receive systematic cultural education and professional art training, leading to a more pronounced absorption and incorporation of folk art compared to earlier times. By integrating embroidery patterns, Dong brocade patterns, and paper-cutting designs, they enhance the decoration of figures and objects in their paintings. For example, in Rong Xuelian's *New Life Embroidered with Skilful Hands*, the modelling of figures remains highly generalized due to the influence of paper-cutting, but the addition of various patterns makes the

figures more informative and detailed. Painters have also intensified the circular arrangement to meet market demands and enhance decorative appeal. Wu Jianchun’s Dong Weaving and Spinning Series exemplifies this by employing circular arrangements for both buildings and trees, enhancing the visual harmony and decorative quality of the paintings. From a cultural-ecological perspective, this phase represents a new balance of forces. Professional training increases technical range and compositional control, while market pressures encourage decorative refinement and recognisable ethnic motifs. Consequently, contemporary paintings embody both agency and constraint: they preserve local cultural references, yet do so within systems of valuation shaped by tourism, education, exhibition culture, and state-recognised heritage discourse.



Figure 6. *Lusheng Dong Tian Dance Wan* by Yao Nidan. Source: Yang Na fieldwork collection, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, China. Original creator(s): Yao Nidan. Copyright and permissions: Images reproduced with permission from the local community and cultural custodians.

The identity of the creators has evolved from primarily farmers to include employees, urban residents, craftsmen, and other professionals from various walks of life. These modern creators are university-educated and

have received professional art training from colleges. This new group of farmerized intellectuals has become the vital soul of contemporary folk painting, infusing fresh ideas and techniques into Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings. Having undergone professional art tutoring and gained experience in drawing and colouring, these creators apply principles of sketching - such as primary and secondary focus, sparseness and density, and perspective (near and big, far and small) - to their Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings. This results in compositions that are rich and full, with noticeable variations in focus and detail, enhancing the overall depth and structure of the paintings (Figure 6).

Category	Content
Theme	Mainly natural landscapes, folk customs and daily life
Type	Primarily personal art, created by the artist to cater to the market
Features	Exhibits a local atmosphere, ethnic characteristics, and the aesthetics of folk art
Composition	Sympathetic composition
Layout	Full, includes changes in hierarchy, density and size (closer objects larger, farther objects smaller)
Modelling	Highly summarized modelling, emphasizing simplicity over complexity, with Dong brocade and embroidery patterns as decoration
Color	More abstract colour usage according to the preferences of the artist
Arrangement	Circular

Table 3. *21st Century Sanjiang Dong Farmer Life Paintings*

Farmer Painting Development from the Perspective of Cultural Ecology

Pre-1978 Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings reveal that government mandates and state ideology exerted a dominant influence over artistic production during this period. Artworks were intricately tied to political narratives and public propaganda, but the relationship between state power and pictorial form was not mechanically direct (Wolf, 1972). In this context, creative expression was subordinated to the imperatives of a socialist state, wherein the natural environment and indigenous cultural elements were rendered secondary to state-driven ideological objectives. As Steward (1968) posited in his work on cultural ecology, cultural adaptations emerge in response to external pressures; here, the primary force was political, channelling the

creative energy of local artists into forms that reinforced national narratives of progress and unity. However, these works were produced through a chain of mediation. State institutions established the ideological horizon; mentors translated this into technical and formal norms; and creators supplied local experiential knowledge within those limits. The resulting paintings were therefore shaped by unequal negotiation. Their realism, ordered figuration, and restricted thematic range reflect a field in which local agency remained present, but heavily channelled (Boden, 2022; Milner, 2002).

The subsequent period of reform and opening up marked a decisive shift in the ecological dynamics influencing Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings. With the relaxation of stringent government oversight, local cultural and natural influences began to assert a more pronounced role in artistic production. This phase was characterized by an increased emphasis on indigenous aesthetics, folk traditions, and the representation of the natural landscape, aligning with Steward's assertion that cultural adaptations are ephemeral and continuously evolving in response to their environment (Sutton & Anderson, 2020). Paintings from this era displayed a heightened sensitivity to local motifs - rural life, ethnic customs, and natural scenery - that signal a reorientation from politically mandated narratives toward expressions that celebrate the organic interplay between nature and culture. This evolution aligns with contemporary debates in cultural ecology that stress the importance of integrating global influences with local environmental contexts (Piccardo & Canepa, 2021; Kamakaula, 2024), thereby illustrating the dynamic and multifaceted nature of cultural adaptation.

In the contemporary 21st-century period, Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings are produced within a still more differentiated cultural ecology in which state recognition, heritage discourse, tourism, market demand, professionalisation, and local cultural memory interact unevenly. Although state ideology continues to contribute to the broader cultural discourse, its restrictive role has markedly diminished, permitting natural ecology and indigenous cultural practices to take centre stage. At the same time, contemporary works often respond to new systems of valuation. Artists have greater formal latitude than before, but they also work

within new pressures that reward particular representations of local culture. This transformation echoes the integrated approach proposed by posthumanism and new materialist theorists, who argue for the co-constitutive role of human and non-human actors in shaping cultural narratives (Armouch, 2024; Lalouvière, 2021). Consequently, the evolution of Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings - from a predominantly politically driven form to a richly layered cultural expression - confirms key tenets of cultural ecology and expands its theoretical scope by demonstrating how the relaxation of political constraints facilitates a more authentic engagement with the natural and material dimensions of cultural identity (Bennett, 2010; Latour, 2005).

Limitations and Implications

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, fieldwork was concentrated in a limited number of sites (Dudong Village, Guyi Town, Sanjiang County Ethnic Experimental School, and Nanning City), so the findings may not capture the full diversity of practice across Dong communities. Second, many participants held institutional, administrative, or educational roles, which may underrepresent the perspectives of less visible painters. Third, the visual corpus derives largely from the first author's fieldwork collection, and the content analysis is interpretive; the readings offered here therefore remain open to alternative interpretations. Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings are recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage, and initiatives such as the 'national culture in the classroom' have expanded its institutional transmission and visibility (Zhou, 2021). However, such initiatives also tend to formalise and standardise what counts as legitimate knowledge of the art form, potentially privileging particular styles, themes, and interpretations while marginalising others. Transmission in this context is therefore a process of selection and codification. Rather than advancing prescriptive recommendations, the findings highlight a set of tensions that structure contemporary transmission: between protection and standardisation, education and creative autonomy, and cultural visibility and market adaptation. These

dynamics suggest that contemporary efforts to sustain the practice involve ongoing negotiation over what is transmitted, how it is formalised, and which forms of cultural expression are legitimised within institutional, educational, and market contexts.

Conclusion

This study examines Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings through the lens of cultural ecology, conceptualising them as products of historically situated relations among environment, social practice, and structures of power. The analysis demonstrates that the form, content, and circulation of the paintings have been shaped by shifting configurations of political authority, pedagogical mediation, local cultural practice, and later market and heritage systems. The three periods analysed in this study reveal changing but continuous processes of mediation. In the pre-1978 period, artistic production was structured through state-led ideological frameworks that prioritised legibility and collective meaning. During the reform era, these constraints were reconfigured rather than removed, as mentors and creators selectively reintroduced local visual resources within evolving artistic and institutional contexts. In the contemporary period, expanded circulation through heritage, education, and market systems has generated new conditions of visibility, in which local expression is both enabled and selectively shaped by external valuation frameworks. The study positions cultural ecology as an analytical framework for understanding how artistic form emerges through the interaction of material environment, cultural knowledge, and institutional power. The paintings changed in theme and in composition, modelling, spatial logic, and decoration because the conditions of making, seeing, and valuing them also changed. The study therefore argues that Sanjiang Dong farmer life paintings are best understood as negotiated cultural-ecological forms: produced through historically shifting tensions among state institutions, mentor mediation, creators' situated agency, ethnic craft inheritances, and later the expanding pressures of heritage governance and market circulation. Across these periods,

power is reconfigured, shaping how cultural value, artistic legitimacy, and visual representation are produced and recognised.

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