

## Article

# Agricultural-Heritage-Oriented Rural Revitalization: Experiences from the Ancient Tea Town of Xiping

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**Abstract:** The Anxi Tieguan Yin Tea Culture System, as the proposed location of a globally important agricultural heritage system (GIAHS), has demonstrated the great significance of a network of heritage settlements and landscapes and supported rural revitalization and the participation and empowerment of women, based on agricultural heritage. Through fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, this study attempts to analyze the experience of rural revitalization in Xiping. Firstly, the unique cultural heritage found within the agricultural landscape, formed by the multi-party linkage and dynamic adaptation of the surrounding natural environment by local residents, has shaped the Anxi Tieguan Yin tea culture system of Xiping. Secondly, local residents actively participate in tea competitions and tea associations, so that the implementation process of agricultural cultural heritage preservation and development can be from the perspective of a shared experience. Thirdly, intangible cultural heritage features, such as the Female Tea Master Training Institute, have played a vital role in the development of tea towns and have proved conducive to women's participation and empowerment. The results show that the agricultural heritage of the area, based on the Tea Manor and its multi-functional resources, has helped Xiping to move toward a more sustainable future, while eventually supporting a local society with a more distinctive rural landscape of which people can be proud. This system meets the need for local socio-economic and cultural development, and the promotion of the sustainable development of the entire region.

**Keywords:** agricultural heritage; agricultural landscape; cultural heritage; rural revitalization; Tieguan Yin tea



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## 1. Introduction

As urbanization develops, agricultural heritage (AH), as an emerging heritage type, is facing many challenges [1]. The mantle of AH covers farms of different types, agricultural museums, vineyards, fishing, mining, and other agricultural activities [2]. AH also incorporates diverse components, such as species, tools, technology, and culture [3]. As a kind of cultural landscape, AH emphasizes the locality of culture with the main ethnic groups, highlighting the relationship between humans, land, and creation [4]. In 2002, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) jointly launched a protection initiative for globally important agricultural heritage systems (GIAHS), aiming to explore and protect typical traditional AH worldwide [5]. AH is conducive to promoting regional sustainable development [6]. In a study of the relationship between cultural heritage and economic development, it has been stressed that cultural heritage is a means of economic development [7]. As cultural heritage is regarded as one of the means of developing and adding value to agriculture, sustainable agriculture should be established on the basis of

protecting cultural heritage, where farmers are the main agents of support for agriculture and rural communities.

In an international context, South Korea makes effective use of agricultural resources by regional branding and tourism as a way to maintain the rural lifestyle and promote the revitalization of rural areas, while in Japan, AH enables stakeholder participation, resisting environmental change, and the development of new business models [8]. Wine tourism in the Tokaj wine region in Hungary promotes adjustments to the rural structure [9,10], creates employment opportunities, and increases human capital [11], along with the opportunity to develop economic, social, and cultural values [12]. In addition, rural tourism involves tourists visiting rural areas and actively participating in the rural lifestyle, which has always been a major agricultural activity [13]. Evidence shows that festival tourism is one of the most sustainable forms of tourism development, which is related to community development and the local environment [14]. In brief, the integration of agriculture and tourism is promoted through the use of natural resources, thereby supporting sustainable rural development [15].

Cultural heritage exists in a traditional or historic agricultural landscape and is the expression of a common memory. While meeting people's functional needs, cultural heritage links the past and present of a location, thereby providing the community with a common experience that can become the foundation of local cohesion [16]. The multi-functionality of AH usually comprises cultural landscapes, biodiversity, recreational opportunities, rural settlements, and food security [17]. Farina [18] considers agricultural land as a cultural landscape that explains human participation in the land, although people have different perceptions of different agricultural landscapes [19]. For instance, the visiting public generally prefers agricultural landscapes with rich natural elements, rather than modern industrialized elements [20]. Although AH involves the common patterns of a productive landscape within traditional agricultural societies, it is also a way of thinking about land use that maintains a sustainable balance with the environment [21]. The relationship between humans and landscapes is dynamic and interdependent, rather than independent [22].

While AH has the capacity to improve social cohesion, rural development, and environmental balance [1], Daugstad et al. [19] point out the connection between agriculture and cultural heritage that exists in traditional or historic agricultural landscapes, describing it as an expression of a community's memories and knowledge about human life, activities, and abilities through time. Traditional knowledge, values, and culture are becoming more and more important in a complex world and are potential resources for rural revitalization [23–25]. For instance, the agricultural folk culture is part of intangible cultural heritage. Folklore is one of the most important factors within a specific ethnic culture [26]. In Sri Lanka, rice cultivation is a cultural custom [27], while pastoral societies in Africa [28] and Andean communities in Latin America [29] think that their livelihoods are related to cultural customs; the Pungda Ancestral Rite, a tea culture and its customs that are preserved at the Hadong heritage site in South Korea, involves local residents holding an ancestor-worship ceremony around Gokwoo during the season when tea trees are planted, to pray for a good harvest [30]. The economic impact of European tourists on festivals has been widely discussed. Many tourists seek rural destinations that will provide pleasant experiences related to natural environments, historical heritage, and cultural patterns. Agricultural folk cultures, such as those found in folk villages and ceremonies, are recreated to attract tourists [31]. The cotton gin museum located in Burton Town, Texas, USA, provides local farmers with promotion and sales channels for the annual Cotton Flower Culture Festival and, likewise, provides a platform for foreign audiences to learn about the cotton flower culture in a short time. Therefore, strengthening local identity and establishing the meaning and value of heritage elements are crucial for the development of AH [32].

It is noteworthy that women play an important role in the development of AH [33]. Many studies have shown that women have made great contributions to agriculture [34,35]. Huang [36] demonstrated the meaning of life in fishing villages through different time and space backgrounds, based on the life experience of women in contemporary fishing

villages, thereby affirming the value of women's labor; similarly, the higher the price of tea in tea-producing areas, the higher the proportion of females in the population and the higher the status of women in the area. Tea planting in an area increases the average education level of women and men by 0.25 and 0.15, respectively [33].

AH can be used as a production factor to realize sustainable rural tourism [37] and has greatly increased tea sales [38]. In terms of the development of the tea industry, tea tourism is defined as the history, tradition, and consumption of tea, which is an important economic agricultural crop as well as a leading traditional industry in China, where it interweaves diverse cultures and becomes the product of social civilization. Since the nineteenth century, tea has become an important Chinese export commodity, such as Tieguanyin tea in Xiping [39].

The Anxi Tieguanyin tea culture system is an agricultural, ecological, and tea culturing system characterized by planting tea bushes and producing Tieguanyin tea. Anxi Tieguanyin tea has made three historic contributions to the world's tea: first, Anxi tea farmers invented a unique tea-making kneading process to create a unique "semi-fermented" tea, known as "oolong tea". Secondly, they invented the whole-plant-layering seedling method of raising a tea plant and created a precedent for the asexual propagation of tea plants. Thirdly, the tea garden in Tieguanyin, Anxi, is a terraced tea garden that adopts compound ecological planting modes, such as retaining grass on terraced walls, interplanting green manure, and alternating tea plantations and forest. Tieguanyin in Anxi County in Fujian Province has improved residents' awareness of their agricultural cultural heritage and the importance of its protection by protecting agricultural biodiversity and the traditional tea culture through training, breeding technology, product processing services, and demonstration households. It can thus be stated that the focus of protection has changed from tangible heritage to focusing on intangible cultural heritage. The Anxi Tieguanyin tea culture system was identified as an important feature of China's agricultural cultural heritage in 2014. Since then, Anxi County has strengthened the protection, development, inheritance, and dissemination of the Tieguanyin culture system, and achieved positive results. Xiping, located in the core heritage area, has been used as a pilot demonstration and promotion site. Such traditional agricultural areas are mostly guided by the government, and local people passively participate in various heritage-protection-related activities [40]. This arrangement is facing three major pressures from the need to secure economic development, ecological protection, and the continuity of traditional cultivation. This means that AH is faced with the issue of multi-functional value and industrial integration development [41], so that the multi-functionality of Xiping's AH is an increasingly important issue, with growing attention paid to the combination of green infrastructure, cultural landscape, and local revitalization. Therefore, by using the qualitative case study approach, this paper aims to explore the experience of the preservation and development of AH in the ancient tea town of Xiping, which has transformed a declining, old agricultural settlement into a multi-functional AH site. These cultural activities, including the landscape grid of the settlement tea manor, the social cohesion of the tea competition, and women's participation and empowerment, have shaped the local cultural landscape and multi-functional agricultural cultural system resources, which play a vital role in the development model of agricultural cultural heritage and have a far-reaching impact on the sustainable development of tea. The local revitalization strategy, guided by agricultural cultural heritage, promotes the progress of Xiping society, which improves the local values, characteristics, production functions, and surmounting of the challenges that are met.

The selection of Xiping as this study's subject is based on the following: (1) Xiping is a demonstration area for China's important AH, with a framework for protection, maintenance, and development; (2) Xiping presents various methods of tea production and abundant resources; (3) the Female Tea Master Training Institute, as a women's organization with intangible cultural heritage, is regarded as having had an important impact on the development of the local tea industry. However, although China's rural revitalization has received increasing attention, the development of Xiping still faces many

problems and challenges [42], especially regarding the role and influence of women in this process. Therefore, the aim of this study is to provide an AH-oriented rural revitalization experience by exploring the preservation and development of the ancient tea town of Xiping. The following sections will review the development of AH in China, explain the study area and data collection methods, analyze the main factors affecting the AH-oriented rural revitalization of Xiping, discuss the multi-functionality of tea-culture-based AH, and draw conclusions.

## 2. Overview of the Development of Chinese Agricultural Heritage

As of the end of June 2020, 62 traditional agricultural systems from 22 countries had been listed on the GIAHS list. After more than 10 years of development, the international community has continued to attach importance to GIAHS. The “Rice–Fish Farming System” in Qingtian County, Zhejiang Province, was defined as the first GIAHS site in China in 2005 [8]. Since 2012, China has initiated 118 AH projects of national-level importance and, as of 2020, there are 15 projects included in the GIAHS list, most of which reflect successful examples of ecological recycling, such as a mulberry dyke–fishpond system, rice–fish symbiosis, agroforestry, and mixed crop–livestock farming. These represent socio-economic, natural, complex ecosystems, based on agricultural production with multi-functional characteristics [43]. The protection practice of agricultural cultural heritage in China has changed from the “exploratory” to the “operational” stage, and a series of practical explorations have been carried out around the aspects of “dynamic protection”, “adaptive management”, and the “sustainable development” of GIAHS and other examples of important agricultural cultural heritage [44]. The agricultural authority puts forward the management principles, including overall protection, coordinated development, dynamic protection, function expansion, multi-party participation, and benefit-sharing, so as to incorporate heritage protection and planning within rural development.

AH is gradually becoming a major force for rural revitalization in China [45]. The AH movement has preserved many prominent agricultural landscapes, maintained restorable ecosystems, and perpetuated valuable traditional knowledge and cultural activities [46]. However, on the downside, from the perspective of protected objects, agricultural biodiversity as represented by agricultural product resources has received more attention in the current protection practice, while the level of attention to agricultural cultural value systems and social organizations remains generally low. The current practice is mainly dominated by farmers and local governments, with little participation from communities and social organizations. More importantly, most farmers passively participate in heritage protection by following government guidance [40]. Moreover, agricultural biodiversity has received more attention in current practice than have agricultural value systems and social organization operations. At present, the practice of tea agriculture as a feature of cultural heritage, led by social organizations in China, cannot maintain growth [47]. More studies are needed regarding its development potential, such as the practice of tea-culture heritage [47] and its development modes in different regions [42]. The above show that the multi-faceted development of tea-culture heritage remains a major challenge that needs to be addressed to maintain China’s AH. This study is based on the successful practices of local social organizations that participate by integrating tea and tourism, but there is little research into their practical effect.

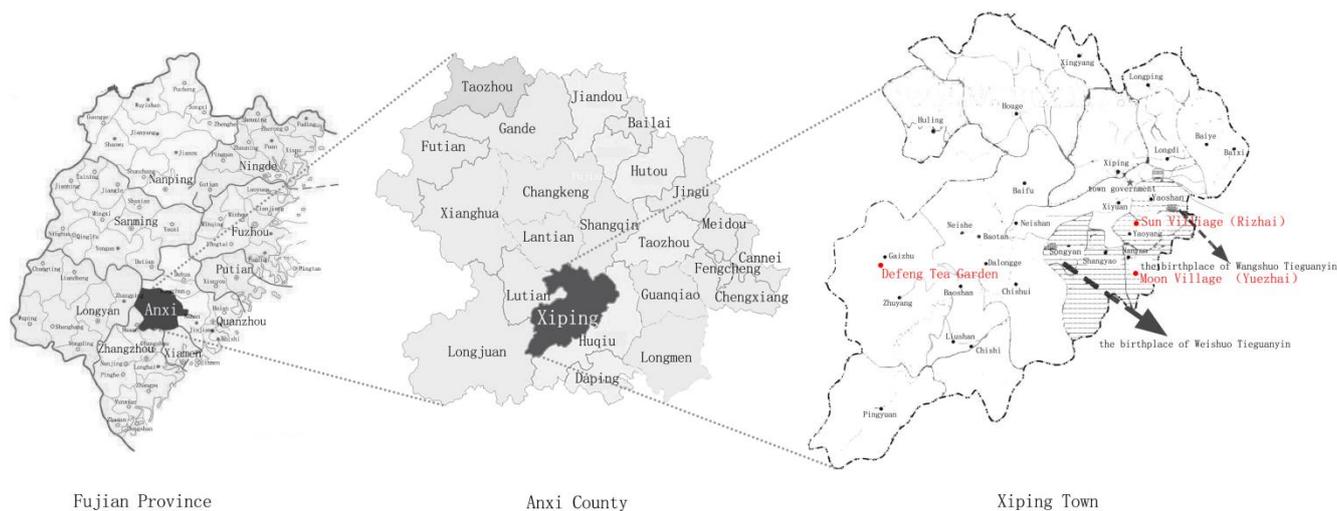
## 3. Data and Methods

### 3.1. Study Area

This study was conducted in Xiping Township, Anxi County, Fujian Province, China. As the birthplace of the well-known Tieguanyin tea, Xiping offers the ancient residential settlements of Sun Village (Rizhai) and Moon Village (Yuezhai) that have established the sterling reputation of Xiping tea. However, these settlements have encountered development problems, including economic decline and population loss. At present, Xiping is

actively promoting the integration of the tea industry and tourism resources, to form a tea-culture tourism network.

Xiping is located in the south of Anxi County (Figure 1), at the southern foot of Daiyun Mountain. The total land area of Xiping is 145.5 square kilometers, and it has 26 administrative villages and 1 community committee under its jurisdiction, with a total population of 61,663 people. The tea-culture heritage of Sun Village (Rizhai) and Moon Village (Yuezhai), and 100-year-old tulou (earth buildings) such as the Taishan, Jusi, and Yingbao buildings, were listed in the eighth batch of Chinese national key cultural relic protection units in October 2019.



**Figure 1.** Map of Xiping.

As the subject of this single, unique, case study, Xiping's importance is as follows:

1. Tea manors, ancient villages, and tulou have been identified as the focus of tea-planting physical resources. Local social organizations have connected the settlements of Tieguanyin's birthplace, tea-house gardens, thousand-year-old ancient villages, and century-old earth buildings to integrate resources to create a tea industry chain.
2. Tea-culture tours have attracted roughly 20 to 30 groups or organizations per year to visit and experience aspects of the industry, ecology, and environment. Xiping Tea Manor is famous for its tea-planting industry, ecological diversity (including aquatic plants), and healthy tea tours. It has become a center for environmental education based on the Tea Manor.
3. The Anxi Tea Competition Association is a local, non-governmental organization that promotes tea-cultivation development in a proactive and participatory manner. The association, consisting of local residents, is generally divided into: (1) community workers; (2) inheritors of intangible tea heritage; (3) tea farmers; (4) environmental protection workers; and (5) tea merchants. It holds "Tea Master Competitions" to develop local brands and promote local revitalization activities.
4. The Female Tea Master Training Institute is widely regarded as the first female tea-culture organization in China. It is composed of tea farmers, tea teachers, tea merchants, instructors in environmental education and training courses, and students, thereby connecting tea cultivation and local values.

### 3.2. Data Collection

This study was conducted from June 2018 to July 2020, with data from fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. The case study is based on the triangulation of data sources, which helps to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the research results. Participant observation was conducted during the process of fieldwork. The research team participated in the daily activities of local communities, such as tea

planting, ancestor worship ceremonies, cultural heritage education courses, environmental cleaning, and the design, construction, and maintenance of ancient buildings and tea facilities. Through fieldwork, the literature related to Tieguanyin tea was collected, and local development characteristics were identified and summarized by interview recordings and field notes. The interviewing adopts purposive sampling to ensure that interviewees have diverse personal backgrounds and long-time direct involvement in local community affairs. Thus, the inclusion criteria are: (1) active participation in community affairs for at least five years; and (2) playing an influential role in the process of AH preservation and community revitalization. A total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted, with a response rate of 100% (Table 1), comprising: (1) IV1, the successor and operator of the ‘Wei Family’ tea brand, who supports tea-culture AH development; (2) IV2, a tea manor manager, who is in charge of construction and management; (3) IV3, an environmental protection director of a tea manor, a middle-aged person returning to Xiping to build a tea manor and its surrounding area as a place worthy of AH and environmental protection education; (4) IV4, the head of a tea competition association, who formulates and develops various “Tea Master Competitions”; (5) IV5, a tea farmer with the title of “Tea Master”, who provides services for visitors to experience the methods of tea making and processing; (6) IV6, a senior local government official, tea-affair coordinator, and policy maker, who advocates tea-manor-based rural revitalization; (7) IV7, the head of the Female Tea Master Training Institute, who leads the promotion of the international Wu-Wo Tea Ceremony; (8) IV8, a female instructor in environmental education and training courses; (9) IV9, a female tea farmer and staff member of the Female Tea Master Training Institute; (10) IV10, a tea merchant and tea brand designer. In particular, these interviewees have acted as primary facilitators for local revitalization, transforming traditional tea resources into multi-functional AH resources through start-up, development, and entrepreneurial phases. In addition, some interviewees are retired people who still actively participate in community affairs without payment.

**Table 1.** Demographics of the participants.

ID Code	Age Group	Role	Participation	Occupation
IV1	55–65	The scion of the “Wei Family”, inheriting the traditional tea art of Tieguanyin.	15 years	Tea brand operator
IV2	60–65	Responsible for the construction and management of a tea manor.	20 years	Tea manor manager
IV3	55–60	Promoting the integration of AH development and environmental protection education.	15 years	Environmental protection director of a tea manor
IV4	55–60	Formulating and developing diverse “Tea Master Competitions”.	23 years	Head of a tea competition association
IV5	40–50	Providing services for visitors to experience the process of tea making and processing.	35 years	Tea farmer with the title of “Tea Master”
IV6	55–60	A senior local government official, tea-affairs coordinator and policymaker, who advocates tea-manor-based rural revitalization.	15 years	Director of the Tea Industry Management Committee
IV7	30–35	The main organizer of the international Wu-Wo Tea Ceremony, promoting the inheritance and innovation of tea culture.	18 years	Head of the Female Tea Master Training Institute
IV8	25–30	An instructor in environmental education and training courses.	5 years	Course instructor
IV9	50–55	Staff member of the Female Tea Master Training Institute.	25 years	Tea farmer
IV10	60–65	A tea-brand designer.	15 years	Tea merchant

In each interview, three core questions were asked, with the aim of eliciting follow-up questions. The three questions are as follows: (1) What are the unique resources for Xiping's future development? (2) What experience do you have in participating in local tea industry affairs? (3) What are the challenges and opportunities in the process of establishing agricultural cultural heritage and developing the tourism industry in Xiping? All interviews were recorded for later transcription, coding, and analysis. This study used a thematic analysis method, which enabled a detailed understanding of the interview data. Through manual analysis, a number of interesting findings were revealed from the process, such as the ancient village-based cultural landscape, rural tourism, clan organizations, and heritage and identity. However, this article will focus on three themes related to the study topic: (1) heritage settlements and landscape networks; (2) tea competitions and tea associations; and (3) female engagement and empowerment.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Heritage Settlements and Landscape Networks

The combination of natural and cultural landscapes is beneficial for AH development in Xiping. Despite tea being the main crop, Xiping suffered an economic downturn in the late 1990s as a result of population emigration and farmland abandonment. Currently, there are two ancient residential settlements located on the tops of mountains, including Sun Village (Rizhai) and Moon Village (Yuezhai) (Figure 2). Sun Village is a cluster of ancient houses, close together, with houses next to each other in the shape of the Chinese character '日' (i.e., sun), while Moon Village was built around 1520, with a total of more than 30 ancient houses surrounded by farmland, vegetation, and terraced tea manors [48]. A tea manor, formerly a state-run tea farm, retains historical traces after renovation, and is rich in natural landscape and ecological resources. The surroundings of the tea manors are mountains and rivers, where people, water, soil, animals, and plants live in interdependent harmony, forming landscape networks merging with green spaces [49].



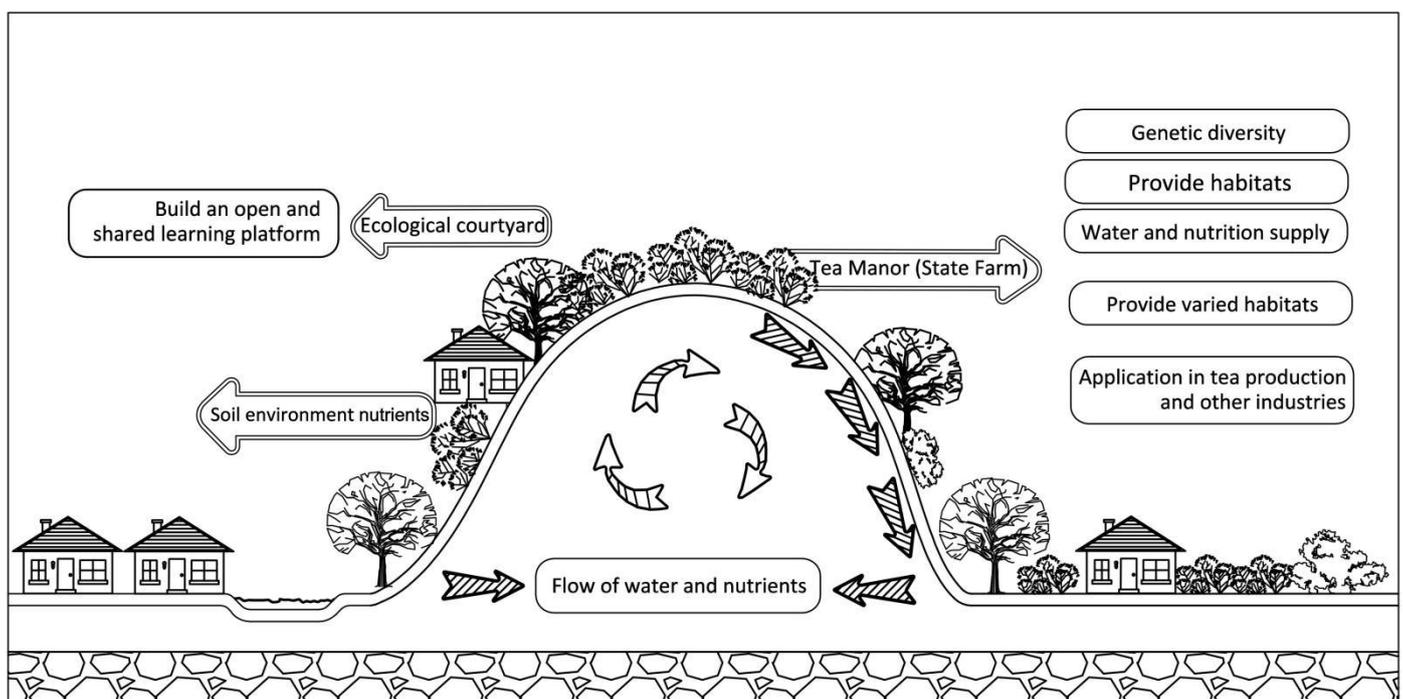
Figure 2. Traditional architecture and agricultural landscape of “Yuezhai” in Xiping.

The environmental characteristics of the tea manor are diverse and include natural, semi-natural, and man-made spaces, which contain interrelated physical resources to support the preservation of AH and the valuable closeness between space and nature. This underlines that the tea-culture landscape contains the collective memories of tea-manor-based settlements [50]. Maintaining green networks plays an important role in providing an attractive and healthy environment, creating unique local landscape characteristics, and establishing a multi-functional agricultural heritage. Though the original functions of settlements and tea farms have disappeared, and many settlements have been abandoned, there are still people who cherish the memories of their lives in those places and attach great importance to their future roles in the development of local communities. IV2, a tea manor manager, said:

*“Formerly a state-run tea farm, the tea manor was developed with ‘materials in memory’, and the surrounding landscape was established in a natural, simple style, largely retaining historic traces and restoring the tea memories of Anxi.”*

Xiping’s traditional tea manor planting and management method contain the ecological wisdom of “a harmony of humans and nature” (Figure 3). Firstly, the tea manor has the terraced design of the popular band-like “tea-mountain” system. Ecological planting methods, such as “stepping grass”, green manure, and tea forests, are used to conserve water and soil. Secondly, in addition to improving the quality of the tea’s raw material, the traditional tea manor planting and management method can also conserve water and soil, regulate climate, protect biodiversity, and stabilize ecosystems. In short, the tea-culture system of Tieguanyin tea in Xiping, based on the traditional tea manor’s planting and management method, demonstrates the development of ecologically sound agriculture in mountain areas, such as a tea landscape with vertical land-use, adapted to local conditions [51]. IV3, an environmental protection director of a tea manor, said:

*“Good tea comes from good mountains and good water. The Anxi Tieguanyin tea culture system is a precious heritage left to us by our ancestors, and it is our responsibility and mission to protect and utilize it well. The subsidy policy guides tea farmers to return to the traditional, handmade, unique tea-making process, in accordance with different conditions such as seasons and climate.”*



**Figure 3.** The traditional tea manor planting and management method in Xiping.

The state-level traditional ancient villages and state-owned farms contain the development history of the Wei and Wang families who have worked in the tea industry for more than 400 years. IV1, a descendant of the Wei family, said:

*“Old houses and their surrounding Tea Mountains are precious assets left by our ancestors. There are traditional southern-Fujian-style folk houses, more than 30 ancient large house groups, and more than 20 old tea brands. We cannot let them disappear, but must keep them in a good state, so as to promote their use and value as cultural resources.”*

Xiping’s agricultural landscape, based on tea manors, forms a network linked with the distinct traditional characteristics and architecture of “Yuezhai”, which encourages ecological afforestation and environmentally friendly farming to develop ecological soundness and biological diversity. For example, the tea-cultivation landscape of “ecological courtyards” preserves the original layout, building structure, and plant community of the tea manor during the renovation process, to ensure that the spirit of the place remains. IV6, a senior local government official, tea-affairs coordinator, and policymaker, said:

*“The ecological courtyard is a typical tea manor, which carries the interactive relationship between humans and nature, promotes multifunctional agriculture production and ecological protection, provides quality products and ecological services, and realizes the value of ecological resources . . . The ecological courtyard is formed in line with regional characteristics.”*

In summary, through talking and conducting an analysis with IV2, a tea manor manager, IV3, the environmental protection director of a tea manor, IV1, a tea brand operator, and IV6, the director of the tea industry management committee, this study found that the characteristics of heritage settlements and landscape networks are conducive to AH preservation and the development of Xiping. These characteristics include a connection between humans and nature, diverse green networks, low-density landscapes, and a terraced-style tea manor, which contribute to the diversity of AH and also have a positive impact on the robustness of local revitalization.

#### 4.2. Tea Competitions and Tea Associations

Xiping’s experience presents a method of developing AH based on the folk culture of tea competitions, which contributes to a cohesive social network. Xiping’s residents support this folk cultural activity because it has social and cultural functions, and the local government uses this intangible cultural heritage as a way of combining social networks and encouraging community revitalization. The tea competition association, established by the Xiping communities, operates to unify technical training and brands. Tea competitions are held every spring and autumn after tea harvesting [39]. It is a traditional custom that began in the Tang Dynasty and became popular among the people of Fujian after the Song Dynasty [52]. The ceremony of “shout to the mountain and worship the tea” has social, cultural, and economic meanings. IV4, the head of the tea competition association, said:

*“‘Shout to [the] mountain and worship the tea’ is both a belief in tea and the local culture of Xiping. In April 2020, the 2020 Anxi Tea Festival was held in Xiping, whose theme was ‘a cup of good Chinese tea for the world’. The traditional ceremony of worshipping tea ancestors and praying for tea blessing shows the belief rooted in Anxi peoples’ hearts that people and nature coexist harmoniously.”*

IV5, a tea farmer with the title of “Tea Master”, said:

*“Winning the laurel of ‘Tea Master’ in the competition is a great encouragement for me. Having been in the tea industry for over 35 years, our traditions come from the past and lead us to a better life.”*

The above quotation shows how important local traditional culture is in shaping people’s lives and livelihoods, and highlights this folk activity of tea competitions as a favorable feature of cultural capital. Furthermore, the association-based social network reflects blood ties and geographical relationships and expands the tea market [53]. IV9, a staff member of the Female Tea Master Training Institute, said:

*“The association is like a big family. We are connected by what we share in our work and the revival of old traditions.”*

Xiping’s tea production, processing, sales, and other parts of the industry have promoted marriages among families inside and outside the settlements. Local people gradually became closer to the foreign merchants with whom they did business and, thus, the original social network of the settlement gradually expanded. The tea association is one of the main characteristics of traditional Chinese society, one that is highly related to blood and geography [54]. Based on this connection, mutual assistance from fellow villagers and the need for faith have prompted them to set up a series of tea associations all over the nation [55]. Such tea associations have a high degree of trust within themselves since they are generally geographically related and blood-bonded. IV10, a tea merchant and tea-brand designer, said:

*“The tea association has certain advantages, such as reducing the cost of entering a certain market, as sales modes and management modes can be learned from the members, which makes it relatively easy to open [up] the market and succeed.”*

Obviously, Xiping’s experience reveals the importance of cultural capital for livelihoods. In this research, through the dialogue analysis of IV4, the head of a tea competition association, IV5, a tea farmer with the title of “Tea Master”, IV9, a tea farmer, and IV10, a tea merchant, the research found that the materials and forms of culture should be regarded as assets for local development. The preservation and development of AH play an important role in developing social cohesion. The local government supports tea competitions as important folk culture, showing the advantage of intangible cultural heritage. Tea competitions develop a system that combines the preservation of intangible cultural heritage with branding and marketing; more importantly, the local society is maintained and united by holding such locality-based public events.

#### 4.3. Female Engagement and Empowerment

The preservation and development of AH in Xiping rely on local engagement and empowerment. The female-oriented learning resource of the Female Tea Master Training Institute has created an open shared-learning platform through the master-apprentice system, covering college teachers, tea farmers, tea artists, tea merchants, and tea major students. The institute is responsible for skills transfer, skills competitions, innovation, and entrepreneurship, and advocates a lifestyle experience that combines education, art, and tea. This shows that a pleasant environment for work, study, interaction, and relaxation is crucial for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. IV7, the head of the Female Tea Master Training Institute, said:

*“We have set up workstations around the world, and we regularly make PPTs, videos, photos, etc., so that they can give the teaching materials to learners faster and more precisely . . . I am the first evaluated, representative inheritor of Tieguanyin production skills . . . through this platform of the training institute to enhance the Anxi Tieguanyin tea culture system. The people who join the institute are from different backgrounds such as technology, culture, management . . . [if we] turn the teacher-student relationship into a sister relationship, then the teacher-student relationship will become integrated. Stimulating the participation of local people can help make it possible.”*

IV8, a female instructor in environmental education and training courses, said:

*“Different forms of cooperation can be realized through inter-generational interactions . . . especially the young people, who make great contributions to the institute. Although sometimes female characters are challenged, it is necessary to recognize the positive influence of female tea masters on tea culture. Etiquette is a core and a starting point . . . including literacy, skills and theory . . . After improving their competence, 30% of the female members have started their own businesses, and their family happiness index has also increased. Many husbands even encourage their wives to join the training institute.”*

The international Wu-Wo Tea Ceremony held by the Female Tea Master Training Institute has indicated that women are crucial to the robustness of local society, and it has provided a platform to promote communication and learning in the local society, which is beneficial to the preservation of AH. The institute plays an important role in tea learning programs for foreign groups, which is helpful for the internationalization of the intangible cultural heritage of Tieguanyin tea. In addition, possible ways and means to make sustainable development policies more easily understood by people through practice and informal learning in heritage sites are explored [33]. IV9, a female tea farmer and a staff member of the institute, said:

*“Under the influence of the Female Tea Master Training Institute, international tea friends, the sisters Betsy Meyer and Dewey Meyer, have set up the ‘North American Intangible Cultural Heritage Workstation for Female Tea Masters of Tieguanyin tea’ in the United States.”*

In this study, by talking and analyzing the dialog with IV7, the head of the Female Tea Master Training Institute, IV8, the course instructor, and IV9, a tea farmer, it was found that the activities of the institute reveal an association with heritage, a far-reaching effect on life, the empowerment of women, the power of social innovation, and the development of the local economy. In the study, special attention was paid to the preservation of AH in Xiping by the Female Tea Master Training Institute. In addition, a series of actions by the women’s group affecting, e.g., ecology, the countryside, education, and social publicity, are a social engine that brings the power to improve the relationship between men and women in local society. In particular, the international Wu-Wo Tea Ceremony, based on AH, combines tradition and innovation to strengthen female engagement in rural revitalization.

##### **5. Multi-Functionality of the Tea-Culture-Based Agricultural Heritage**

Taking Xiping as an example, this paper aims to explore the impact of the preservation and development of AH on rural revitalization. The results show that AH is much more than the agricultural production of an area. In terms of the ecology of space, the preservation of AH has a significant effect on the improvement of the tea-cultivation landscape and the ecological diversity of the settlement and can be regarded as a valuable contributor to the rural green infrastructure. In terms of social levels, the tea-manor-based AH demonstrates social cohesion and community revitalization. Regarding ecology, AH can actively function as part of the rural ecosystem. In terms of the economy, the production of AH aims to realize social goals such as united efforts, cooperation, and social care. In general, Xiping has developed a sound social network that includes agricultural life, ecological landscapes, and social cohesion.

The development of Xiping’s AH provides a process for integrating humans and land within agricultural landscapes. The agricultural landscape in Xiping today is a combination of nature, cultural characteristics, and human interventions. The tea-manor-based practices establish the characteristics of a rural landscape, including the connection between humans and nature, diverse green networks, a low-density landscape, and a terrace-style tea manor landscape. This study emphasizes the close connection between nature and culture in the preservation of AH, as the tea manor enables people to widely and profoundly perceive the beauty of nature and the influence of culture and history. In addition, the ecology of space in tea-manor-based AH is unique as it changes with the seasons and the production cycle. This further defines how people are associated with the ecology of space, just as the AH landscape is a form of rural landscape. It is not only a common pattern of a productive landscape within a traditional agricultural society but also a way of thinking about land use that encourages sustainability while maintaining a natural balance [21]. As a complete system, AH is more than the sum of its components since it reflects integrity and sustainability and a long-term combination of continuity and interaction [56].

The ecological courtyard, relying on natural ecological resources, promotes the establishment of a small-scale landscape, showing a tea-culture-based social network. Although this case study is context-specific, it demonstrates a place that is public, cooperative, and

social. The experience of Xiping shows that the characteristics of the AH development process are collaborative and involve mutual learning and experience-sharing. The holding of tea competitions indicates that the characteristic culture of Chinese rural areas is generally based on the networks of rural society, underpinned by clan relationships, ties of blood, and geographical bonds. The development of this culture is built on the basis of group participation. This corresponds to Skinner's views [57] on the relationship network of farming families, clans, the intermarriage circle, and religious groups. The tea competition reconnects the relationship between residents and landscape, and supports the formation of a cohesive social network, as Cosgrove and Jackson [58] indicate the landscape is the image of the culture. The study also shows that the cultural construction behind the landscape makes Xiping a symbol of enhancing social cohesion and local identity. As long as the culture and social background in which the landscape is located are properly expressed and have symbolic truth, they can provide an authentic experience [59]. In short, this local-society-led and multi-participation preservation of AH should be encouraged.

Tea competitions, as significant local festivals, promote the construction of local identity in the process and play an important role in achieving rural revitalization. This supports Bajec [60] as an argument for cultural heritage and public participation in the process of achieving sustainable development in rural communities. By indicating how AH sustains livelihoods and shapes lifestyles, this study shows that livelihoods are not simply based on economic factors but instead are formed through a wider range of intangible and tangible cultural factors. As Azmi [61] emphasizes, cultural tradition is not only economic but also a means to realize an emotional, moral, and spiritual life. As pointed out by Bebbington [62], the local cultural background is essential for achieving safer livelihoods and more sustainable wellbeing in rural communities.

The intangible cultural heritage activities of Xiping women's groups provide a series of creative social actions that integrate the female role within society, exploring the potential of women's participation in the preservation and development of agricultural cultural heritage from a Chinese perspective. As Qian [33] indicates, the development of the tea industry cannot be separated from the special role of women: "The higher the price of tea, the higher the proportion of the female population in tea-producing areas and the higher the status of women in these areas". Xiping's experience shows that female engagement and empowerment are obviously an important force in promoting AH preservation. According to the study results, the tea-manor-based AH approach, including site planning, spatial design, and intangible cultural activities involved in agriculture, leisure, environmental education, and international cooperation, is conducive to establishing multi-functional, tea-culture-based AH. Moreover, the institute can greatly help establish social connections that empower women and other vulnerable groups and maintain cultural differences, all of which are the foundation of rural revitalization.

## 6. Conclusions

The development of a multifunctional AH has been an important global topic because it is regarded as a key to a sustainable future for society, one that evolves from daily economic production activities and the establishment of local cultural features. This paper aims to explore the experience of preservation and development of AH in the ancient town of Xiping in China, transforming it from a decaying, old tea settlement into a multi-functional AH site. The main findings are as follows:

1. Heritage settlements and landscape networks: the "tea-mountain" system contains a connection between humans and nature, diverse green networks, a low-density landscape, and a terraced-style tea manor, making the tea-manor-based AH in Xiping unique, and constructing a whole image of sustainable development.
2. Tea competitions and tea associations: Xiping has developed a cohesive social network that covers agricultural lifestyles, traditional customs and activities, and community collaboration. The cultural system surrounding tea cultivation plays a vital role

- in shaping social cohesion, and this cohesion encourages individuals to actively participate in community affairs and helps build a strong and effective social network.
3. Female engagement and empowerment: the intangible cultural heritage activities of women's groups and their participation in international collaboration show a series of creative social actions. This illustrates the obvious influence of women's role in tea-culture-based rural revitalization, as a driving force combining engagement, equality, and empowerment.

This study shows that heritage settlements and landscape networks, tea competitions and tea associations, and female participation and empowerment are worthy of mention for agricultural cultural heritage-oriented rural revitalization. Constructing a model of sustainable development aims at maintaining the balance between human socio-economic growth, natural resource use, and ecosystems. This type of synergy can encourage better interpersonal relationships and intergenerational ties, establish local cultural characteristics, improve agricultural products (such as tea-making), and make sustainable use of agricultural cultural resources, in response to the needs of local development, combined with the implementation of the Anxi Tieguanyin agricultural culture system. This case study indicates that the tea-manor-based AH with its multi-functional resources promotes the rural revitalization of Xiping. This involves environmental quality, landscape values, social cohesion, and ecological diversity. By exploring the development experience of Xiping, this paper aims to emphasize the importance of AH preservation in different forms around the world, and to explore the contribution of women to the preservation and development of AH. In addition, Xiping's tea-manor-based agricultural landscape can help individuals, communities, and countries to develop and strengthen social identity and meet various contemporary needs, such as rural lifestyles and livelihoods. This means that with the increasing importance of agriculture-based cultural systems, the various development challenges of AH sites (such as Xiping) for local revitalization are an important issue that needs to be addressed. Even during the rural development process, such as village reorganization, consolidation, relocation, withdrawal, or merging, the land as the spatial carrier on which rural culture relies has been changing. This means that the agricultural cultural heritage system, which is based on local consensus and integrates ecology, culture, and society, is the prerequisite for promoting local transformation, cultivating the civic qualities of democratic politics, and achieving sustainable development.

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