

# Ancient agriculture: the rice terraces of the Hani people

By IAPC



Terraced rice paddies - Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province

More than 1,300 years ago, on the slopes of the Ailao Mountains and South of the Red River, the Hani people began to cultivate rice. The geographical particularity of the region together with the creativity and persistence of the Hani people were a symbiotic combination that gave birth to a cultural landscape that today is considered a UNESCO World Heritage site<sup>1</sup> and an FAO World Agricultural Heritage site<sup>2</sup>.

The Hani are one of the 56 ethnic groups that inhabit the People's Republic of China, and their population is concentrated mainly between the Yuanjiang and Lancang rivers in the southern province of Yunnan. To be more precise, it is in Honghe prefecture that the population is at its highest density, with more than 1.6 million people. They also reside in Vietnam and Laos.



Map 1: Location of Yunnan Province in China

Map 2: Location of Honghe Prefecture in Yunnan Province

The Hani trace their origins to the ancient Qiang people, a nomadic people of the Tibetan plateau. During the expansion of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), the Qiang people had to disperse and migrate from the Tibetan plateau to other regions of present-day China. The branch that went South and settled on the Dadu River received the name "Heyi" and are the ancestors of the Hani people. After the Hani people settled on the Dadu River, they were forced to abandon their agricultural settlements due to wars and migrated back to the subtropical Ailao Mountains in present-day Yunnan Province.

There, more than 13 centuries ago, the Hani began to develop terraced rice production, perfecting the system to an exemplary sophistication. Throughout the Southern slopes of the Ailao Mountains, they created canal systems to channel water from the mountaintops to the terraces, where the water is intentionally contained to grow the region's star crop, red rice.



Red rice is the star cereal produced on the terraces of the Hani people

This clever strategy of utilising scarce water and limited arable land is indicative of the exquisite and skilful technology of agricultural production. The Hani have also been able to intensify and diversify their agricultural systems, integrating animal husbandry such as carp, chickens, ducks, cows and buffalo.

To this day, thanks to local protection policies, the terraces continue to be tilled and managed in the traditional way. The structure, natural elements and cultural environment have not undergone radical changes for more than 1,000 years. Modern fertilisers and pesticides are not allowed and, on the contrary, organic agricultural products are being developed in the region.

Even the houses retain their role in supporting the cultural landscape of the rice terraces, although they now use some modern materials for maintenance or reconstruction. The location of the houses follows a popular minority saying "farm at the foot of the mountain and live on the hillside" and demonstrates the Hani understanding of the three-dimensional climate in the Ailao Mountains. Where the valley is cool and humid and the summit, due to the abundant fog, has a shady and cold microclimate. However, the mid-mountain area is characterised by a moderate climate, ample sunshine and is at a reasonable distance from the working area.



Hani village on the mountainside

The cycle of rice cultivation is central to the life of the Hani people and determines an important part of the traditional calendar, with festivals and sacrificial activities around it.

The Hani divide the year into "three seasons" according to the climate and the main phases of cultivation: the cold season (10th to 2nd lunar month of the following year), where due to low biological activity, mainly repair and maintenance of the terraces and preparation for spring ploughing are carried out; the warm season (3rd to 6th lunar month), where ploughing, planting and rice management are carried out; and the warm and rainy season (7th to 9th lunar month), which is the harvesting season.



Hani people's typical dance to celebrate the harvest

Sacrifices and festivals are also related to agricultural work. The main ones are "Angmatu" and "Kuzhazha". Angmatu takes place at the arrival of spring, prior to the beginning of sowing, and is the most important festival in which the people prepare to start a new cycle of cultivation. Kuzhazha is held in June and represents the arrival of midsummer, when the rice seedlings begin to glean and flower. During this festival, the people gather to share traditional foods, slaughter animals, set up the mills and prepare for the autumn harvest.

In recent years, the beauty of the cultural landscape created by the combination of the natural rice cycle and the age-old labour of the Hani people has attracted millions of tourists, generating significant income for the population. Every season of the year has its own particular charm. From November to March, the water-covered terraces form a huge mirror on which the sun shines and the clouds reflect. From April to September, the rice growing season brings a vivid green colour to the landscape, and from late September to early October, the ripening rice forms beautiful golden fields.

The Honghe rice terraces are not only the icon of the Hani people's culture. At a time when the industrial agriculture proposed by the Green Revolution (represented by transgenic monoculture systems and agrochemicals) claims to be the undisputed model, the Hani terrace system confirms that agricultural production in harmony with the environment and respectful of cultural diversity is possible.

## References

1. Designation of the Hani Rice Terraces as World Heritage - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - 2013. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1111>
2. Designation of the Hani Rice Terraces as an Important Global Agricultural Heritage System - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations - 2010. <https://www.fao.org/giahs/giahsaroundtheworld/designated-sites/asia-and-the-pacific/hani-rice-terraces/en/>