

# **RICE TERRACE DEVELOPMENT AND IRRIGATION SYSTEMS IN THE AILAO MOUNTAINS, YUNNAN, CHINA: THE FORMATION OF A MULTIETHNIC RICE TERRACE AREA**

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During the past several hundred years, various ethnic groups have practiced rice terrace agriculture along the slopes of the Ailao Mountains. The aim of this study was to reveal how this multiethnic rice terrace area was formed by examining the development of irrigation systems on a watershed basis. A case study of one village showed that customary rules for water management among villages were closely related to the historical processes of rice terrace expansion and the construction of irrigation channels. At the watershed level, rice terrace development was greatly influenced by the hydrological conditions, which determined the accessibility of water for irrigation. Rice terraces were first constructed on the upper slope of the watershed, just below the cloud forest zone, where ample water was available with the use of simple irrigation facilities. Rice terraces then expanded to the less suitable mid-slope region, accompanied by the construction of long-distance irrigation channels that began in the upper reaches of the watershed. The distribution of ethnic groups within the watershed was closely related to rice terrace expansion and the migration history of each ethnic group. These results imply that the water management system within a watershed is closely related to the historical process of rice terrace expansion, suggesting that a detailed survey of the irrigation systems can determine the process of how resource management systems were established in this multiethnic rice terrace area.

**Keywords:** Ethnic group, Irrigation, Mountain, Rice terrace, Yunnan