ALAM CIPTA
Sustainable Tropical Design Research and Practice
Journal Homepage: http://alamcipta.upm.edu.my/

Perception and Display of Folk Activities in Cultural Space – A Case Study of a Dong Ethnic Wedding Ceremony in Chenyang Eight Village, China

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ABSTRACT

This study takes the Chengyang Eight Villages as a case to examine how Dong ethnic weddings construct place identity through a spatial–symbolic system. Based on the event tracking of three complete wedding ceremonies during the 2024 Spring Festival, this research adopts participant observation, spatial behaviour mapping, and semi-structured interviews, followed by thematic analysis and methodological triangulation. The results show that the wedding ceremonies activate a series of threshold nodes such as family courtyards, village paths, communal wells, and the drum tower square through the repetitive encoding of objects, actions, soundscapes, and crowds. This process generates three cultural cores: identity and belonging, collaboration and cohesion, and blessings and celebration. These cultural cores contribute to the sedimentation and reproduction of place identity across its four dimensions: distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Theoretically, this study proposes and validates a mechanistic framework linking the "spatial–symbolic system" to place identity. Practically, it advocates a dual conservation approach integrating "ritual and space", incorporating key spatial nodes and ritual routes into community-based adaptive governance. It also highlights the need to guard against the dilution of authenticity caused by excessive performativity and tourism commercialisation in order to foster community cohesion and the sustainable transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: cultural space; Dong wedding; intangible cultural heritage; place identity; symbols;

ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Received: 13 March 2025
Accepted: 22 February 2026
Published: April 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47836/AC.19.1.PAPER06

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INTRODUCTION

Folk practices serve as essential mechanisms for sustaining place identity and constructing place memory (Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999). They also contribute to the preservation of urban memory and the shaping of place image (Zhou, 2017). As important carriers of local values, these practices through distinctive cultural imagery and authentic experiential

modes significantly shape residents' understanding of cultural festivals and enhance their cultural identity (Quinn, 2005).

Manifested in varied forms such as performing arts, competitive games, and traditional crafts, folk practices impart a strong sense of locality to cultural space. Through sensory experience and social interaction, they foster both identity formation and a sense of belonging at cultural and psychological levels, thereby positioning cultural space as a fundamental vessel of place identity (Zarkhah et al., 2020).

Cultural space serves as the primary setting for these distinctive practices. The perception and performance of authenticity within these spaces not only strengthen residents' sense of belonging (Mitchell & de Waal, 2009) and social identification (Becerra et al., 2018), and when supported by public engagement (Zhou et al., 2023) and policy frameworks (Qun et al., 2012) also reinforce place identity (Mitchell & de Waal, 2009; Ayalp & Bozdayi, 2013). This, in turn, promotes regional revitalisation (Ziyaee, 2018a) and fosters sustainable development (Solarek & Grochowska, 2021; Vong, 2015).

However, with the rise in population mobility and cultural pluralism, the relationship between public identity and place or home has become increasingly complex (Duffy & Mair, 2018). Folk practices are often instrumentalised to boost tourism and local economies (Chang, 2006). As socially constructed entities, cultural heritage landscapes are susceptible to commodification and external manipulation, which can erode authenticity and hinder the organic evolution of cultural practices (Winchester & Rofe, 2005; Chen & Tao, 2017).

Nevertheless, by fostering shared experiences and cultural symbols, folk practices continue to reinforce emotional attachment to "place/home" across diverse contexts and support the formation and strengthening of public identity (Duffy & Mair, 2018).

Current research tends to prioritise macro-level planning and physical environmental enhancements while overlooking the spatial practices and perceptual dimensions of everyday ethnic rituals, particularly weddings. Comprehensive studies that integrate ritual spaces, ceremonial practices, and symbolic meanings to interpret place identity remain relatively limited.

Among the most emblematic cultural practices of the Dong ethnic group, wedding customs form a crucial part of Dong identity and significantly influence the cultural landscape of Dong-settlement regions (Wu & Meng, 2020).

To prevent the erosion of local distinctiveness in the evolution of traditional festivals and rituals (Tao et al., 2014), this study investigates a typical case, Chengyang Bazhai in Sanjiang County, Guangxi. Focusing on key stages of the Dong wedding that includes "Stealing the Bride", "Recognising the Well" (symbolised by the bride carrying water),

the wedding banquet, and the return visit alongside their corresponding outdoor cultural spaces, this study explores how ritual performance constructs place identity through spatial activation, symbolic encoding, and perceptual experience, while also considering the implications for intangible cultural heritage preservation and community sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Spaces

Lefebvre (1992) categorised space into perceived space, conceived space, and lived space, highlighting its composite nature encompassing physical, psychological, and social attributes. Based on this framework, cultural space is defined as a place that generates social phenomena and "place meaning", characterised by physicality, culturality, and perceptibility (Lai et al., 2013). It is not only associated with human behaviour and psychological processes but also serves as a public space for social interaction and cultural practice (Farhana & Farida, 2008; Ma et al., 2021). The value of cultural space is mainly reflected in three dimensions: material, aesthetic, and symbolic (Solarek & Grochowska, 2021). Its distinctiveness is shaped by a combination of hard landscapes, historical relics, artistic expressions, folk customs, and environmental atmospheres (Richards, 2001), which together give rise to specific cultural landscapes and sociocultural meanings through the activities it hosts (Mahendra et al., 2019; Hussein et al., 2020; Farhana & Farida, 2008; Fazeli et al., 2012; Hakim et al., 2022). As a space endowed with both spatial and temporal attributes, cultural space is often included as a key category of intangible cultural heritage, periodically accommodating cultural events and traditional expressions (Yu et al., 2019).

Mechanistically, the interaction among material space, cultural meaning, and social behaviour constitutes the basis for the presentation and perception of authenticity. Public spaces that can meet the needs of specific groups and are easily identifiable and nameable are more likely to be recognised for their cultural value (Solarek & Grochowska, 2021). Ferdous and Nilufar (2008) explained the generative logic of cultural space through the interrelation among person, space, and culture, which aligns with the triadic structure of material space–cultural meaning–social behaviour (Figure 1).

In terms of application, cultural space has been studied in various contexts, including the spatial optimisation of urban cultural space (Wang et al., 2019), the construction of identity in historic towns (Lai et al., 2013), the analysis of artistic features and spatial layout (Liu et al., 2019), and the ecological and social reconstruction of rural areas (Zhong, 2020). Cultural space contributes to the creation of a sense of place (Uzzell, 1996), enhances environmental quality (Solarek & Grochowska, 2021; Sepe, 2015), gains public support (Zhou et al., 2023), satisfies cultural needs (Choi, 2011), and supports policy-making (Qun et al., 2012) and heritage conservation (Kittang & Bye, 2023). As

such, it strengthens belonging, social identity, and place identity (Mitchell & de Waal, 2009; Becerra et al., 2018; Ayalp & Bozdayi, 2013) and promotes regional revitalisation and sustainable development (Ziyaee, 2018a; Solarek & Grochowska, 2021; Vong, 2015).

Importantly, the value of cultural space is not a static resource but is continuously activated, reproduced, and reinterpreted through folk practices under specific social and cultural contexts (Yu et al., 2019). This process of activation is often influenced by performative and festive tendencies and must be coordinated with public support and policy guidance to avoid symbolic dilution and loss of authenticity. At present, in ethnic minority regions such as the Dong areas of Guangxi, research remains limited on the dynamic processes through which cyclical folk practices are embedded into space and contribute to identity formation. In particular, the micro-level mechanisms through which cultural activities via spatial embedding that carry, transmit, and recreate regional cultural meaning, thereby fostering place identity, have yet to be sufficiently explored, especially in studies that predominantly focus on macro-level planning and physical-environmental improvements.

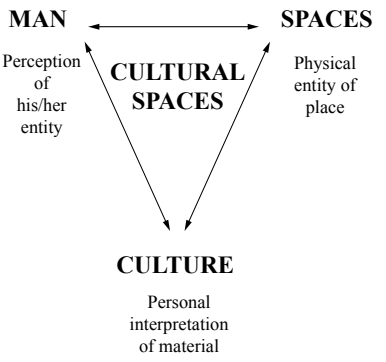

Figure 1. The correlation of man, space and culture indicates formation of cultural space Source: Ferdous and Nilufar (2008)

Folk Activities

Folk practices, as vital expressions of intangible cultural heritage, require the joint support of material infrastructure and the continuity of local traditions for their sustained vitality (Pi & Guo, 2023). These practices play multiple roles in maintaining social order, facilitating social cohesion, and driving social change; rituals, in particular, serve to connect individuals and communities, with symbolic forms carrying deep social meanings (Turner, 1977).

As Turner (1982) suggested, distinctive practices serve as arenas of cultural expression that manifest group symbols, reconstruct social relations, and provide symbolic support for everyday life. Changes in modes of practice, spatial usage, and the quality of the built environment can reshape public spaces and their identity (Kolçak & Kaya Erol, 2022).

Symbolic expressions embedded in experiential practices reinforce shared identity and represent common forms of reaffirming community consciousness (Falassi, 1987). The ritual process elevates assumed cultural values to reflective or even sacred levels through their renewal and reaffirm ation, thereby shaping identity (Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999); what appears as "disorder" is, in fact, the generation of social order (Turner, 1977).

In ethnic minority regions, folk practices are often driven by strong community consciousness, which contributes to the distinctiveness of place (Winchester & Rofe, 2005). For instance, in the case of Dong weddings, residents create perceptible cultural landscape symbols through spatial transitions and ritual behaviours within specific cultural spaces, thereby constructing folk cultural spaces characterised by unique experiential qualities. The spatial configuration of heritage sites and featured events enables people to experience a strong sense of place within the rural landscape (Winchester & Rofe, 2005).

According to non-representational theory, folk practices should be understood through embodied experience and practical engagement: physical participation and emotional drives interact with the material environment to shape holistic experiences (Thrift, 2008). The effectiveness of cultural and ritual activities lies in the co-creation of affective atmosphere and the material characteristics of space (Duffy & Mair, 2018).

On a practical level, symbolic elements such as dance and performance (Duffy & Mair, 2018), traditional attire (Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999), lighting (Winchester & Rofe, 2005), and food (Keken & Go, 2006) serve as pathways for translating cultural values into local textures and community identities (Duffy & Mair, 2018). These expressions not only awaken collective awareness and reinforce self-understanding and emotional solidarity (Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999) but also function as mechanisms for identifying group membership and reinforcing communal boundaries (Duffy & Mair, 2018).

Cultural Space–Folk Activities–Place Identity: An Interactive Mechanism

The framework of place identity emphasises its multidimensional constitution. Relph (1976) proposed an integrative structure comprising physical features, activities and functions, as well as meanings and symbolic representations. Breakwell (1992) and Twigger-Ross (1996) identified four core dimensions: distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Ginting et al. (2017) highlighted the significance of landmarks, uniqueness, and perceptual differentiation. Proshansky (1983) emphasised the role of the physical environment in the construction of self-identity. Bernardo et al. (2023) revealed four domains of place identity: personal, social, functional, and environmental.

During specific events, physical places can be transformed into alternative stages that reenact civilisational traditions and generate distinctive cultural experiences (Winchester & Rofe, 2005). The integration of activities with cultural landscapes imbues places with unique characteristics and symbolic meanings (Lai et al., 2013; Hussein et al., 2020).

Cultural experience relies on perceptual processes. Individuals interpret the physical environment through the coordination of visual, auditory, and tactile senses, thereby defining the relationship between the self and others (Proshansky et al., 1983a; Lawson,

2001). The dynamic nature of the sensory system allows these experiences to evolve continuously over time (Thrift, 2008).

As a result, activity-based experiences can strengthen vivid memories. Participants often engage with cultural events through four experiential dimensions including education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism, which in turn shape their sense of loyalty (Ayob, 2011).

In summary, folk practices serve as key activators of the value of cultural space. Through ritualised symbolism and spatial production, they initiate a continuous chain of "material expression → sensory experience → meaning/memory". When supported by public engagement and guided by policy, the interactions among space, behaviour, symbols, and meanings can further contribute to the reinforcement of place identity, while also radiating outward to support regional revitalisation and sustainable development. Consequently, the value of cultural space demonstrates both temporal continuity and spatial extensibility.

METHODOLOGY

Criterion of Case Study

According to the *UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, social customs, rituals, and festive events are classified as intangible cultural heritage. These encompass practices, expressions, knowledge, skills, and their associated cultural spaces that are recognised by a community or group as part of its cultural legacy. The Dong people are a major ethnic group in southern China, and their ethnonym can be traced back to Song-dynasty texts. The preface to *Ximan Congxiao* records "the Five Streams tribes … Mao, Yao, Liao, Zhuang, and Qiao," among which the term "Liao" is widely interpreted in academic literature as a historical reference to the present-day Dong.

Within this historical–cultural–spatial framework, Chengyang Bazhai, located in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County of Liuzhou, Guangxi (one of China's five Dong autonomous counties), was selected as the case study site. Chengyang Bazhai consists of eight Dong villages include Ma'an, Yan, Ping, Da, Dong, Pingpu, Pingtan, and Jichang—and was designated a national 5A-level tourist attraction in 2024. Among them, Pingyan Village (comprising Ma'an, Yan, and Ping) was included in China's Tentative List for World Cultural Heritage in 2018. This area hosts the highest concentration of Dong natural villages and retains key spatial typologies, such as drum-tower squares, wind-and-rain bridges and related public spaces, family courtyards, public wells, and open gathering grounds, all embedded within an intact settlement morphology. Ritual traditions remain vibrant, with multiple weddings following full ceremonial procedures

continuously observable during the research period.

Under the dual pressures of 5A-level tourism management and tentative heritage listing, the site is subject to both transmission imperatives and tourism challenges. Nevertheless, the local community demonstrates a strong willingness to cooperate, and language facilitation (Dong/Mandarin interpretation) is available. Therefore, Chengyang Bazhai is both representative and practical as a site for investigating cultural space (material settings and spatial organisation) and folk practices (continuity and observability of wedding rituals). It provides a robust empirical basis for exploring the ritual–space–identity interaction mechanism. Accordingly, the field investigation centres on five core villages within Chengyang Bazhai (Figure 2).

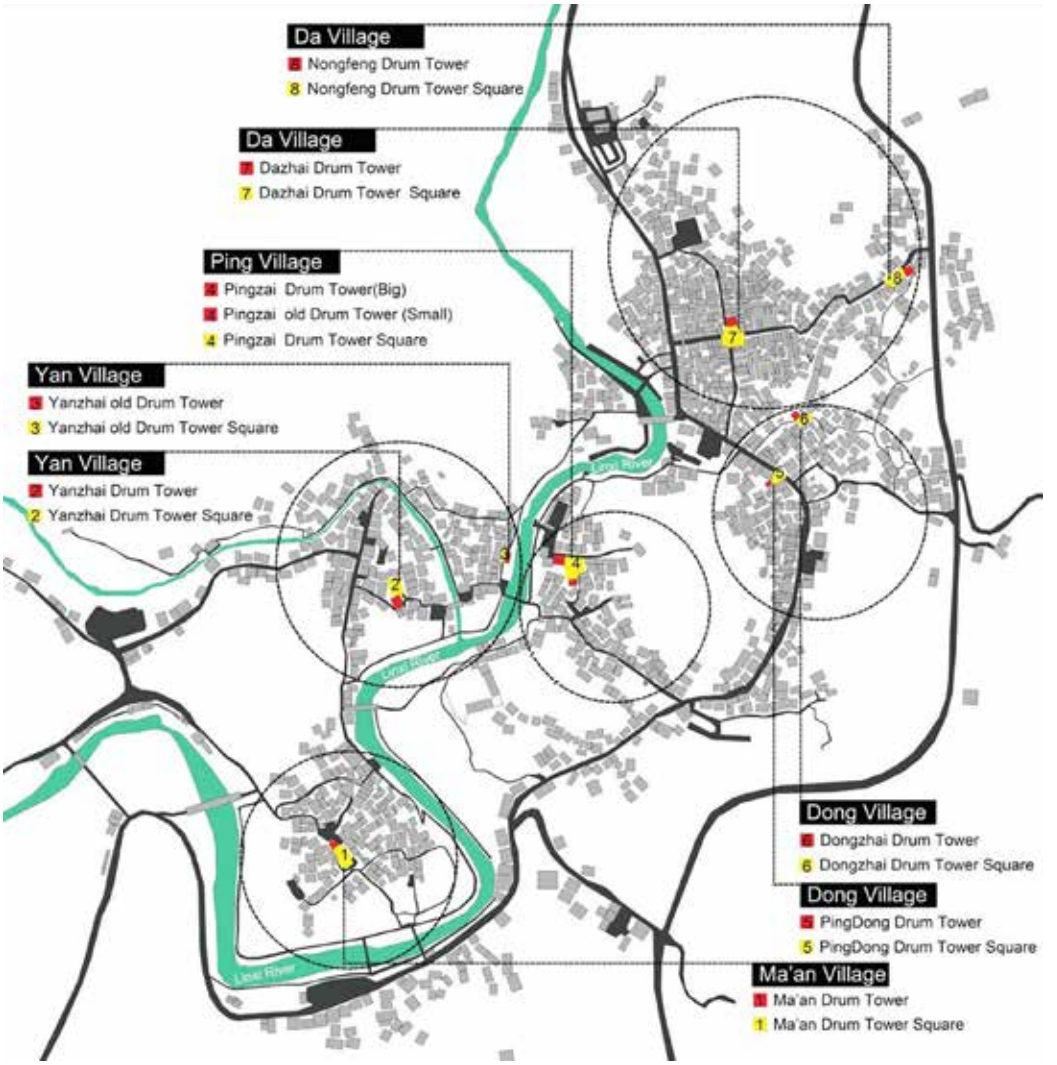

Figure 2. Chengyang Bazhai center main 5 villages division map. Source: Author (2024)

Case Study Method

Adopting a qualitative case-study design, this research focuses on how Dong weddings are presented and perceived in outdoor cultural spaces in Chengyang Bazhai and on the ensuing processes of perception and identity. Case studies help uncover mechanisms of cultural phenomena in real-world settings and integrate multiple sources of evidence (Lai et al., 2013; Yin, 2003).

Event Tracking and Field Archiving. We systematically tracked three weddings during the study period, documenting four key ritual phases—"stealing the bride", the bride carrying water, the wedding feast, and returning the bride. Records included event sequences, participant composition, spatial trajectories, and key locales such as family courtyard, drum-tower squares, public wells, and open grounds. Participant observation, photographic documentation, and spatial behaviour mapping were employed to archive the spatial layouts, ritual objects, attire and adornment, and ceremonial actions (Hutchinson, 2010; Lai et al., 2013). Tracking centred on the 2024 Spring Festival, the peak wedding season in the region. To align with the holiday period, the scenic area encouraged weddings in traditional folk formats, increasing scale and public participation and enriching the ritual content.

Interview Design and Sampling. To obtain multiple perspectives from organisers and participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted in October 2024. Interviews were primarily undertaken in the Dong language and with Mandarin interpretation when needed to ensure cultural and linguistic fidelity. All interviewees were fully informed about the research objectives, procedures, and rights, and they consented to audio recording. Transcripts were produced and cross-checked by two researchers. In total, 12 villagers were interviewed. All had lived in the village for more than 10 years and had direct experience with Dong weddings. The sample included key knowledge holders of newlyweds, organisers, ritual hosts and general attendees, helpers and neighbours as participants, ensuring diversity in gender, age (18–80), and social roles. Purposive sampling was used, with data saturation guiding the final sample size and redundancy control (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Interview topics included ritual scheduling, spatial usage, behaviours and symbols, material preparation, overall evaluation, understanding of cultural meaning, motivation for participation, atmospheric perception, and attitudes toward transmission. All participants provided informed consent before recording; data were anonymised and securely stored.

Data Analysis and Quality Assurance.Thematic analysis was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following the steps of open coding → theme development → refinement of core themes. Discrepancies were resolved through cross-checking and discussion by two researchers. Triangulation across interview data, field observations, and visual/mapping

materials was used for cross-validation. Researcher reflexivity was also applied to reduce subjective bias and enhance the study's reliability and validity.

RESULTS

A wedding is the most consequential life-course threshold, marking the rite of passage into adulthood. This section draws on systematic observation and interviews from three complete Dong weddings in Chengyang Bazhai (during the first lunar month), organized along four analytic strands: ritual process, spatial progression, the space × symbol system, and place identity. For clarity, we delineate four key phases: Stealing the Bride (fetching the bride), Bride Carrying Water (well recognition), the Wedding Feast, and Sending the Bride Back (return to the natal home). The corresponding spatial nodes extend sequentially from the household courtyard to village wells, lanes, to the Drum Tower Square, open grounds, and then to inter-village routes and landmarks.

Wedding Ritual Process

Phase 1: "Stealing the Bride"

A wedding is the most consequential life-course threshold, marking the rite of passage into adulthood. This section draws on systematic observation and interviews in the first lunar month from three complete Dong weddings, organized along four analytic strands: ritual process, spatial progression, the space × symbol system, and place identity. For clarity, we delineate four key phases: Stealing the Bride (fetching the bride), Bride Carrying Water (well recognition), the Wedding Feast, and Sending the Bride Back (return to the natal home). The corresponding spatial nodes extend sequentially from the household courtyard to village wells/lanes, to the Drum Tower Square/adjacent open grounds, and then to inter-village routes and landmarks.

Stealing the Bride typically occurs between New Year's Eve (lunar month 12, day 30) and dawn. The escort team consists of the groom and an even-numbered set of two to six groomsmen, symbolizing auspicious pairing; they wear dark traditional Dong jackets and carry gifts such as candies, apples, cigarettes, alcohol, and red envelopes. Departure and entry are timed to an auspicious hour determined by the couple's birth data, vary by household, and the overall tone is discreet and low-key. Upon arrival at the bride's household courtyard, the groom must pass the gate-blocking rite (e.g., antiphonal singing, playful tests) before entering to escort the bride. Influenced by contemporary/Han-style customs, red envelopes have become routine for "opening the door." The bride's family typically serves oil tea, and if the party arrives early a light meal may be shared. After the entry procedure, the bride dressed in Dong cloth attire, silver ornaments, and a bridal headscarf leaves with the team for the groom's home. Unlike accounts elsewhere in Dong areas that mention lamp-leading/adding oil to the stolen lamp or lusheng-leading (Liu,

2016), Chengyang Bazhai avoids these public leading practices and remains more covert and orderly. Figure 3 depicts key elements of this phase, which include bridal attire, escort dress, oil-tea reception and return.

Spatially, this phase forms a compact sequence centered on the bride's household courtyard → village lane or alley. The courtyard is the first threshold node where gate-blocking and entry occur. A brief transfer then uses the lane, often choosing the most concealed or the shortest route to minimize attention, completing a single closed loop from arrival to entry, exit, and transfer. Practices of mid-route pranks or symbolic bride snatching persist in oral memory but have been attenuated or replaced by standardized procedures. The role of groomsmen has shifted from protection and preventing interception to ceremonial assistance. Influenced by contemporary and Han-style customs, red envelopes have become the routine means of opening the door.

Representative interview excerpts:

"Groomsmen are usually two or four, seldom more than six; even numbers are auspicious." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"You have to pass the singing challenge with the 'sisters' group' before they let you take the bride." — YY, 45, Ma'an Village

"Prepare gifts in advance—apples for safety, candies for sweetness, plus cigarettes and alcohol. We will serve oil tea; if they arrive early, we may share a light meal." — CMY, 53, Pingtan

"The exact time depends on the couple's birth data and the auspicious hour; it's usually New Year's Eve at night, but departure/entry varies by family." — CMY, 53, Pingtan

"In the past it was more discreet—we fetched the bride quietly, unlike today." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

"We used to bring the bride home in the dead of night, without fanfare, fearing someone might intercept us en route." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"In the old days youths liked pranks—spreading mud on the road to make it slippery; sometimes elders had to step in to calm things down." — YSY, 69, Yanzhai

Figure 3. Key scenes from the Dong wedding "stealing the bride" ritual. Source: Author (2024)

Phase 2: "The Bride Carries Water"

Held on the day following the bride's arrival at the groom's household, the bride's water-carrying rite colloquially known as the "well-recognition rite" (认井) that serves to guide the bride in familiarising herself with the new domestic environment and, by "drawing water from the same village well", symbolically incorporates her into the husband's family, lineage, and village community. The rite is usually conducted between 10:00 and 12:00 in the morning. Prior to departure, the bride completes full ceremonial dressing in traditional Dong attire with silver ornaments, presenting a formal public appearance. The accompanying party typically includes bridesmaids, the groom's sisters, unmarried relatives and friends, and often a route leader responsible for guiding both itinerary and ritual sequence. Buckets and carrying poles are prepared by the groom's family, with red paper or the "喜" character affixed to the buckets to signify celebration. Water is ladled in even numbers, most commonly two ladles—to signify paired auspice and express consideration for the bride's physical effort and ritual propriety.

Fieldwork observations (the first day of the first lunar month in 2024) across three wedding cases indicate that Brides 1 and 3 in Ma'an Village drew water from the Ma'an River well within the village, whereas Bride 2 in Yanzhai undertook the rite at "Sweet-Water Well" and the "Upper-Lower Wells". Interviewees explained that this follows the customary principle of "each bride returns to the well of her own village," which functions both as a practical orientation toward everyday water sources and as a communal affirmation of the "source of life" (see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). In recent years, modest variations have appeared: the groom, groomsmen, and boys from the lineage sometimes join the procession, enhancing visibility and participation and reflecting an emergent tendency toward more collaborative gender roles.

This phase shifts the ritual trajectory from the domestic interior into public space, proceeding sequentially through "household departure point—village lane or alley—public well." As a core threshold node in the village's productive life and symbolic order, the well performs a function of public witnessing. Spectators along the route—especially women and elders—constitute a social arena of "watching—evaluation—reputation diffusion." Unlike the enclosed spatial loop of "courtyard—lane" during the stealing-the-bride rite, the well-recognition rite emphasises an "open confirmation" of status at a public node (the well), whereby the bride's household-level status transition receives community-level acknowledgement. The rite thus functions simultaneously as a symbolic transformation of marital status and as a key step in the bride's integration into her new family and village.

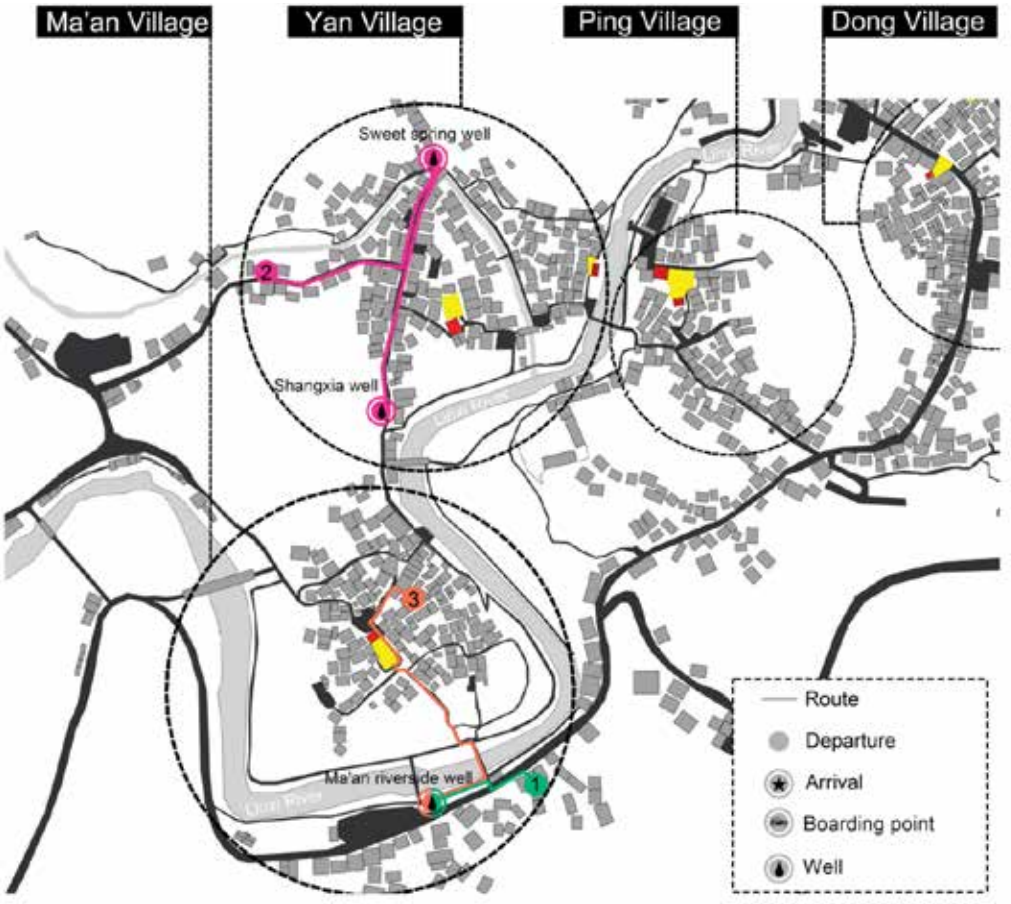

Figure 4. Three groups of brides observed carrying water routes. Source: Author (2024).

As interviewees described:

"Having the bride carry water is a presentation to the whole village. The well is our 'source of life', and the process of carrying water is also a process of recognition." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

"Carrying water marks the change from girl to housewife. The bride must wear full Dong ceremonial dress and present her best self to the village." — CMY, 53, Pingtan

"Those who accompany the bride are usually unmarried youths, including bridesmaids and neighbourhood girls. There is a route leader who not only accompanies the bride but also helps her learn the locations of the village wells." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"People generally know a bride arrived the previous night. When firecrackers sound the next morning, women gather to watch—not only the bride's appearance but also the quality of the cloth and embroidery, and even her competence in carrying water… Elders observe craftsmanship; young people watch mainly for excitement." — YSY, 69, Yanzhai

"Brides go to the well in their own village. The bride in Yanzhai went to two wells because those are the ones used for daily drinking water, mainly to show her where they are." — W, Yanzhai

"In the past the groom seldom accompanied the rite; now, with increasing gender equality, more people are willing to participate together." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

1. Drawing water from the well

2-3. The bride's water-carrying procession

Figure 5. Scene from the "Bride Carrying Water" (recognizing-the-well) ceremony. Source: Author (2024)

Phase 3: Wedding Feast

The second day of the first lunar month is a central occasion for the couple to host relatives and friends, marking the formal incorporation of the new household into the village and functioning as a major celebratory and social event. Preparations usually begin several days in advance: relatives and patrilineal kinsmen discuss the menu and number of tables and assign tasks accordingly. The cuisine emphasises both tradition and auspicious symbolism: pork, chicken, duck and fish constitute the basic set; the Dong "Three Treasures" which is sour fish, sour pork and sour duck, glutinous rice and sashimi appear frequently. Even-numbered dishes are preferred to connote pairing and concord. Although catering remains primarily family-organised, external banquet teams are increasingly hired for convenience.

Venue choices generally fall into four types: (1) inside the family house if space allows; (2) simultaneous use of adjacent courtyards of neighbours or relatives; (3) concentration on the Drum Tower Square when the household is nearby; and (4) canopied seating on open ground beside the house when located farther from the Drum Tower. Selection balances accessibility, capacity and symbolic centrality. Interviewees noted that canopies on the Drum Tower Square have become common to accommodate large guest numbers. In recent years, 30–40 tables with approximately ten guests each (around 300–400 attendees) have become typical for medium-to-large banquets.

Procedure and participation. The banquet usually begins around 14:00. The bride and groom, accompanied by best man and bridesmaid teams, receive guests. Guests offer red envelopes and blessings and receive cigarettes and candies in return. In keeping with Dong hospitality, nonlocal visitors who express congratulations and provide an appropriate gift may also join the tables. The couple and attendants generally wear full traditional Dong attire; the bride's embroidered shoes and silver headdress mark particular solemnity. Unlike earlier practice, when brides often remained out of public view in the afternoon, contemporary brides commonly participate in sequential toasting, signalling a shift in visibility from the inner chamber to the public feast.

In the field case of Ma'an Village, there were 3 weddings observed held at the Ma'an banquet of Drum Tower Square. The back-of-house kitchen was arranged on the terrace behind the tower, forming an efficient sequence of kitchen, service line and seating area. Forty-eight round tables covered in red cloth were laid out in orderly rows; firecrackers sounded before the opening. Fourteen dishes were then served in sequence including poultry and fish, braised pork, egg dumplings, sour fish or sour pork, glutinous rice, sashimi and seasonal vegetables, signifying pairing and concord. The couple subsequently toasted each table, publicly announcing their entry into married life and expressing gratitude to the assembled guests (see Fig. 6).

The Dong people attach great importance to the mother's family (uncle's family). Historically, "Ka Jiu" (a woman marrying into her uncle's family) reflected the position of the uncle's family in the wedding order (Pan, 1999). Today this has largely become a symbolic exchange: maternal uncles present gifts or sing escort songs in congratulations, and the couple reciprocates after the feast; firecrackers are set off upon arrival and departure to mark propriety and joy. Such reciprocal offerings render kinship ties audible and visible, reinforcing the norm of mutual obligations within the community.

Spatial logic. The feast constitutes an open ritual circuit composed of back-of-house preparation, entry and seating on the main square or in courtyards, the receiving route and sequential toasting. The Drum Tower Square magnifies communal scale and performs as a public centre, while forecourts and neighbourhood courtyards materialise intimate

patrilineal units. Through the overlaid flows of people, materials and ritual exchange preparation, service, seating and toasting—domestic cooperation is translated into a publicly shared order. In this way, the banquet integrates household labour, food symbolism and communal celebration into a single isomorphic practice. Shared dining, reciprocal gifting and cyclical toasting continually reproduce symbolic capital of belonging, face and guanxi, vertically connecting the social-spatial tiers of household, neighbourhood and village.

Interview excerpts.

"We discuss the dishes and the number of tables with patrilineal uncles and brothers several days in advance." — YY, 45, Ma'an Village

"Pork, chicken, duck and fish are must-haves, along with sour fish and sour duck as signature Dong dishes." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"Glutinous rice, sashimi and the Three Treasures—sour fish, sour pork and sour duck—are indispensable." — CMY, 53, Pingtan

"In the past, relatives handled most tasks—from marinating sour fish to stir-frying. Everyone worked together." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

"If the house is too small, we set up canopies on the Drum Tower Square—convenient and lively." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"In the past there were fewer people. Now we often see 30 to 40 tables, about 300 to 400 guests." — YY, 45, Ma'an Village

"The best man and bridesmaid teams wear Dong attire; the couple wear corsages, and the bride's embroidered shoes and silver headdress are especially grand." — CMY, 53, Pingtan

"Traditionally the bride seldom came out to toast; she would return to her room after lunch to dress." — YY, 45, Ma'an Village

"When maternal uncles come for the feast, firecrackers are set off upon arrival; when they leave, we set them off again and present aged liquor and meat—part of Dong custom." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"At weddings, maternal uncles bring liquor for the banquet; after it ends, we offer return gifts." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

Figure 6. Ma'an Village No. 3 couple wedding feast scene photo. Source: Author (2024)

Phase 4: Sending the Bride Back

The return visit on the third day of the Lunar New Year marks the most ceremonious finale of the wedding sequence. It signifies the bride's temporary return to her natal home, the completion of the ritual cycle and formal respect and gratitude to the maternal kin. The procession typically sets out in the morning following the banquet, with auspicious time and route details determined by senior elders of the groom's village. Composed of the groom's extended family and relatives, the larger the entourage, the stronger the impression of prosperity and ritual gravitas. Routes usually follow the custom of "returning by the original path", underscoring ritual completeness and cyclicality. Along the route, the procession passes key symbolic nodes such as the Drum Tower and the Wind and Rain Bridge (see Figure 10), setting off firecrackers at spatial thresholds including village gates, corners and bridgeheads and tossing candies to bystanders, so that soundscapes and gifting diffuse festivity. In our observations, Bride No. 3 was preceded by six boys in traditional Dong attire carrying bamboo poles wound with red firecrackers and igniting them while advancing; in the case of Bride No. 1, senior male relatives lit firecrackers and scattered candies along the route, producing parallel "ritual flow" and "soundscape flow" in motion (see Figures 8-2, 3, 6).

The gift-bearing formation is the most visible element at this stage. Relatives in front carry shoulder poles and bamboo baskets; red pig, sour fish or sour duck, glutinous rice and oil tea are decorated with red paper, red bags or the character "喜", signifying abundance and auspiciousness. Other items such as rice cakes, oranges and apples, beer and tea and red embroidered shoes together form a locally distinctive repertoire of objects (see Figure 7). In formation, the gift carriers lead, followed by unmarried Dong maidens in full dress with traditional silver ornaments. The bride walks near the end, wearing silver ornaments but with her head covered to mark her married status; in her right hand she holds a piece of Dong cloth wrapped in red fabric, later to be sewn into a dudou as a sign that the marriage is "complete from beginning to end" and auspicious. The groom follows closely, embodying protection and commitment (see Figures 8-1, 4, 5, 7).

Across the three cases observed, Brides No. 2 and No. 3 were from outside villages, so the processions commonly adopted a compound route of walking out of the groom's village, transferring by road vehicle and walking again into the destination village. Bride No. 1 married within the same area (Dong village to Ma'an village), walked the entire route and hosted a thank-you banquet on open ground near her natal home. All three routes passed core landmarks such as the Drum Tower Square and the Wind and Rain Bridge; notably, Bride No. 1's journey covered five villages in the core of the Eight Villages, highlighting the cultural and spatial significance of the ritual path (see Figure 9).

Upon arrival, a banquet is held at the bride's natal home as thanks and hospitality. After the meal, maternal cousins often "steal" meat or beer in playful gestures that express blessings and extend symbolic interaction within the kin network. Diachronically, improved transportation and tourism governance have shifted return-visit practice from full-day mountain walking on a single crowded day toward dispersed dates with partial vehicle transfers. The former competition to take "higher routes" has faded as timing and routing have become coordinated. Crucially, however, the return visit is not merely a moving display of ritual, people and sound; it is a ritual parade structured by spatial nodes. The Drum Tower and its square, the Wind and Rain Bridge, the village gate and the Land Temple constitute obligatory sacred–secular interfaces and authoritative thresholds. Passing and saluting each node through firecrackers and candy tossing both reaffirms respect for the village's core spaces and serves as a spatialised proclamation to ancestors and deities that the marriage is accomplished. Even when contemporary routes involve walking out of the village, transferring by vehicle and walking back in, the procession still reconnects these key nodes to maintain the continuity of the village's spatial order and the legitimacy of the ritual system. Overall, the return visit follows a programmatic sequence

of returning by the original path, saluting the nodes, displaying the gift-bearing formation and concluding with a banquet, thereby reconfirming ties from the husband's family to the maternal family and translating the vertical and horizontal networks of household, neighbourhood and village into shared spatial experience and identity.

Interview excerpts.

"When passing places like the Drum Tower, the Wind and Rain Bridge and the Land Temple, we set off firecrackers to show reverence to the deities." — YY, 45, Ma'an Village

"Scattering candies spreads good fortune so that everyone watching can feel the joy of the wedding." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"Red pig, Dong cloth and oil tea are required in the gifts. The 'Three Treasures' are essential." — ML, 49, Dazhai

"Usually more than eighty people come—adults and children, the whole family of relatives and friends." — CMY, 53, Pingtan

"The first two loads of rice at the head are usually carried by the most respected close relatives." — PC, 37, Yanzhai

"In the past we walked the entire day. First came the rice carriers, the red pig in the middle, then fish, meat and liquor; the bride and unmarried young women were in the rear, and the last one with a headscarf was the bride. Now, with easier transport, people may carry gifts out of the village, take a vehicle to the bride's village entrance and then carry them in by hand." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

"The old return routes were all mountain paths. Which bride walked higher and better reflected the family's promise? If two processions met, each would compete to take the higher path, and neither would yield. During the Spring Festival there could be more than ten processions in a single day—very lively. To avoid conflict, dedicated coordinators later arranged times and routes. Nowadays, due to tourism, wedding dates are dispersed—some before the New Year, some on the first or second day, and some after the fifteenth—which suits visitors and wedding parties and qualifies for scenic-area incentives. Elders still recall the old bustle with deep affection." — YSY, 69, Yanzhai

"Maternal cousins may 'steal' some items. Since they 'cannot marry the bride', they take a bit of meat as token compensation, which also adds playful fun to the event." — PC, 37, Yanzhai

Figure 7. Sending the bride home in a procession to pick out a gift. Source: Author (2024)

Figure 8. Send the Bride Home Ceremony. Source: Author (2024)

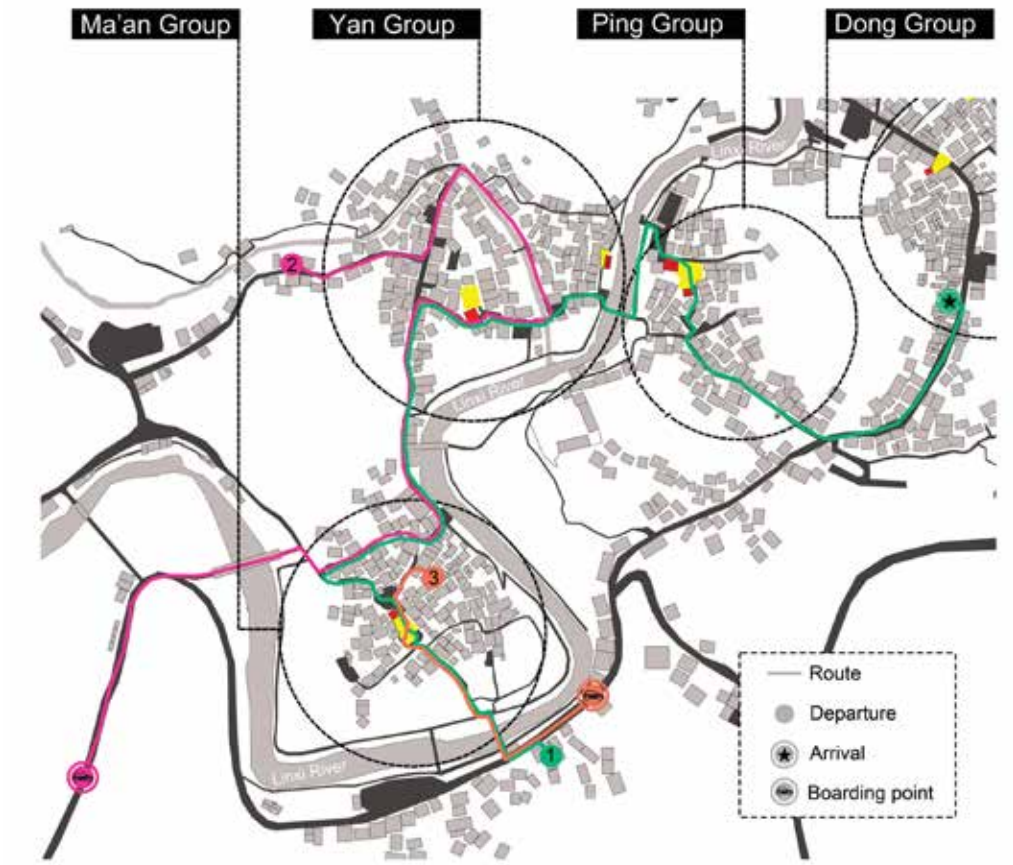

Figure 9. Three sets of observed routes for sending brides home. Source: Author (2024)

Figure 10. Places where the bridal party passes by. Source: Author (2024)

Symbols and Cultural Significance of Expression and Perception in Marriage Culture Space

Cultural space possesses physical, cultural and perceptual attributes, constituting a locus in which social phenomena and "place meaning" are produced (Ziyaee, 2018b). During Dong wedding ceremonies, space does not operate as a static container; rather, through movement between nodes and the coupling of actions, objects, soundscapes and crowds, it is dynamically endowed with meaning and transmits cultural memory (Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999). In Chengyang Bazhai, the wedding sequence depends on a set of sequentially traversed threshold nodes that include the family courtyards, public wells, lanes, the Drum Tower, the Drum Tower Square, neighbourhood courtyards and open grounds, the Wind and Rain Bridge, the village gate and the Land Temple, together with the ritual practices and symbolic objects that consistently appear at these nodes, thereby forming a readable and reproducible "space × symbolic system" (Thrift, 2008; Duffy & Mair, 2018). For an overview, Table 1 provides a matrixed summary of "ritual–space–behaviour–symbol–meaning", which functions as the evidentiary hub of this section.

Table 1
Symbols and cultural significance of expression and perception in marriage culture space. Source: Author (2024)

Ritual/ Time	Space	Behavior	Symbol	Meaning of symbol
Stealing the Bride / December 30th of the Lunar Calendar	The bride's home	Reception for guests and the groom's	Oil tea, food and drinks	Represents the bride's family's acceptance and respect for the groom's side.
		Gate-blocking activities	Red envelopes, cigarettes, and alcohol	Symbolizes the groom's sincerity in marrying the bride and demonstrates the groom's etiquette.
			Candies and apples	Represent sweetness and safeness.
			Singing duels and games	Serve as a test from the bride to the groom and as blessings from relatives and friends to the couple.
		Bridal Dressing	Traditional Dong ethnic clothing	Showcases traditional Dong craftsmanship, made from handmade and dyed Dong cloth, symbolizing cultural heritage.
			Silver jewelry	Silver ornaments symbolize protection from evil and carry the heritage of Dong culture.
			Dong cloth headscarf	Marks the transition of identity; wearing a headscarf indicates married status.
	Village road	Welcoming the bride	Groomsmen team	The number of groomsmen must be even, symbolizing pairs and good fortune.
		Bringing the bride home	Snatching the bride and pranks	Represent the groom's family's protection and commitment to the bride, and the participation and playfulness of young people in wedding customs.

Ritual/ Time	Space	Behavior	Symbol	Meaning of symbol
Bride Carrying Water / First Day of the First Month of the Lunar Calendar	Water Well	Carries Water	Recognizing the Well	Becoming familiar with the village environment; drinking from the same well symbolizes becoming one family and signifies acceptance of identity.
			Carrying Pole and Bucket	Symbolizes integrating into a new family and taking on the responsibility of family care.
			Scooping Water	The water scooped into the bucket is an even number, a blessing to the couple, and a small amount of water shows care for the bride.
	Village Pathways	Displaying Scenery	Traditional Dong Attire	Showcases the craft of textile weaving and embroidery.
			Posture and Demeanor	Highlights the bride's skills, upbringing, and grace.
			Guides, Accompanying Relatives, and Groom	Represents the family's acceptance and recognition of the bride, as well as the groom's responsibility and care for her.
Wedding Feast /The second day of the first month of the lunar calendar	Groom's Home	Preparation	Clan Members and Relatives	Demonstrates close family ties and teamwork.
			Groom, Bride, Groomsmen, Bridesmaids	Hospitality, respect, and gratitude.
			Traditional Dong Attire	Marks the transition of roles and identities; embodies cultural heritage with decorations symbolizing hopes for a bright future.
			Candy and Cigarettes	Represents reciprocation and the sharing of joy, sweetness, and celebration.
		Welcoming Guests	Firecrackers	Relatives from the maternal family set off firecrackers to announce their arrival, showing respect and etiquette towards the bridegroom's family, while also expressing joy.
				The bridegroom's family responds with firecrackers to warmly welcome and celebrate the guests.
			Red envelopes, Rice Wine, and Pork	Uncle family and Relatives offer rice wine and pork to bless and show acceptance of the couple.
				Guests present red envelopes to convey blessings and support.
	Drum Tower Square/ Neighbor's Home/Open Space	Feast Preparation	Clan Members and Relatives	Reflects close family ties, teamwork, and mutual assistance.
		Feast	Three Treasures of Dong Cuisine: Sour Fish, Sour Pork, Sour Duck, Glutinous Rice, Sashimi, etc.	Represents the cultural heritage of traditional cuisine; even-numbered dishes symbolize pairing and harmony.
			Round Table, Red Tablecloth	Symbolizes completeness, festivity, and auspiciousness.
		Toasting	Groom, Bride, Groomsmen, and Bridesmaids Toasting Guests at Each Table	Facilitates introductions between the couple and their relatives and friends, sharing joy and expressing gratitude.
			Guests Raising Glasses and Congratulating	Represents blessings from the relatives and friends.

Ritual/ Time	Space	Behavior	Symbol	Meaning of symbol
Sending the Bride Home/ The Third Day of the First Month of the Lunar Calendar	Groom's Home	Collective preparation	Clan Members and Relatives	Demonstrates family cohesion.
	Village Pathways	Procession	Procession Team	Symbolizes collective unity and the prosperity of the family lineage.
			Traditional Dong Attire and Silver Jewelry	The elaborate attire shows great importance attached to the wedding and cultural heritage.
			Firecrackers	Setting off firecrackers at the Drum Tower and Wind and Rain Bridge shows respect for ancestors and deities. Firecrackers are also set off at village entrances, turns, or bridges to signal spatial transitions and enhance festivity and excitement.
			Carrying Poles and Bamboo Baskets	Traditional methods of carrying goods represent cultural continuity.
			Red Cloth, Red Strings, and the Chinese character for "喜" (happy)	Symbolizes luck and celebration.
			Scattering Candy	Candy scattered along the way to share joy and blessings.
			Rice, Glutinous Rice, and Rice Cakes	Represents the groom's family's generosity, respect for the bride's family, and wishes for the couple's prosperity, harmony, and peace.
			Red Pig	
			Sour Fish, Sour Duck, Sour Pork	
			Oranges and Apples	
	Bride's Home	Feast	Dong Cloth Headscarf	Marks the bride's change in identity.
			Red Dong Cloth	Symbolizes a complete and auspicious marriage.
			Three Treasures of Dong Cuisine: Sour Fish, Sour Pork, Sour Duck, Glutinous Rice, Dong Sashimi, etc.	Represents emotional connection and gratitude.
			Round Table, Red Tablecloth	Symbolizes completeness, festivity, and auspiciousness.
			Maternal Family Cousins Stealing Meat	A continuation of tradition; playful blessings and close family bonds.

Source: participatory observation, spatial mapping, and semi-structured interviews from three weddings during the first lunar month of 2024 (n=12).

Within the Dong wedding sequence in Chengyang Bazhai, a series of threshold nodes—family courtyards, public wells, the Drum Tower and Drum Tower Square, neighborhood courtyards and open grounds, village paths, the Wind and Rain Bridge and the Land Temple structure transitions from inside to outside, from private to public and from household to village. At each node, stable combinations of actions and objects, enacted through bodily participation and affective atmospheres, compose socially meaningful "readable scenes" (Thrift, 2008; Duffy & Mair, 2018). The household gate, with its gate-blocking, entry and escort-out procedures, shifts the wedding from domestic

space into a publicly witnessed domain; public wells and connecting lanes, through well-recognition and water-carrying, accomplish the role shift from maiden to housewife by embedding identity confirmation into the community's life-support substrate; the Drum Tower Square and neighborhood courtyards translate kin ethics into shared celebration through preparation, seating and table-to-table toasting; and the return-to-natal-home procession traverses authoritative nodes the Drum Tower, the Wind and Rain Bridge, the village gate and the Land Temple—where en-route petitioning and node-specific salutations produce a spatialized proclamation to ancestors and deities. Through cyclical "return by the original route," the cosmic order and kinship networks of the village are reinforced, reweaving family–neighborhood–village into a spatial order of communal memory.

These threshold nodes function as both physical carriers of ritual progression and triggers of meaning-making. The recurrent appearance of objects, actions, soundscapes and crowds condenses into three cultural cores that are layered and reproduced through periodic crossings of the nodes:

(1) Identity and recognition: the bride's regalia and headscarf, publicly visible at gates, well platforms and the Drum Tower Square, articulate a declaration of transition from family member to community member; the "return by the original route with node salutations" reconfirms kin networks and the village spatial order.

(2) Collaboration and cohesion: clan coordination in food preparation and gift-bearing with carrying poles and procession formations weaves consanguinity and locality into visible collective action, externalising a collaboration chain of back kitchen, main square and procession, and building a shared sense of "I can and we can."

(3) Blessing and festivity: the diffusion of firecrackers and candies, together with the repetition of even-numbered dishes and round-table layouts, sediments values of auspiciousness, reunion and abundance into shared affect, with external praise and internal approval consolidating collective honour.

In summary, operating through a space × symbolic system, the Dong wedding integrates the route logic and social hierarchy of family–neighbourhood–village into perceivable, memorable and reproducible place meanings, providing an empirical foundation for subsequent analysis of the psychosocial dimensions of place identity.

Construction of Place Identity in the Wedding Ceremony of the Dong Nationality

When space is endowed with value and meaning, it is transformed from a mere site of movement into a place of pause and identification (Tuan, 1977). In Chengyang Bazhai, the wedding relies on the space × symbolic system described in Section 4.2 to sediment personal emotions, collective interactions, and value judgments into place identity.

Drawing on Relph (1976), Proshansky et al.(1983), Breakwell (1992), and Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996), and integrating field materials, we analyze four dimensions that include distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy with representative quotations.

Distinctiveness

Distinctiveness expresses a sustained aspiration to remain different from other people and places. It is not only manifested in cultural contrasts with elsewhere but also performed and reinforced through attractive cultural activities (Ginting et al., 2017). Identity is the set of features or scripts of a place that prompt people to remember and wish to revisit it because it differs from other places and possesses personality and uniqueness (Hernández et al., 2007). Beyond architectural form and natural scenery, distinctiveness is also produced by the cultural activities a space carries, which endow it with specific social and psychological meanings. Events and practices inscribed in these activities mark particular spaces in individual and collective memory as unique and significant locales.

In Chengyang Bazhai, distinctiveness is pursued through distinctive attire (Dong cloth, silver ornaments, headscarves), distinctive material icons (Red pig, three acids, red cloth bag, carrying pole and bamboo basket), and a distinctive route "returning by the original path" that passes the Drum Tower, the Wind and Rain Bridge, and the Land Temple—together composing a locally situated "place script." This object–route–node configuration renders the wedding something that "can only happen this way here," concretizing Relph's sense of place.

"Passing the Drum Tower and the Wind and Rain Bridge on the return visit, we set off firecrackers to honor ancestors and deities." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

"On the return to the bride's natal home, there are firecrackers everywhere on the village road, candies are scattered, and the red pig is carried—very special!" — YLD, 32, Pingtan

"If the house cannot accommodate the banquet, we set up in the Drum Tower Square; the Drum Tower is very important to us." — ML, 49, Dazhai

Continuity

Continuity provides an ongoing connection to particular places. Continuity of self-experience is maintained through memory aids fixed in the environment; place-referential continuity is sustained via sites of personal emotional significance (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). The wedding transforms everyday locales include the Drum Tower Square , public wells , and the "original route" of return into reproducible ritual memories and place anchors, enabling the transformation of personal roles and the continuity of community culture to be periodically reconfirmed within a single spatial lineage. Each participation in or observation of the wedding deepens awareness of these spaces' centrality in Dong

culture, making them cultural symbols and memory carriers closely tied to customary marriage practices.

"On the second day we go to 'recognize the well' so that the bride becomes familiar with its location." — YY, 45, Ma'an

"A Dong wedding must be held in the village." — YYY, 20, Dazhai

"Whether one married elsewhere or in a Western style, we still return to hold a Dong wedding." — LLD, 28, Yanzhai

"As long as one is Dong, one should hold a Dong wedding. I also like it because it is lively; as a child I looked forward to seeing how my older siblings would marry when they grew up." — WYL, 42, Ma'an

In local understanding, to ensure ritual integrity and cultural transmission, the traditional wedding must be completed within the village—not only because particular village spaces bear vital cultural and ritual meanings, but also because they have become indispensable components of Dong wedding culture.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to positive evaluations of oneself or one's in-group and concerns one's sense of personal or social worth. It is partly derived from social identity, which is acquired through external affirmation and social standing; positive external evaluations directly enhance individual self-esteeM (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Open banquets and processions translate hospitality, abundance, and liveliness into honor visible to others; the joint display of sartorial beauty and culinary abundance affirms dignity and "face" in the public realm.

"I feel proud to host a Dong wedding and to invite good friends to dine at home." — PC, 37, Yanzhai

"The Dong wedding is richer in process and livelier than a Western-style wedding; I'm willing to bring outsiders to experience it." — WY, 36, Yanzhai

"I have brought friends several times; they all said it was good and unique." — YGH, 22, Dazhai

"As a child I longed for a white-dress wedding, but later—especially after marriage—I came to value the meaning and grandeur of the Dong wedding and hope it is passed down." — LLD, 28, Yanzhai

Such "liveliness that is seen" accumulates, through praise and resonance, into shared pride and collective self-esteem.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy denotes the belief in one's capability to meet situational demands. It reflects how local environments support people in carrying out chosen activities and is a key indicator of personal agency; it is closely related to self-esteem and can be strengthened through teamwork, role modeling, and enhanced belonging in cultural or collective participation. The organizational affordances and spatial supports of the wedding offer a praxis of "I can—we can": the collaboration chain—back kitchen division of labor, dish delivery flow, table-to-table toasting, procession formation, and the return banquet—generates a sense of capability and role confirmation through doing.

"If the house is not large enough, we use the Drum Tower Square, and someone helps plan the return route." — CPR, 79, Pingtan

"Serving as a groomsman made me feel important in the wedding." — YGH, 22, Dazhai

"I am happy to attend friends' Dong weddings, take photos, and share them to spread the culture." — WYL, 42, Ma'an

"When relatives host a banquet, we take leave and rush home; if you don't go back now, they may not come when it's your turn." — YRY, 20, Dazhai

Through the publicly visible practices of attire display, food preparation, gift logistics, and the diffusion of soundscapes, both individual and collective agency are continually activated, enabling the village to sustain mobilization and reproduce its culture.

The Dong wedding is not merely a personal or family event but a collective festivity of clan and community that constitutes an expansive cultural space. It embeds distinctive attire and material icons together with distinctive routes , the repeated revisiting of obligatory nodes such as Drum Tower Square and public wells , publicly witnessed liveliness and dignity , and division of labor with role-bearing into a single space × symbolic system. Consequently, the ritual is not only narrated but enacted: through the coupling of body, affect, and material environmenT (Thrift, 2008;Duffy & Mair, 2018), identity is affirmed in moments of being seen, cohesion is generated in jointly completed procedures, blessings are shared through light, sound, and gifting, and place identity is remembered, renewed, and sustained along routes that traverse family, neighborhood, and village.

CONCLUSION

Using Chengyang Bazhai as an empirical case, this study shows how the traditional Dong wedding constructs place identity through the dual mechanism of a space × symbolic system. As illustrated in Figure 11, a triangular structure presents the interaction among people, space and cultural symbols. The wedding sequence successively traverses family

courtyards, public wells, Drum Tower Square, the Drum Tower, the Wind and Rain Bridge and the village gate as threshold nodes. Objects, actions, soundscapes and crowds move between and pause at these nodes, forming interpretable symbolic sequences. The wedding therefore constitutes not only a marital contract but also a public declaration of identity and a continuous reproduction of collective memory.

Based on combined evidence from event tracing, participatory observation, spatial behaviour mapping and semi-structured interviews, the study finds that the wedding revolves around three cultural cores—identity and recognition, collaboration and cohesion, and blessing and festivity. The bride's full regalia and "being seen" at threshold nodes realise the transformation from family member to community member; clan and neighbourhood practices in cooking, toasting and procession collaboratively organise consanguinity and locality into visible collective action; the repetition of firecrackers, candies and "even-numbered dishes–round-table layouts" sediments values of auspiciousness, reunion and abundance into shared affect. These processes align with the classical dimensions of place identity: uniqueness originates from local attire and objects tied to routes and nodes; continuity relies on periodical revisiting of obligatory nodes; self-esteem is reinforced through publicly witnessed festivity and propriety; and self-efficacy accumulates through the collaboration chain of "back kitchen–square–procession–return-visit banquet". Hence, place identity emerges as a temporally layered identity formation continually renewed through ritual cycles (Mansour et al., 2023).

Interview results further indicate that respondents generally take pride in the Dong wedding, regarding it as a vital link between family and community and a core form of Dong cultural transmission. The repetitive enactment of rituals in specific cultural spaces strengthens participants' emotional attachment and value evaluation, thereby continuously consolidating both place identity and cultural identity. As an important carrier of place identity, cultural space exerts a profound influence on participants' cognitive and affective experiences, demonstrating the tight coupling of cultural space and social behaviour.

In terms of governance implications, the protection of intangible cultural heritage should not only focus on ritual procedures but must also address the integrity and authenticity of the spatial carriers that enable ritual enactment (family courtyards, public wells, Drum Tower Square, bridges and temples). Community-centred participatory governance and adaptive management of key nodes and ritual pathways can activate community participation and foster a virtuous cycle of heritage transmission, community cohesion and local development, while cautioning against excessive performatisation and tourism-driven dilution of authenticity.

The limitations of this research include its single region, concentrated time period and limited sample. Future studies may undertake cross-regional comparison and

longitudinal tracking and integrate participatory mapping, sensory ethnography and quantitative measurement to further assess the transferability and policy implications of the space×symbol system.

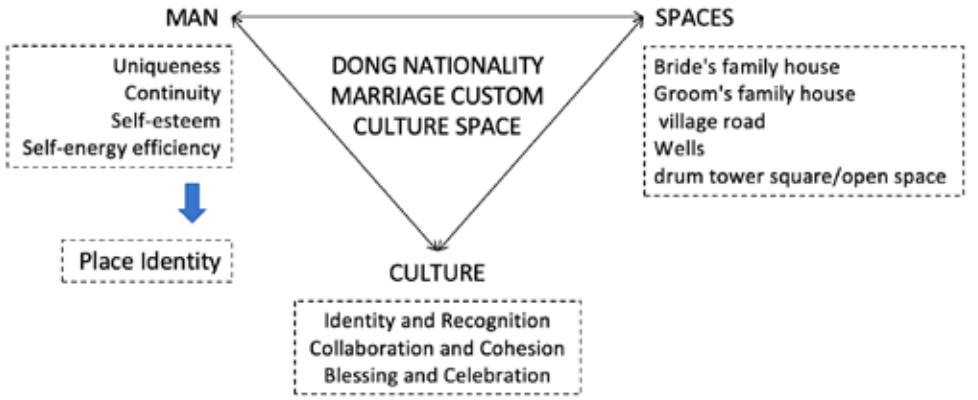

Figure 11. The constituent elements of the Dong ethnic wedding cultural space. Source: Author (2024)

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

This study advances theory, empirics, methods and practice in an integrated manner. Theoretically, it proposes and verifies a mechanism framework of "space × symbolic system → place identity": with threshold nodes and ritual pathways as the structural backbone and with objects–actions–soundscapes–crowds as the symbolic coding, it explains how the three cultural cores sediment and reproduce across the four dimensions of place identity (uniqueness, continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy), thus supplementing process-based explanation and operationalisable description of the "ritual–space–identity" relationship. Empirically, focusing on everyday minority rituals rather than large-scale festivals, the study provides detailed material on the complete Dong wedding sequence, spatial use and symbolic connotations, filling gaps in research on "wedding–spatial practice–perceptual dimensions", and presents key space–behaviour–symbol linkages in matrices (Table 1) and multiple figures to enhance comparability and replicability. Methodologically, by combining event tracing, participatory observation, spatial behaviour mapping, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis in a multi-source triangulation, the study demonstrates how to effectively stitch sensory–affective material together with spatial evidence and offers a reusable micro-level approach for cultural space and heritage research. Practically, it proposes a dual protection orientation of "ritual and space", incorporating family courtyards, public wells, Drum Tower Square, the Wind and Rain Bridge and village gates as key nodes into community-based adaptive governance and spatial zoning. By maintaining local temporalities and ritual pathways and avoiding authenticity dilution, the study provides actionable clues for coordinating community participation, heritage protection and local development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Supported by the Planning Fund Project for Humanities and Social Sciences of the Ministry of Education of China (Grant No. 23YJAZH188).

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