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Spatial Dataset Development of Cultural Ecological Protection Zones in China

YANG Xiaohui[1,2] KONG Ruixuan[1,2] CHEN Manyi[3] JIANG Dong[1,2] ZHU He[1,2]* LIU Huaxian[1,2]

1. Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China;
2. College of Resources and Environment, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100049, China;
3. School of Public Administration, Central South University, Changsha 410083, China

Abstract: The construction of cultural ecological protection zones is a core approach to the holistic regional protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and also represents an innovative initiative in China's ICH safeguarding efforts. Since 2007, China has established 23 national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones (CEPZs), while provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities have promoted the establishment of 253 provincial CEPZs with distinctive characteristics. Based on official announcements released by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and cultural and tourism departments of provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities, this study conducts statistical compilation and sorting, obtains lists and related attribute information of national and provincial CEPZs, and adds specific geographic coordinates for each zone to generate vector data, thereby constructing the Spatial dataset of cultural ecological protection zones in China. The dataset includes: (1) the list and geo-location of national-level CEPZs, and the information covers the name, scope, and approval time of the CEPZs; (2) the list and geo-location of provincial-level CEPZs, and the information covers the province, name, establishment time and scope; (3) statistics of the number of national-level and provincial-level CEPZs in China by province; (4) statistics of the number of national-level and provincial-level CEPZs by year of establishment. The dataset is archived in .shp and .xlsx formats, comprising 17 data files, totaling size of 2.67 MB (compressed into a single file, 1.61 MB).

Keywords: cultural ecological protection zone; spatial distribution; China; intangible cultural heritage

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The dataset supporting this paper was published and is accessible through the *Digital Journal of Global Change Data Repository* at: https://doi.org/10.3974/geodb.2025.11.08.V1.

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***Corresponding Author:** Zhu, H., Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, zhuhe@igsnrr.ac.cn

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1 Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH") is the most dynamic and important component of cultural diversity, and represents the crystallization of human civilization and a valuable shared heritage of humanity[1]. China's ICH is rich and diverse, serving as a vivid testament to more than 5,000 years of continuous Chinese civilization, a key component of outstanding traditional Chinese culture, and a precious spiritual treasure of all ethnic groups. The knowledge and wisdom embedded within it regulate the production and lifestyles of people, shape value orientations, and function as a cohesive force for maintaining ethnic unity and promoting integrated and harmonious cultural development.

Cultural ecological protection zones take ICH safeguarding as the core objective and emphasize "holistic and place-based" protection practices within specific regions. Compared with protection approaches targeting individual heritage items, this model pays greater attention to the coupling among cultural heritage, the natural environment, and community production and life, advocating coordinated development of cultural inheritance, the ecological environment, and social progress at a regional scale, thereby forming a sustainable protection and utilization mechanism. Its fundamental characteristics include the coexistence of processuality and openness, strong inter-element correlations, and prominent spatial integrity[2]. Therefore, the establishment of cultural ecological protection zones (CEPZs) not only deepens China's ICH protection concepts and practices but also provides locally grounded experience for international heritage governance.

The theoretical origin of CEPZs can be traced back to the concept of "cultural ecology" proposed by Steward in 1955, which regards human culture as a dynamic system interacting with the natural environment and emphasizes the relationship between cultural adaptation and ecological balance[3], providing an analytical framework for understanding the formation mechanisms of regional cultural characteristics. CEPZs are demarcated by administrative boundaries while possessing multiple identity attributes centered on culture[4]. Their construction runs through people's production and daily life practices, reflecting the cultural logic of ICH protection from regional holistic protection to the building of a Chinese national community[5], highlighting the "embedded development" in the process of development and protection[6]. It is both a process of improving the quality of life of people of all ethnic groups through various forms of ICH practices[5] and an important pathway for regional sustainable development.

In 2007, the Minnan Cultural Ecological Protection Experimental Zone was approved for establishment at the national level, marking the initiation of cultural ecological protection (experimental) zone construction in China. As of December 2024, 16 national cultural ecological protection zones and 7 national cultural ecological protection experimental zones (a total of 23) have been established at the national level, covering 17 provinces; at the provincial level, a cumulative total of 253 provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones have been established. The Measures for the administration of national CEPZs define them as specific areas established with the approval of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, with ICH protection as the core, implementing holistic protection of culturally significant and distinctive cultural forms[7]. The measures emphasize principles such as prioritizing protection, holistic protection, and "seeing people, seeing objects, and seeing life", and stipulate that applications for national cultural ecological protection experimental zones must be based on at least two years of regional holistic protection practice at the provincial level. This indicates that provincial-level construction forms an important foundation for national-level construction.

CEPZs, as important geographical units for cultural ecological protection and key instruments for the holistic regional protection of ICH, are still at an early stage of research. Existing studies are mostly grounded in anthropology, folklore, and sociology, while research from a geographical perspective remains relatively underdeveloped. Therefore, this

study systematically reviews relevant announcements and official documents issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, as well as cultural and tourism departments of provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities, and compiles and constructs a dataset of cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones in China. From a spatial perspective, this study establishes the basic framework for CEPZs, aiming to provide fundamental data resources and research support for related studies.

2 Metadata of the Dataset

The metadata of the Spatial dataset of cultural ecological protection zones in China[8], including the dataset name, authors, geographic region, year of the dataset, data format, data size, data files, data publisher, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Metadata summary of the Spatial dataset of cultural ecological protection zones in China

Items	Description
Dataset full name	Spatial dataset of cultural ecological protection zones in China
Dataset short name	CEPZs_China
Authors	Yang, X. H., Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, yangxiaohui4720@igsnrr.ac.cn Kong, R. X., Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, kongruixuan2024@163.com Chen, M. Y., Central South University, goodseer@outlook.com Jiang, D., Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, jiangd@igsnrr. ac.cn Zhu, H., Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, zhuhe@igsnrr.ac.cn Liu, H. X., Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, liuhx.16b@igsnrr.ac.cn
Geographic region	China (data for Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan not available)
Year	2006–2024
Data format	.xlsx, .shp
Data size	2.67 MB
Data files	Spatial distribution and related information of national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones; statistical data by province and by year
Foundations	Xinjiang Science and Technology Department (2022A03002); National Natural Science Foundation of China (42271248, 42571289)
Data Publisher	Global Change Research Data Publishing & Repository System, http://www.geodoi.ac.cn
Address	No. 11, Datun Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100101, China
Data sharing policy	(1) *Data* are openly available and can be free downloaded via the Internet; (2) End users are encouraged to use *Data* subject to citation; (3) Users, who are by definition also value-added service providers, are welcome to redistribute *Data* subject to written permission from the GCdataPR Editorial Office and the issuance of a *Data* redistribution license; and (4) If *Data* are used to compile new datasets, the "ten percent principle" should be followed such that *Data* records utilized should not surpass 10% of the new dataset contents, while sources should be clearly noted in suitable places in the new dataset[9]
Communication and searchable system	DOI, CSTR, Crossref, DCI, CSCD, CNKI, SciEngine, WDS, GEOSS, PubScholar, CKRSC, OARL

3 Methods

According to the Measures for the administration of national CEPZs, national cultural ecological protection experimental zones are required to formulate a master plan and submit an application for acceptance after 3 years of implementation of the plan. Experimental

zones that pass the acceptance are designated as national cultural ecological protection zones and are officially granted plaques. According to the terminology used in relevant policy documents, these zones are uniformly referred to as "national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones". The national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones included in this study cover all 23 zones established since the approval of the first national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zone in 2007.

At the provincial level, due to significant differences in establishment principles and standards across provinces—for example, in Yunnan Province, provincial cultural ecological protection zones are established with village-level administrative units as the core, whereas in Hebei Province they are based on county-level administrative units—and due to variations in naming conventions among provinces, this dataset uniformly adopts the term "provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones". It includes a total of 253 provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones established since 2006, when the Government of Yunnan Province approved the establishment of ethnic traditional cultural protection zones, up to December 2024 (excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan due to lack of data). The dataset records detailed information, including the name, announcement time, and location of each cultural ecological protection zone and experimental zone.

The data required for this study mainly include basic geographic information and data on national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones. The basic geographic information data consists primarily of vector data of administrative divisions at all levels across the country, sourced from the National Platform for Common Geospatial Information Services[1]. Data on national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones were obtained from official lists published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and cultural and tourism departments of provinces (excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan)[10–48]. The authors compiled and organized summary lists of national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones and improved the associated attribute information (such as scope and approval time). The administrative divisions to which each zone belongs were determined by the name of the cultural-ecological protection (experimental) zone, the applying region, or the applying institution. Meanwhile, with reference to government websites, information released by cultural and tourism departments, and resources such as the Encyclopedia of China, the spatial scope of national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones was further specified to municipal, county, township, and, in some cases, village-level units. Geographic coordinates for each protection zone were determined and integrated with vector data from the National Platform for Common Geospatial Information Services, thereby developing the spatial distribution dataset of CEPZs in China. The administrative divisions used follow the standard administrative division data of China, GS (2024) 0650.

4 Data Results

4.1 Dataset Composition

The dataset in this study is divided into 2 parts: national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zone data and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zone data. Specifically, it includes: (1) the list and geo-location of national-level CEPZs, and the information covers the name, scope, and approval time of the CEPZs; (2) the list and geo-location of provincial-level CEPZs, and the information covers the province, name, establishment time and scope; (3) statistics of the number of national-level and provincial-level CEPZs in China by province; (4) statistics of the number of national-level and

[1] National Platform for Common Geospatial Information Services. www.tianditu.gov.cn.

provincial-level CEPZs by year of establishment.

4.2 Data Results Analysis

From the perspective of provincial distribution, Qinghai Province boasts the highest number of national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones, with 3 currently, followed by Jiangxi, Fujian, Yunnan, and Henan Provinces, each with 2. In terms of coverage area, Qinghai Province ranks first for national-level cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones, with a total area of 297,248.16 km^2 for its three zones, followed by Shaanxi Province with 86,128.13 km^2. Regarding the number of provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones, Yunnan Province has the largest number, with 85 zones, followed by Shandong, Inner Mongolia, and Hubei, with 17, 13, and 13 zones, respectively. Provinces such as Hainan and Shaanxi have relatively few, with only one each. For provincial-level cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones, Inner Mongolia has the largest coverage area, at 481,692.16 km^2, followed by Xizang, Qinghai, and Ningxia, with 361,119.50 km^2, 321,586.22 km^2, and 316,865.44 km^2, respectively. These differences in quantity, to some extent reflect variations among provinces in the level of emphasis on ICH protection, the richness of cultural resources, and regional cultural characteristics (Table 2, 3).

Table 2 Statistics of the number of CEPZs in China by province

Province	Number		Province	Number		Province	Number	
	National	Provincial		National	Provincial		National	Provincial
Yunnan	2	85	Heilongjiang	0	6	Shanxi	1	3
Shandong	1	17	Sichuan	0	6	Fujian	2	3
Inner Mongolia	0	13	Henan	2	6	Jiangxi	2	3
Hubei	1	13	Ningxia	0	5	Liaoning	0	2
Jiangsu	0	12	Qinghai	3	5	Jilin	0	2
Zhejiang	1	11	Xinjiang	0	5	Xizang	0	2
Hebei	0	11	Chongqing	1	4	Hainan	0	1
Guangdong	1	9	Hunan	1	4	Shaanxi	1	1
Guangxi	1	8	Anhui	0	4	Cross-provincial protection zones	2	0
Gansu	0	8	Guizhou	1	4			

Table 3 Statistics of the area of CEPZs in China by province

Province	Area (km^2)		Province	Area (km^2)		Province	Area (km^2)	
	National	Provincial		National	Provincial		National	Provincial
Inner Mongolia	0	481,692.16	Hunan	15,477.49	48,863.06	Zhejiang	1,139.76	21,806.78
Xizang	0	361,119.50	Xinjiang	0	47,996.49	Guangdong	15,829.12	19,180.71
Qinghai	297,248.16	321,586.22	Shandong	15,761.66	43,428.18	Hebei	0	18,940.97
Ningxia	0	316,865.44	Anhui	10,787.90	42,769.34	Yunnan	51,522.42	17,747.61
Sichuan	33,805.73	236,687.23	Shaanxi	86,128.13	41,236.71	Shanxi	24,674.56	13,734.35
Gansu	0	148,411.71	Hubei	29,925.20	38,316.46	Henan	15,955.10	10,292.21
Heilongjiang	0	147,552.36	Fujian	44,437.52	33,529.33	Hainan	0	9,378.29
Guangxi	33,538.69	124,396.13	Jiangxi	44,686.87	32,250.89	Chongqing	19,796.28	8,110.82
Guizhou	30,294.67	71,131.12	Liaoning	0	30,976.19			
Jilin	0	49,265.33	Jiangsu	0	23,254.48			

From a spatial perspective, based on China's division into 7 major geographical regions, Southwest China has a relatively large number of both national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones. In contrast, Northeast and Northwest China have relatively fewer zones, both number and spatial density. National cultural- ecological protection (experimental) zones are distributed across 17 provinces and exhibit both clustering and dispersion nationwide, spanning all three topographic steps (Figure 1). Provincial cultural-ecological protection (experimental) zones also show an uneven distribution: provinces such as Yunnan and Shandong have more zones, and those in Shanxi and Henan have fewer, more dispersed zones. This pattern is closely related to factors such as local historical culture, natural environment, and level of economic development (Figure 2).

The distribution patterns of cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones reflect the spatial characteristics of regional cultural forms. Historically, the origin, inheritance, and development of traditional and local cultures have been influenced by multiple factors. Among these, topographic conditions have had a significant impact on the formation of traditional local cultures. For example, the plains of the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River and the Yellow River basin benefited from favorable agricultural conditions, leading to the early emergence of cultural forms. This is reflected in the spatial distribution of cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones, with a relatively large number in provinces such as Shandong, Hubei, and the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region. Similarly, regions such as Huizhou, surrounded by mountains and historically characterized by low transportation accessibility, have preserved and transmitted their cultural traditions more effectively[49]. In contemporary times, the factors influencing cultural inheritance and distribution have increased, and their relative importance has also changed. Scholars such as ZENG Mengyu and ZHANG Xuemei[50] have summarized that the spatial distribution of cultural heritage and traditional culture is influenced by economic development, urbanization processes, transportation accessibility, cultural integration, and institutional policies. Taking the Qiandongnan National Cultural Ecological Protection Zone as an example, the economy, as a fundamental factor, shapes the survival environment of culture, while modern industrial development and urbanization also affect its original ecological and cultural inheritance systems. Meanwhile, cultural integration can lead to the accumulation and evolution of traditional cultures in certain regions, resulting in different forms of expression of ICH items in the peripheral or marginal areas within cultural ecological protection zones.

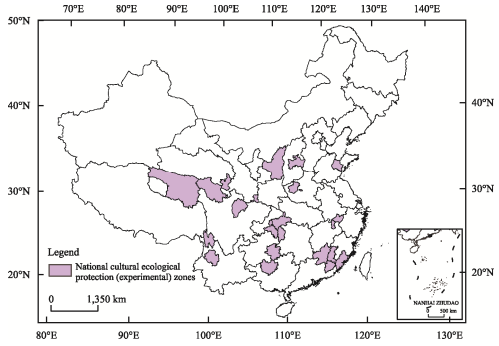


Figure 1 Distribution map of national-level CEPZs

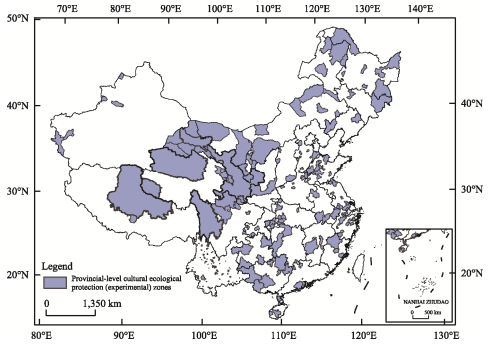


Figure 2 Distribution map of provincial-level CEPZs

This study analyzes the temporal changes in the number of provincial and national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones. For those protection zones whose spatial scope has been expanded after establishment, statistical calculations are conducted based on

their initial year of establishment, and the results are presented in Figure 3. From the perspective of the approval and establishment timeline of national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones, since 2006 and up to 2024, the number of cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones in China has continuously increased. In particular, during 2009 and from 2020 to 2023, the number of newly established provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones increased significantly. By 2024, a total of 253 provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones had been established. National cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones showed a steady increase from 2014 to 2023, reaching 23 by 2024. This indicates that in recent years, the level of attention paid to cultural ecological protection in China has greatly increased, and the work of cultural ecological protection has been progressively implemented, achieving a certain scale nationwide.

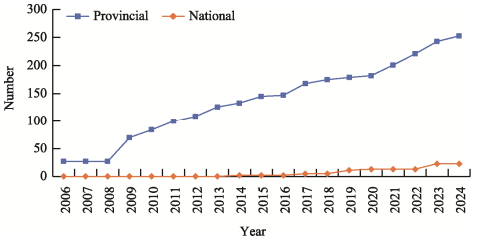


Figure 3 Statistical chart of the number of provincial and national CEPZs (2006–2024)

5 Conclusion

This dataset compiles the lists of cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and provincial cultural and tourism departments from 2006 to 2024, including a total of 276 entries, consisting of 23 national cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones and 253 provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones. It supplements detailed attribute information such as location, Chinese and English names, spatial scope, and establishment time for these zones, and systematically organizes the quantity and spatial distribution information of cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones in China, thereby providing important data support for research on cultural ecological protection at both national and regional levels. Analysis of the dataset shows significant regional differences in the spatial distribution of cultural-ecological protection (experimental) zones in China. The southwest region has a relatively large number, whereas the northeast and northwest regions have fewer, reflecting the close relationship between cultural ecological protection efforts and regional development levels and cultural resource endowments. From a temporal perspective, the number of national and provincial cultural ecological protection (experimental) zones has continued to increase, indicating that China's cultural ecological protection construction has developed rapidly and achieved initial results. This dataset can be integrated with datasets on intangible cultural heritage and local culture, providing a fundamental reference for research in this field.

Author Contributions

Yang, X. H. conducted the overall design of the dataset development; Kong, R. X. was responsible for writing the data paper, revising the initial draft, and data visualization; Chen, M. Y., Jiang, D., and Liu, H. X. were responsible for data collection and organization; Zhu, H. conducted data visualization, carried out the overall design of the dataset development, and contributed to the revision of the initial draft.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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