

## Guilin Cultural Landscape: Identity and interaction in Guilin, Guangxi

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**ABSTRACT**

The Guilin cultural landscape, located in the northeastern region of Guangxi, China, is renowned for its distinctive karst topography, picturesque rivers, and rich cultural heritage. This study explores the identity and interaction of the Guilin cultural landscape by analyzing its natural features—such as limestone peaks, caves, and water systems—and human elements, including traditional architecture, historical relics, and local lifestyles. The concept of identity is defined by the integration of natural and cultural characteristics that shape the uniqueness of the region. Meanwhile, interaction refers to the dynamic relationship between local communities and their environment, especially focusing on fishermen and farmers who maintain traditional practices in close connection with the landscape. Despite the region's popularity as a tourist destination, current research often overlooks the cultural and ecological roles of residents. This study applies interdisciplinary perspectives, including semiotics, symbolic interactionism, cultural ecology, and aesthetics, to investigate how Guilin's landscape functions as both a living environment and a cultural symbol. Through fieldwork and qualitative analysis, this research highlights the importance of recognizing and preserving the deep interconnection between people and place in the Guilin cultural landscape.

**Keywords:** Guilin Cultural Landscape, Landscape Identity, Natural Landscape, Cultural Landscape, Interaction, Fishermen and Farmers



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### INTRODUCTION

The cultural landscape of Guilin is a composite entity that integrates natural scenery, cultural characteristics, and historical heritage, distinguished by its unique landform features and rich cultural connotations. It is mainly concentrated in areas such as the urban district, the Lijiang River (漓江), the Yulong River in Yangshuo (阳朔遇龙河), and the Lingqu Canal (灵渠) (according to the Master Plan of the Guilin Lijiang River Scenic Area, 2006). Guilin's karst landforms have created magnificent peaks, clear waters, caves, and stone forests, possessing high aesthetic value. Natural wonders such as Elephant Trunk Hill (象鼻山), Fubo Hill (伏波山), and Diecai Hill (叠彩山) not only showcase spectacular scenery but also serve as cultural symbols. Guilin also preserves rich historical and cultural elements such as ancient city walls, temples, folk customs, and traditional villages, reflecting a diverse humanistic landscape.

Guilin's cultural landscape is located in the northeast of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, at the southern end of the Xiang-Gui Corridor (湘桂走廊), bordering Hunan Province to the north and adjacent to Guangdong

Province. The geomorphology of Guilin is characteristic of the typical southern karst landscape, featuring a rich variety of karst formations such as peak clusters, peak forests, caves, and stone forests (Cui, 2013). These natural landscapes, known for their picturesque and diverse beauty as well as their spectacular and unique formations, lay a solid foundation for Guilin's cultural landscape.

Guilin's cultural landscape boasts a long history, integrating natural and human elements, and holds unique aesthetic, cultural, and scientific value. Prehistoric sites such as the Zengpiyan Site (甑皮岩遗址) (China Museum Association, 2022) and Baojiyan Site (宝积岩) (Liao, Jiang, & Peng, 2006) reveal traces of early human civilization in southern China. The Lingqu Canal (Zheng Liandi & Liu Jianxin, 2018), a marvel of ancient hydraulic engineering, embodies significant world cultural heritage value. The region's abundant cliff inscriptions provide valuable historical materials for the study of local history (Tian Ye, 2024). The distinctive beauty of Guilin's landscape lies in its towering peaks, extraordinary formations, and picturesque elegance, inspiring deep reflection. The term

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strangeness refers to Guilin's one-of-a-kind karst landforms, unmatched elsewhere in the world, while gracefulness highlights its delicate, luminous, and tranquil qualities, evoking a sense of serenity and aesthetic delight. Guilin's typical karst terrain has formed peak forests (峰林), peak clusters (峰丛), and numerous caves, offering considerable scientific research value (Zhu & Wang, 1988).

Identity here refers to landscape identity, which is defined as the perceived uniqueness of a place (Stobbelaar & Pedrolí, 2011). This uniqueness arises from the combined influence of natural landscape features and cultural landscape characteristics, and includes three key dimensions: natural features, cultural attributes. First, natural landscape characteristics form the foundation of regional distinctiveness. In Guilin and Yangshuo, dramatic karst landforms with towering peaks, abundant caves, and clear winding rivers create picturesque scenery where mountains and water harmoniously coexist. Second, cultural landscape characteristics reflect the region's rich historical and cultural heritage. Traditional residences, religious structures, ancient bridges, stone inscriptions, and historical sites not only embody unique architectural aesthetics but also illustrate a long-standing symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.

Interaction refers to the communication and integration between individuals or groups and society, mainly including fishermen and farmers. In Guilin, fishermen rely on rivers like the Lijiang River for traditional fishing, forming a deep bond with nature. Fishing villages are not only living spaces but also places of cultural transmission, where fishing practices reflect ecological knowledge and community identity. Farmers interact with society through agricultural life in rural areas. Guilin's farming, often using traditional methods like terracing, highlights a close relationship with the land and respect for nature. Villages serve as both production and cultural spaces, where festivals and daily life strengthen social bonds and reflect the harmony between humans and nature.

Research on Guilin's cultural landscape has often treated its mountain and water scenery as static, neglecting the interactions between natural landscapes, cultural features, and residents' lifestyles. This study approaches Guilin's landscape through the lens of landscape identity, examining how natural landforms, cultural constructions, and daily life interact. It emphasizes the dynamic role of fishermen and farmers in shaping the landscape through ecological practices, revealing their perceptions and influence. By highlighting human–landscape interaction, the study fills gaps in understanding cultural landscape identity, deepens insight into local identity and ecological awareness, and provides theoretical and practical guidance for the protection and revitalization of Guilin's cultural heritage.

Based on the background and significance of Guilin's cultural landscape, this study adopts a comprehensive theoretical framework combining semiotics, symbolic interaction theory, cultural ecology theory. This interdisciplinary approach enables a deeper understanding of Guilin's cultural landscape across natural, humanistic, and artistic dimensions, with a particular focus on its identity and interactive relationships. This topic is really important to do further study. With the purposes are set as follows:

Objectives

2.1 To study the identity of the Guilin cultural landscape in Guilin, Guangxi.

2.2 To study the interaction of the Guilin cultural landscape in Guilin, Guangxi

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore Guilin's core scenic areas, with a focus on local residents such as fishermen and farmers. Methods include field observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review. An interview with Professor Xuefeng Wang of Guangxi Arts University provided insights into the historical evolution and cultural development of Guilin's landscape. Fieldwork, conducted from July 12–15, 2025, documented representative natural and cultural sites. On July 12–13, surveys in Xingping Ancient Town (兴坪古镇) and Xingping Fishing Village (兴坪渔村) focused on spatial patterns, cultural atmosphere, and traditional fishing practices. On July 14, investigations extended to key sites in Guilin city—Seven Star Park (七星公园), Chuanshan Scenic Area (穿山景区), Jingjiang Prince's Palace (靖江王府), Diecai Area, the Two Rivers and Four Lakes (两江四湖), and Elephant Trunk Hill—highlighting the interaction between urban landscapes and historical culture. On July 15, visits to Xishan Park (西山公园), Baoji Hill (宝积山), Diecai Hill, Fubo Hill, Dongzhen Gate (东镇门), Yingwu Hill (鸚鵡山), and Tiefeng Hill (铁封山) deepened understanding of the city's mountain system and cultural remains. Data collection included photographs, notes, and interview transcripts, which were analyzed through content analysis and integrated with historical records. By examining human–nature interaction, the study identifies the core features of Guilin's landscape identity and presents an integrated picture of the co-construction of nature, culture, and daily life. The findings provide theoretical and practical insights for cultural landscape protection, local identity building, and landscape value narration.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

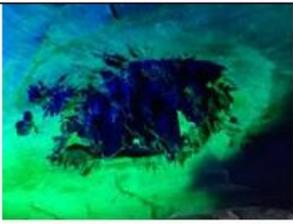
### Identity of Guilin cultural landscape

**Natural landscape characteristics**

The identity of Guilin's cultural landscape refers to the overall image and cultural symbolism formed by its unique natural and humanistic landscape characteristics. The research focuses on: (1) natural landscape features including karst landforms, distinctive peaks, karst caves, water scenery, and vegetation; (2) humanistic landscape features such as architectural styles and historical sites.

Guilin's karst landscape is a unique geomorphological type formed by the long-term dissolution of carbonate rocks such as limestone by water, and is known as the Guilin-type karst (Zhi & Zhang, 2016). It features classic formations such as peak-cluster depressions, peak-forest plains, caves, and underground rivers. Peak-cluster depressions are composed of dense stone peaks surrounding sunken basins, often containing underground streams and sinkholes. Peak-forest plains, by contrast, feature scattered, isolated stone peaks in various shapes—such as cone-shaped or saddle-shaped peaks (Zhang, 2021). Guilin's karst caves, including Reed Flute Cave and Silver Cave, are renowned for their complex spatial structure and fantastical scenery. Inside, they are filled with formations such as stalactites, stalagmites, and stone pillars, shaped like dragon columns, jade shoots, and stone curtains, offering strong visual appeal ( Table 1). These caves are typically formed by groundwater dissolving rocks along fissures, creating multi-chambered, multi-level spatial systems, often accompanied by hidden underground rivers. The use of colorful lighting enhances the visual impact, making these caves important sites that combine natural wonder, scientific research, and cultural tourism. They also serve as valuable field samples for studying karst evolution and paleoclimatic conditions.

**Table 1 Characteristics of cave sediments Image Source: Tongfu Zhang**

Stalactites (钟乳石)	Stalagmites (石笋)	Columns (石柱)
		
Flow stone (石瀑)	Drapery (石幔)	Soda Straws (管状石笋)
		
Shield (盾穴)	Drapery Shield (石幔盾)	Lotus Basin (莲花盆)
		

Distinctive peaks. The mountains of Guilin, formed by karst processes on limestone, are celebrated for their distinctive cone-shaped and tower-like peaks, sharp contours, and dramatic visual presence. Clustered as peak forests or peak groups, they create the classic scenery of rivers winding through fields and mountains rising abruptly from the ground. Many peaks are named for their forms, blending natural imagery with cultural meaning. Elephant Trunk Hill resembles an elephant drinking from the river, while Camel Hill (骆驼山) suggests a resting camel. Fubo Hill, named after General Fubo, embodies heroic spirit, and Duxiu Peak, elegant and solitary, is praised as a pillar of the southern sky. These evocative names reveal not only vivid visual associations but also the deep aesthetic and cultural resonance between Guilin's natural forms and human imagination ( Table 2).

Table 2 Distinctive peaks Image Source: Tongfu Zhang

Place Name	Shape	Natural Features	Image	Elevation (m)
Elephant Trunk Hill (象鼻山)	Isolated Peak	Resembling an elephant with its trunk drinking water		200
Fubo Hill (伏波山)	Isolated Peak	Half resting on land, half extending into Lijiang River, with a steep incline, towering towards the sky		213
Duxiu Peak (独秀峰)	Isolated Peak	A solitary peak standing upright, piercing the sky		216
Chuan Hill (穿山)	Isolated Peak	The mountain contains a cave running through it, resembling a full moon hanging high		298
Tashan (塔山)	Isolated Peak	A steep peak with a Buddhist pagoda at its summit		194
Nanxi Hill (南溪山)	Isolated Peak	a shape resembling a saddle-shaped stone screen		291
Camel Hill (骆驼山)	Isolated Peak	The shape of the mountain resembles a camel, with two peaks standing side by side		187.4
Laoren Hill (老人山)	Cluster of Peaks	Resembling an elderly person lying on their back		290

Moon Hill (月亮山)	Cluster of Peaks	A natural circular hole at the mountain's peak, resembling a bright moon		380
Luosi Hill (螺丝山)	Cluster of Peaks	The mountain shape resembles a spiral ascending		100

Guilin's waterscapes, renowned for their clarity and elegance, contrast beautifully with its unique karst peaks, forming a natural landscape scroll. The Lijiang River meanders gracefully, reflecting surrounding peaks between Guilin and Yangshuo, creating poetic scenery. The Yulong River, with bamboo groves and stone bridges, exudes rural charm, while the Taohua River merges softly with the Lijiang. City lakes like Rong, Shan, and Mulong combine natural beauty with cultural heritage. Guilin's waters and karst mountains enhance each other—rivers gain depth from peaks, and mountains gain grace from flowing waters. In Yangshuo, this interplay produces mesmerizing scenes, where peaks seem to float on mirrored waters. This harmonious fusion of mountains and rivers defines Guilin as a unique natural wonder.

### Humanistic landscape characteristics

The humanistic landscape features are uniquely captivating, manifested in garden architecture, traditional residential, Guilin cliff inscriptions and historical relics. The garden architecture is built in harmony with the terrain and water, employing techniques such as scenic borrowing and framing to create poetic spaces that embody the aesthetic concept of the unity of heaven and man. Traditional dwellings, characterized by gray bricks, black tiles, and horse-head walls, are naturally arranged and seamlessly integrated with the mountainous and watery environment, showcasing the wisdom of human-nature symbiosis. Guilin's cliff inscriptions are rich in content, with exquisite calligraphy carved into the rock walls, blending with the natural landscape and carrying profound historical and cultural significance as well as spiritual connotations.

Guilin's garden landscape architecture is meticulously designed within the context of its karst landforms and natural mountain-water backdrop, blending aesthetic, cultural, and functional requirements. It includes traditional forms such as pavilions, corridors, bridges, and towers, as well as modern landscape elements (Table 2). The design emphasizes harmonious integration with the natural topography, with flexible layouts based on the height of the mountains and the openness of the views. Through spatial creation and sightline guidance, these buildings foster interaction and symbiosis between architecture and landscape. Garden architecture not only provides spaces for relaxation and sightseeing but also constructs rich spatial layers, creating a unique atmosphere and enhancing the visual effects of the landscape. These buildings harmoniously blend with the natural mountains and waters, showcasing the wisdom of human-nature coexistence, highlighting Guilin's historical depth and local characteristics as a cultural and tourism hub, and serving as a vivid embodiment of Guilin's mountain-water culture.

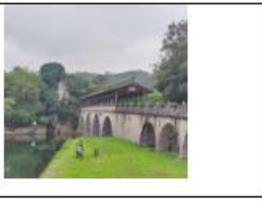
**Table 3 Guilin's garden architectural elements Image Source: Tongfu Zhang**

Pavilion	Gallery	Scenic Bridge	Pavilion Building	Pagoda
				

Guilin's garden architecture is distributed across various locations based on the terrain, including mountain foothills, slopes, ridges, cliffs, cave entrances, canyons, watersides, water crossings, and islands, demonstrating architectural wisdom that adapts to local conditions and harmonious integration with nature (Table 3). Buildings at the foothills, such as the Ludi Cave (芦笛岩) restaurant, Crescent Moon Tower in Seven Star Park (月牙楼) ① and Diecai Pavilion, follow the natural slope; hillside Site, like Bixu Pavilion (碧虚阁) ②, offer expansive views; cliffside Site, like Tingtao Pavilion (听涛阁) ③, utilize the incline to create a sense of layers; sidge-based site, like Bowang Pavilion (博望亭)

④, uses the mountain ridge to provide elevation and broad views of the surrounding landscape; gorge site, like the Sky Bridge⑤, are cleverly designed; Mountain-top Site, like Wenchang Pavilion on Duxiu Peak (独秀峰文昌亭) ⑥, occupies the summit to highlight prominence and provide panoramic views; cave entrance site, like Ludi Cave Entrance Architecture⑦, use light and shadow to create a sense of mystery; riverside site, such as Wangjiang Pavilion (望江亭) ⑧, symbolize the fusion of land and water; overwater site, like Huachao Bridge (花桥) ⑨, connect both banks and enhance aesthetic appeal; lakeside site, like Waterside Pavilion at Ludi Cave (芦笛岩水榭) ⑩, is set by the water to create reflections and enhance the scenic harmony; island site, such as the Island Architecture on Rong Lake⑪, emphasize solitude and tranquility. These structures not only provide spaces for relaxation but also embody the harmonious coexistence of architecture—environment—people, highlighting the unique charm of Guilin's mountain-water culture ( table 4) .

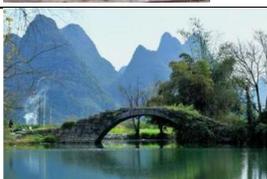
**Table 4 Layout of Guilin's landscape architecture on the mountain Image Source: Tongfu Zhang**

Foothill Site ① 	2 Hillside Site ② 	Cliffside Site ③ 	Ridge-based Site ④ 
Gorge Site ⑤ 	Mountaintop Site ⑥ 	Cave Entrance Site ⑦ 	Riverside Site ⑧ 
Overwater Site ⑨ 	Lakeside Site ⑩ 	Island Site ⑪ 	

The traditional residential style in Guilin is simple and natural, harmoniously coexisting with the surrounding mountains and water. The buildings are typically arranged in courtyards, using spaces as units, reflecting the traditional Chinese Feng Shui principles, which emphasize backing on mountains, facing water, and orienting towards the sun. Many homes are built near water, such as those in Jingchuan Jiangtou Village and Yangshuo Fishing Village. The materials used are primarily gray bricks, small blue tiles, and white plaster walls, with wooden or brick-and-stone structures. Poorer households often use mud bricks and gray tiles. The roofs are usually gable-shaped, which facilitates drainage and insulation, and features such as hanging eaves, horse-head walls, and pitched roofs are commonly seen. These elements are both practical and aesthetically pleasing. Horse-head walls, which extend beyond the roof, serve both decorative and fireproof purposes (Mao, 2005); gable walls enhance the stability of the structure. The doorways are intricately carved, symbolizing status, while stone bridges with simple designs complement the natural landscape, highlighting the practicality, simplicity, and regional characteristics of Guilin's residential architecture (Table 5).

**Table 5 Architectural elements of traditional residential buildings in Guilin Image Source: Tongfu Zhang**

Roof 			
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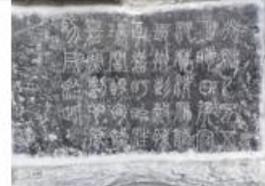
Ridge decoration				
Gable wall				
Horse-head wall				
Door				
Window				
Partition Door				
Partition Window				
Stone bridge				

Guilin Cliff Inscriptions are Stone Inscriptions and cliff sculptures found on the cliffs and rock faces of Guilin's mountains. They began in the Eastern Jin dynasty, flourished during the Tang and Song dynasties, and reached their peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties. There are currently about 2,062 surviving stone carvings (Liu, 2013). The content includes poetry, historical inscriptions, religious scriptures, medical formulas, and more, offering immense historical, artistic, and academic value. These stone carvings are mainly distributed in famous scenic spots such as Putuo Mountain, Elephant Trunk Hill, Longyin Rock, and Duanxiu peak, with Longyin Rock being the most concentrated. The carvings are often etched directly into the hard rock faces, blending seamlessly with the surrounding landscape and demonstrating the aesthetic concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Famous inscriptions, such as Guilin's mountains

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and waters are the best under heaven, are carved on Duanxiu peak and have become a cultural symbol of Guilin (Zhu & Lin, 2011). Inscriptions from the Song dynasty, such as Yuan You Party List, Luchuang Fu, and Yangqi Tang Fang, are valuable for studying Northern Song politics, traditional Chinese medicine, and karst landforms. Guilin stone carvings are not only an important part of Guilin's landscape culture but also provide significant material for the study of ancient Chinese calligraphy, geography, religion, and social development, representing a crucial aspect of Chinese cliff inscription art (Table 6).

**Table 6 Guilin stone carvings Image Source: Tongfu Zhang**

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Guilin's historical relics. As a famous historical and cultural city in China, Guilin is home to numerous precious relics that showcase the social customs and cultural achievements of various historical periods. The Jingjiang Prince's Palace is the best-preserved prince's mansion from the Ming Dynasty. With its solemn architecture and profound cultural heritage, it blends palace and residential styles and serves as an important physical artifact for studying the Ming Dynasty's system and Guilin's history (Gong, 2014). The Zengpi Rock site, dating back approximately 12,000 to 7,000 years, has yielded a large number of prehistoric artifacts, forming the unique Zengpi Rock Culture that reflects the exchange between ancient humans and Southeast Asian cultures. The Ancient South Gate and East Town Gate are significant city gates of the Song Dynasty's Jingjiang Prefecture. With their sturdy structure, they showcase ancient defensive wisdom and urban planning, with the East Town Gate being the most well-preserved. The Ling Canal, an ancient canal dug during the Qin Dynasty, connects the Xiang River with the Lijiang River. It not only facilitated the unification of the Central Plains and Lingnan but also represents the remarkable achievements of ancient Chinese hydraulic engineering. These relics collectively form the rich historical and cultural landscape of Guilin (Table 7).

**Table 7 Guilin's historical relics Image Source: Tongfu Zhang**

The Jingjiang Prince's Palace	Zengpi Rock site	The Ancient South Gate	The Dongzhen Gate	The Lingqu Canal
				

Thus, The identity of Guilin's cultural landscape is a profound reflection of the region's natural and humanistic elements. From its distinctive karst formations to its cultural heritage, every aspect of the landscape is a testament to the symbiotic relationship between nature and human life. Understanding this identity is crucial not only for appreciating the region's unique aesthetic and cultural values but also for preserving its rich heritage and promoting sustainable development in the future. This cultural landscape is more than just a visual spectacle; it is a living testament to the deep connection between the people and the environment in Guilin.

### Interaction

Interaction refers to the connections and exchanges between individuals or groups and the surrounding society. This section focuses on fishermen and farmers, whose lifestyles, work, and cultural activities reflect their interactions with both society and nature.

### Fishermen and Society

The fishermen of Guilin are a group residing in the Lijiang River basin and its surrounding areas, primarily relying on fishing for their livelihood. Their economic activities are closely tied to the aquatic environment, and they have developed unique cultural practices, customs, and lifestyles. The relationship between the fishermen and the Lijiang River system is

very intimate, as they have long relied on the abundant fishery resources of the river, engaging in traditional techniques such as cormorant fishing and bamboo raft fishing. The rhythm of their lives and traditional ways are deeply rooted in the local natural environment, and their water-dependent livelihood creates a dynamic interaction with the natural landscape in terms of culture.

Guilin fishermen's living environment is mainly divided into two forms: boat dwellings and land-based buildings. Boat dwellings were the traditional way of life for Guilin fishermen, especially before 1985, when many fishermen lived on boats, which served as both transportation and living spaces. The living space inside the boats was cramped, with kitchens and bedrooms usually separated by simple wooden boards or cloth curtains. Additionally, the boats often faced difficulties due to the lack of fixed docking facilities, with wind and waves causing frequent disturbances. Another group of fishermen lived in land-based buildings, typically located along the banks of the Lijiang River or at the foot of mountains. These houses were simple and functional, often made of wood or a combination of wood and brick, and made full use of natural resources. For example, Xingping Fishing Village is a typical case, where the village is located by the mountains and water, and the houses blend seamlessly with the surrounding natural landscape, reflecting a unique harmony between the water-based ecosystem and the fishermen's way of life.

Fishermen use a variety of traditional fishing tools, showcasing their deep connection with the Lijiang River. Common tools include fishing boats, fishing nets, cormorants, fish baskets, fishing lanterns, and raincoats. Fishing boats are mostly made of wood or bamboo, making them easy to navigate through the Lijiang River's waterways; fishing nets come in various forms and are used for casting or surrounding fish; cormorants, trained to assist in fishing, represent a highly distinctive traditional method. Fish baskets are used to store fish, making sorting and transportation more convenient; fishing lanterns provide illumination during nighttime fishing ( Table 8). These tools not only sustain the livelihood of the fishermen but also carry rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship, reflecting the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

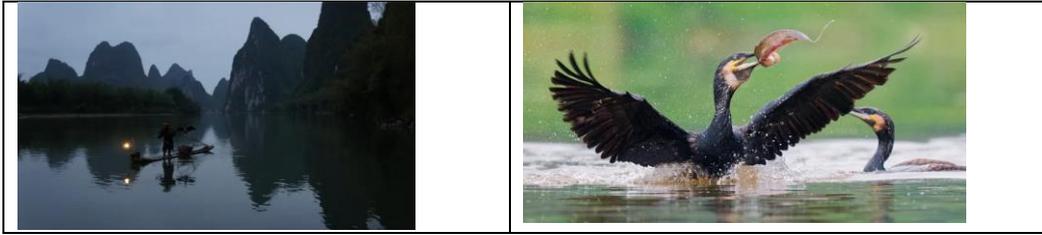
**Table 8 Fishing tools of Guilin fishermen Image Source: Tongfu Zhang**

<p><b>fishing boat</b></p> 	<p><b>cormorant</b></p> 	<p><b>fishing net</b></p> 
<p><b>fish basket</b></p> 	<p><b>fish lantern</b></p> 	<p><b>straw raincoat</b></p> 

Among the traditional fishing methods of the fishermen in Guilin, night fishing and cormorant fishing are the most distinctive to the region (Table 9). Night fishing typically involves lighting fishing fires on the surface of the Lijiang River to attract fish schools with the light, which are then caught using fishing nets or cormorants. Fishermen often form multiple small boats in a circle, using light, sound, and water disturbances to guide the fish into a concentrated area, creating the unique scene of fishing fire circle fishing, showcasing the interactive wisdom between humans and the environment. Cormorant fishing is one of the traditional fishing methods of Guilin fishermen, with a long history and rich cultural background (Liu, 2010). Fishermen train cormorants to dive and catch fish, and a rope tied around the bird's neck prevents it from swallowing large fish, allowing the fish to be retrieved. This form of human-animal cooperation has a long history and is listed as an intangible cultural heritage of the region, embodying the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, while also becoming an important symbol of Guilin's fishing culture.

**Table 9 fishing methods Image Source: VCG.COM**

Night Fishing	Cormorant Fishing
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### Fishermen and Society

The farmers are those who have long relied on the land for agricultural production, primarily growing crops such as rice, vegetables, and fruit trees. They are not only the backbone of Guilin's local economy but also an integral part of the local cultural landscape, lifestyle, and social interactions. Farmers occupy a central position in the social structure of Guilin, profoundly influencing the natural and cultural landscapes of the region.

Ox plowing(Figure1), as a long-standing agricultural method (Sun & Wu, 2023), is especially distinctive in Guilin. In areas with complex karst landforms, such as Dongshan Village in Qifeng Town, ox plowing remains in use due to its flexibility. During the spring plowing season, the sight of farmers working together with water buffalo presents a pastoral scene that embodies the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and carries deep agricultural cultural significance.



**Figure1 Ox Plowing Image Source: NetEase**

Ox plowing is not merely a labor method; it is closely tied to the surrounding natural landscape and cultural life. During the spring plowing season, farmers work alongside oxen in the fields, with oxen slowly moving forward in the morning light, their steps light and rhythmic. The plows turn the soil, stirring up mud and water that glisten in the sunlight, surrounded by lush hills and rice paddies. The rhythm of the oxen's steps merges with the natural rhythm, creating a unique harmony in the fields, like a peaceful and beautiful pastoral painting, showcasing the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Thus, Guilin's fishermen and farmers have formed profound interactive relationships with nature and society through their production activities. Fishermen, relying on the Lijiang River's ecological environment, have developed unique methods such as cormorant fishing and fishing fire circle fishing, demonstrating the cooperative wisdom between humans and nature. Their lifestyle, whether living on boats or near the water, also reflects the close connection between aquatic ecology and human habitats. Farmers, on the other hand, through methods such as ox plowing and rice planting, have forged a deep emotional bond with the land, and collective labor strengthens the cohesion of the community. These production and living practices not only reflect the people of Guilin's adaptation to and utilization of nature but also shape unique cultural landscapes and social interaction models.

## DISCUSSION

### Discussion on the Identity

The identity of Guilin's cultural landscape can be interpreted through the lens of semiotic theory, which emphasizes the role of signs and symbols in conveying meaning within a cultural context. According to Roland Barthes, landscapes are not merely physical spaces but are imbued with symbolic significance, where natural forms and human constructions act as a system of signs (Barthes, R. 1972). In Guilin, the karst peaks, rivers, and caves function as visual symbols that communicate aesthetic values and cultural narratives. Names such as

Elephant Trunk Hill or Camel Hill are iconic signs that blend natural morphology with local mythology and historical memory, reflecting the deep cultural encoding of the natural landscape. Similarly, architectural elements, stone inscriptions, and garden layouts serve as semiotic markers that transmit social norms, religious beliefs, and historical continuity.

From the perspective of cultural ecology theory, as proposed by Julian Steward, landscapes are dynamic systems shaped by the interaction between humans and their environment(Steward, J. H. 1972). Guilin's rivers,

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terraced fields, and fishing villages exemplify how local communities adapt to and modify the karst environment while maintaining ecological balance. Fishermen and farmers not only utilize natural resources for survival but also actively participate in shaping the cultural landscape, creating a symbiotic relationship between society and nature. Garden architecture and traditional dwellings are designed in response to topography, water systems, and climate, demonstrating adaptive strategies that harmonize human needs with environmental constraints.

Combining these perspectives, the identity of Guilin's cultural landscape emerges as a multi-layered construct: semiotics highlights the symbolic and communicative meanings embedded in natural and humanistic features, while cultural ecology emphasizes the functional and adaptive interactions between humans and the environment. Together, these theories explain why Guilin's landscape is not only visually striking but also culturally meaningful and ecologically integrated, reflecting both the aesthetic values and adaptive strategies of its local communities.

#### **Discussion on the interaction**

The interactions of Guilin's fishermen and farmers with their environment can be interpreted through symbolic interaction theory, which emphasizes that social life and human behavior are constructed through shared meanings and symbols (Blumer, 1986). For Guilin fishermen, practices such as cormorant fishing and night fishing are not merely economic activities but rich cultural symbols that encode local knowledge, social norms, and ecological understanding. The arrangement of boats, the use of fishing tools, and even the rituals surrounding fishing fires serve as symbolic actions that communicate collective identity and the community's intimate relationship with the Lijiang River. Similarly, farmers' practices such as ox plowing and terraced rice cultivation embody shared meanings of harmony, labor, and respect for the land, creating symbolic ties between humans, the natural environment, and cultural traditions.

From the perspective of cultural ecology theory, as proposed by Julian Steward, human societies adapt to and modify their environments in ways that sustain both ecological and cultural systems (Steward, J. H. 1972). Guilin fishermen's boat dwellings, riverside villages, and use of natural resources demonstrate adaptive strategies that maintain the ecological balance of the Lijiang River while supporting livelihoods. Farmers' agricultural practices, especially in karst terrains, reflect a long-term adaptation to complex topography and water systems. The design of settlements, land use, and seasonal farming activities illustrate how human behavior co-evolves with the natural environment, forming sustainable and resilient cultural landscapes.

Combining these two theoretical perspectives, Guilin's human–landscape interactions are simultaneously symbolic and ecological. Symbolic interaction theory highlights how fishermen and farmers convey meaning

and cultural identity through daily practices, while cultural ecology theory explains the adaptive and functional aspects of these interactions. Together, these approaches reveal that Guilin's fishermen and farmers not only sustain their livelihoods but actively shape the cultural landscape, reinforcing social cohesion and demonstrating a dynamic human–nature relationship.

#### **CONCLUSION**

##### **Conclusion on the Identity**

The identity of Guilin's cultural landscape is a multifaceted reflection of the region's distinctive natural formations and rich humanistic heritage. Its karst landforms, including peak-cluster depressions, isolated peaks, caves, and flowing rivers, create visually striking scenery while shaping local ecological systems. These natural features, in combination with Guilin's waterscapes, generate harmonious, dynamic interactions between mountains and rivers, forming a unique aesthetic that has inspired both cultural symbolism and artistic expression.

Equally significant are the humanistic elements, including garden architecture, traditional residential buildings, cliff inscriptions, and historical relics. These features reveal a deep understanding of ecological adaptation, spatial harmony, and the integration of culture with natural surroundings. Structures such as pavilions, bridges, and courtyards are carefully sited according to terrain and water systems, reflecting the wisdom of human–nature coexistence. Stone carvings and historical sites further embed cultural memory and social identity into the landscape, linking past and present.

Overall, Guilin's cultural landscape embodies a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, where ecological adaptation, aesthetic principles, and cultural heritage converge. Recognizing this identity is essential for appreciating Guilin's unique charm, guiding sustainable development, and ensuring the preservation and revitalization of both its natural and cultural values.

##### **Conclusion on the Interaction**

The interaction within Guilin's cultural landscape highlights the dynamic relationship between humans and their environment, particularly through the activities of fishermen and farmers. Fishermen, living along the Lijiang River and its tributaries, have developed specialized practices such as cormorant fishing and night-fire fishing, which demonstrate adaptive knowledge and cooperative strategies with the aquatic ecosystem. Their dwellings, whether boat-based or land-based, reflect a harmonious integration with the riverine environment, illustrating how livelihoods shape and are shaped by natural landscapes.

Similarly, farmers engage in traditional agricultural practices like ox plowing and terraced rice cultivation, closely aligned with the topography and ecological conditions of the region. These practices not only sustain livelihoods but also reinforce community cohesion and

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cultural continuity. Through such activities, residents actively shape the landscape, blending economic, social, and ecological functions.

In sum, the interaction of Guilin's residents with their environment embodies a living, reciprocal relationship, where human activity and natural systems co-evolve, forming a resilient cultural landscape that reflects both ecological adaptation and social identity.

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