

# Religion and ecology among China's Blang people

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James Miller, a professor in Queen's University's (Ontario, Canada) School of Religion and the Cultural Studies program, and An Jing, a visiting research student in the School of Graduate Studies, found a distinct link between the strong religious culture of the indigenous Blang people of southwest China and their region's economic and ecological development. Credit: Queen's University

Fieldwork conducted by two Queen's researchers could help develop culturally appropriate conservation efforts and environmental education programs in a remote mountainous area of southwest China where deforestation is a major environmental issue.

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culture of the indigenous Blang people and their region's economic and ecological development.

"Our research provides clear evidence of religion playing an influential role in managing the relationship between the Blang people and their local ecosystems," says Dr. Miller. "Their religious life is not a matter of private belief or personal spirituality, but a cultural system that clearly intersects with ecological and economic systems."

Previously subsistence farmers, Blang villagers have now turned almost exclusively to producing tea leaves, which when processed becomes a highly valuable finished product. Since China began its economic and landholding reforms in the 1980s, the villagers have been steadily converting their lands to the production of tea, with tea bushes now dominating the steeply-terraced mountainsides.

Interestingly, the researchers observed that recent economic development from tea production in the village is contributing to a resurgence of religion, new temple construction and lavish religious activities. But while the economy is benefiting, deforestation is impacting biodiversity preservation and water management in the local area.

However, during a three-month annual Buddhist festival that marks the beginning of the rainy season, there is a prohibition on cutting down large trees. While in traditional times the trees might have been cut down for building houses, these days they are cut down to increase the land available for tea production. Observance of the tree-cutting injunction has a positive effect on the local ecology by slowing the tree removal. It also demonstrates how indigenous [religion](#) and culture can be an ally in promoting conservation efforts.

**More information:** For more information, visit Dr. Miller's research

blog at [www.sustainablechina.info/](http://www.sustainablechina.info/)

Provided by Queen's University

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