

Negotiating Pilgrimage: Kora, Summit Ascent, and Han-Tibetan Fusion at Jizu Mountain

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This study examines the interaction and integration of Han Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage practices at Jizu Mountain, a sacred site that embodies the confluence of two distinct cultural logics. Drawing on comparative analysis of symbolic systems and behavioral patterns, it focuses on the tension and synergy between Tibet's traditional circumambulation (*skor ba*) and the Han's *summit ascent* as pilgrimage modalities. The research reveals how these practitioners negotiate cultural adaptation: While incorporating the Han-style summit pilgrimage, they preserve Tibetan sacred spatial cosmology through the circular metaphor of the overall journey and localized circumambulation rituals. This hybrid Buddhist practice ultimately shaped a composite religious-cultural terrain unique to Jizu Mountain.

Keywords: Jizu Mountain, pilgrimage, Han-Tibetan cultural fusion, sacred mountain worship, Buddhist practice, cultural adaptation

Jizu Mountain, a renowned Buddhist sacred site located in Binchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, is believed that the Venerable Kasyapa, holding the Buddha's robe and alms bowl, entered into samadhi on this mountain to await the advent of Maitreya Buddha. This sacred origin endowed it with great eminence in Buddhism and made it a shared sacred destination aspired to and venerated by both Han and Tibetan peoples. It provides a unique spatial field where these two distinct Buddhist cultural traditions encounter, engage in dialogue, and undergo integration. Pilgrims from diverse cultural backgrounds arrive here, carrying their own faith traditions and practice models. Their behaviors, concepts, and understandings of sacrality intertwine and interact, giving rise to a composite model of pilgrimage that not only embodies the characteristics of both Han and Tibetan cultures but also possesses the unique features of Jizu Mountain itself. This model is not a simple cultural overlay but a dynamic and continuously constructed process, profoundly reflecting the robust adaptability and creativity demonstrated by Han and Tibetan cultures through their long-term interaction.

Both the Han and Tibetan ethnic groups have developed their own unique mode of mountain veneration. Han Chinese mountain veneration is commonly termed "*chaoshan*" (朝山, pilgrimage to mountains). It can be characterized as a process where pilgrims ascend from the mountain's base to its summit, conducting worship on route at mountain temples and sites associated with spiritual legends, and culminating in ceremonies venerating the enshrined Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at the peak. This paper refers to this as the "summit ascent mode" of

pilgrimage. In contrast, Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage involves walking clockwise around the sacred mountain, using it as the central axis. Previous studies have often used the term “pilgrimage” (or specifically “kora” for the circumambulatory practice) for this. This paper designates this practice as the “circumambulation mode” of sacred mountain worship.

At Jizu Mountain, these two pilgrimage modes exhibit complex interweaving and fusion in practical scenarios. Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims both retain their accustomed circumambulation practices and inevitably adapt to the mountain’s natural environment and sacred spatial layout, which are configured for the summit ascent mode. Elements of the Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage mode have also been integrated into the Han Buddhist pilgrimage, making the pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain a sacred journey co-constructed by both Han and Tibetan traditions.

Core Differences Between Pilgrimage Modes of Han and Tibetan Buddhism

The Tibetan Circumambulation Mode of Sacred Mountain Worship

Tibetan sacred mountain worship, rooted in Bon beliefs and later integrated with Buddhism, centers on the kora (circumambulation) as its fundamental ritual form. Pilgrims take the sacred peak as the central axis and walk clockwise around the mountain, forming a closed circular route that starts and ends at the same point. This practice is embedded with the circular metaphor of Tibetan Buddhism, which symbolizes the Buddhist concepts of samsara (cause and effect and reincarnation) and the eternal existence of the Dharma—the circle’s lack of beginning and end embodies the cyclical nature of life and the constant turning of the Dharma wheel.

The objects of these rituals—the sacred mountains—are often venerated in the form of personified mountain deities serving as Buddhist dharma protectors. These mountain deities often possess more than one personified image and are also conceived as having certain social relationships—primarily kinship ties—with surrounding peaks. Ascending to the sacred summit is even a taboo for most Tibetan holy mountains, as circumambulation itself is a way to maintain reverent distance from the sacred and establish a connection with the mountain deity.

Previous related research has often treated the Tibetan kora as pilgrimage, analyzing it through the lens of Victor Turner’s “liminality” model. Cai Bei (2010) argues that this process can be viewed as a circular liminal phase within a rite of passage. He describes mountain circumambulation as a process during which people

enter a sacred site from a point of departure, undergo a circuit of secluded sacred experience and participation. This includes the hardships of the journey, the severe tests that unpredictable harsh weather imposes on body and mind, enduring various discomforts, handling unexpected incidents, and finally returning to the starting point. (p. 30)

Cai Bei terms the venerated structure as a central axis. This “axis” can also extend to monasteries, stupas, and other such focal points.

Chaoshan: The Han Summit Ascent Mode of Mountain Pilgrimage

Han mountain pilgrimage, or *chaoshan*, is defined as Han cultural groups traveling to famous mountains and temples to burn incense and worship, with the summit ascent as its classic form. The core goal of this mode is to establish contact with the deity enshrined at the summit temple: Pilgrims ascend from the mountain foot to the peak, stopping to worship at temples and deity manifestation sites along the way, with burning incense and prostration as the main ritual acts.

Chaoshan pilgrimages typically unfold in the form of “summit ascent”. Susan Naquin and Chün-fang Yü (1982) summarized *chaoshan* as follows:

It must include going to the temple on the summit and stopping along the way at places where the deity had manifested itself. The main goal was to establish contact with the deity whose image was housed at the summit. (p. 13)

This definition aligns with most people’s experience. When Chinese people pilgrimage to a particular mountain, they often aim to reach the summit, and famous mountain peaks typically have temples—such as the Bixia Temple atop Mount Tai, the Huazang Temple on Mount Emei’s Golden Summit, and the Huiji Temple on Mount Putuo’s Foding Summit. In summary, “establishing contact with the deity whose image was housed at the summit temple” is the core purpose of this type of pilgrimage.

The sacredness of Buddhist mountains is often established and disseminated through claims such as a particular mountain being the *bodhimandala* (sacred site) of a certain bodhisattva. For instance, Mount Wutai is considered the *bodhimandala* of Manjushri Bodhisattva, Mount Putuo of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, Mount Emei of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, and Mount Jiuhua of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Whether at the summit or at places along the route where deities have manifested, the primary methods of worship are burning incense and performing prostrations. For many, both incense burning and prostration have corresponding “standard” movements that must be strictly observed, while others do not take this view. Nevertheless, there is consensus among them regarding incense offering: First, the number of incense sticks lit should be an odd number; second, one should move in a clockwise order between when offering incense and prostrating; third, incense burning and worship should proceed from lower to higher elevations, from the mountain foot toward the summit, with no incense burned during descent.

However, China has numerous Buddhist schools, and the above model does not fully apply to all Buddhist traditions. Although Tibetan Buddhist sacred mountain worship also conforms to the behaviour of “Buddhists going to famous mountains and temples to burn incense and worship”, its specific circumambulation pilgrimage process differs significantly from this summit ascent mode of pilgrimage.

Han-Tibetan Cultural Interaction in the Tibetan Pilgrimage at Jizu Mountain

Upon first glance, the pilgrimage processes of Tibetan Buddhism and Han Chinese Buddhism at Jizu Mountain appear remarkably similar: Both depart from the Ling Shan Yi Hui Archway at the mountain’s foot, take Huashou Men and Jinding Temple as their core pilgrimage objectives, and burn incense and perform prostrations at monasteries along the way, such as Zhusheng Temple and Shizhong Temple. However, the Tibetan pilgrimage is distinct from the Han summit ascend tradition in that it incorporates a series of circumambulation rituals at all sacred sites, and the pilgrimage is not limited to the mountain itself but spans the entire journey from departure to return home. Also, the Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage consists of diverse activities beyond incense burning and prostrations.

The similarities and differences between the two can be interpreted from two perspectives: On one hand, Tibetans’ adoption of the summit ascent pilgrimage mode within Jizu Mountain represents an active adaptation and cultural adjustment to the coexisting Han Chinese Buddhist pilgrimage mode and the secular spatial distribution of Jizu Mountain within this specific field. On the other hand, it is not merely the pilgrimage modes of other ethnic groups that have influenced the Tibetan pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain. As an important component of China’s diverse and unified national culture, the Tibetan mode of worship has also profoundly influenced the

overall cultural landscape of Jizu Mountain. Circumambulation rituals and mani stone piles have become practices shared by pilgrims of all ethnicities on Jizu Mountain. When we examine the two in an overlapping manner, we discover not two mutually influencing modes, but rather a singular, diverse practice.

The Tibetan Adoption of the Summit Ascent Mode

Circumambulation is the fundamental mode of Tibetan sacred mountain worship. Pilgrimages to most sacred mountains are conducted in the form of mountain circumambulation; ascending to the summit is not only uncommon but, for some sacred mountains, even constitutes a taboo. However, Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims at Jizu Mountain, at least within the mountain itself, do not engage in circumambulation but instead adopt the summit ascent mode. This makes it a rather exceptional yet deliberate choice.

It's worthwhile to point out before further discussion that, Jizu Mountain is not just a "Han Buddhist Mountain" but an orthodox sacred mountain in the Tibetan cognitive system. It has been incorporated into the Tibetan zodiac sacred mountain system. Tibetans believe that pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain in the Rooster Year accumulates 12 times the merit, just as pilgrimage to Kawakarpo (Meili Snow Mountain) in the Sheep Year does. This inclusion places Jizu Mountain on par with typical Tibetan sacred mountains such as Kawakarpo, making it a legitimate sacred destination for Tibetan pilgrims. This notion significantly influences the timing of Tibetan pilgrimages to sacred mountains. Pilgrim Sg from Badi Town, Deqin County, told me:

In sheep years, you go to Kawakarpo; in monkey years, it's Damo Patriarch Cave; in rooster years, it's Jizu Mountain. Rooster years—especially if there's someone in the family born in a rooster year—are particularly good for the whole family to go. There's no specific requirement for the month; in December [of the lunar calendar], whenever you have time, you can go.¹

That Jizu Mountain has been incorporated into this system indirectly indicates that its status is, to some extent, analogous to sacred mountains like Kawakarpo. While its importance may not rival that of mountains such as Gangdisê, it is at least not relegated to some special category simply because it lies outside predominantly Tibetan-inhabited areas. Rather, it is regarded as an existence similar to other sacred mountains.

Under the premise that Jizu Mountain holds a status comparable to other Tibetan sacred mountains to a certain extent, the fact that Yunnan Tibetans' pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain does not take "mountain circumambulation" as its primary form of worship is noteworthy. In my fieldwork, I have not encountered any Tibetan pilgrims who circumambulate Jizu Mountain itself. Their specific pilgrimage process involves proceeding from the mountain foot to the summit, burning incense and performing prostrations at various sacred sites along the way, all of them heavily colored by Han Chinese Buddhist characteristics.

One example is Yj and her companions, a group of over 10 people, mostly women aged above 50, come from Shangri-La. They took a bus directly from Shangri-La to the vicinity of Zhusheng Temple, then took a sightseeing vehicle to Yufo Temple, and transferred to the cable car. In the past they would have walked up the mountain, but now "can't walk anymore, so we ride up". Afterwards, they proceeded from the cable car upper station to Huashou Men, then to Jinding Temple. Along the path between Huashou Men and the cable car upper station, they stopped to enjoy the scenery, took photos, and continued onward to worship at Huashou Men.² This process is commonly seen in cases from traditional pilgrimage areas. Similarly, a group of eight from Yanmen Town, Deqin County, all relatives. This group was generally older in age, with one young man, Ls, taking care

¹ Sg, male, Tibetan, 32 years old. Interviewed on April 27, 2025, in Badi Town, Deqin County.

² Yj, Tibetan, 52 years old. Interviewed on February 28, 2025, in Jizu Mountain.

of the others. Their mountain ascent process was identical to Yj's: They took a vehicle directly to Zhusheng Temple, then a sightseeing vehicle to Yufo Temple, where they took the cable car, without deliberately stopping anywhere along the way for rituals. After getting off the cable car, Ls and his family's sequence of activities differed from Yj's. They first walked to Jinding Temple, entering through a side door next to the dining hall, which was closer to the cable car upper station. Upon entering, they faced the incense burner in front of the main hall. The group burned incense before the main hall, circumambulated the Buddha statues inside the hall, and then proceeded to Huashou Men. The ritual at Huashou Men involved prostrations, chanting scriptures, placing keys (a ritual act), and then circumambulating the Crown Prince Pavilion. According to Ls, they came "to pay respects. They (referring to the elderly companions) can't walk anymore, so we ride up. We'll walk down the mountain".³

These two cases illustrate that the Tibetan pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain in Yunnan indeed adopts a summit ascent model rather than mountain circumambulation. Whether Jinding Temple on Tianzhu Peak or Huashou Men serves as the pilgrims' final destination, the Jizu Mountain pilgrimage is consistently a process of ascending from the mountain foot to the summit, ultimately establishing a connection with the deities at the peak.

Tibetans' summit ascent-style pilgrimage at Jizu Mountain appears, overall, closer to the Han Buddhist pilgrimage model. Pilgrims themselves clearly recognize the differences between worshipping Jizu Mountain and other sacred mountains:

(When circumambulating Khawakarpo) in sheep years, (the number of pilgrims) increases. According to our superstitious beliefs, walking for one year in an ordinary year counts as one year, but walking one circuit in a sheep year is equivalent to walking twelve years. Similarly, for Jizu Mountain, in a rooster year, going to burn incense and worship Buddha there is equivalent to going twelve times. Jizu Mountain has no place to circumambulate; you simply go to worship at the temples. Khawakarpo—the entire mountain is sacred. You can't reach the summit, you don't go to the summit.⁴

This statement by Sg also reveals pilgrims' understanding of the sacred spaces of these two mountains, an understanding that provides an explanation for the difference between summit ascent and mountain circumambulation. Khawakarpo being "entirely a sacred mountain" means that every part of it is sacred, and sacredness entails observing certain taboos while moving within it. All profane elements should be kept as far away as possible from the sacred mountain; even circumambulation must follow prescribed routes without transgression (Xu, 2009). Therefore, the circumambulation practice itself is a way of maintaining distance and expressing reverence within sacred space. By circling rather than ascending, people place themselves under the protection of the sacred mountain while avoiding direct contact with the sacred summit.

The fact that Jizu Mountain involves "simply going to worship at the temples" and has "no place to circumambulate" indicates that the manifestation of sacred space at Jizu Mountain differs from that of Khawakarpo. The sacredness of Jizu Mountain is not rooted in every plant and tree as it is with Khawakarpo; rather, sacredness is concentrated in specific locations such as temples. Consequently, walking on Jizu Mountain does not carry the same potential danger of offending the sacred that exists when walking on Khawakarpo. Taboos and rituals are no longer necessary outside of temples and sacred sites. Pilgrim behavior of taking photos, enjoying the scenery, and singing at the sightseeing spots exemplifies this understanding of sacred space—in non-core sacred areas, they need not maintain a strict ritual state at all times. Furthermore, since the pilgrimage

³ Ls, Tibetan, 28 years old. Interviewed on March 27, 2025, in Jizu Mountain

⁴ Sg, male, Tibetan, 32 years old. Interviewed on April 27, 2025, in Badi Town, Deqin County.

destinations—Huashou Men and Jinding Temple—are located at higher elevations, those wishing to pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain must climb the mountain, following accessible paths to worship at sacred sites along the way, ultimately reaching the summit.

In summary, although Jizu Mountain has been incorporated into the Tibetan sacred mountain system, it differs from the typical Tibetan mountain worship. Its sacredness concentrated in temples, legendary sacred sites, and the summit; therefore, pilgrimage necessarily comprises a mountain ascent process.

The Circular Metaphor of the Overall Pilgrimage Route

The Tibetan circumambulation ritual, whether circumambulating sacred sites or sacred objects, always contains a circle—either physically existing or symbolically implied—which Cai Bei terms the “circular metaphor” (Cai, 2010, p. 96). While Tibetan pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain adopts the summit ascent mode in adapting to Jizu Mountain’s sacred spatial configuration, which differs fundamentally from that of sacred mountains, the overall pilgrimage journey nevertheless aligns with the “circular metaphor” of circumambulation rituals on a broader spatiotemporal dimension. Although mountain circumambulation with Jizu Mountain as the central axis does not form part of the pilgrimage, the majority of pilgrims consciously strive to create a closed loop in which, apart from the convergence of the starting and ending points, no path is repeated.

Before discussing the “circular metaphor” in Tibetan pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain, it is necessary to clarify the core connotations of the “circular metaphor” within the Tibetan cultural context. The circular metaphor originates from the symbolic significance of circles in Tibetan Buddhism. On one hand, the circle, without beginning or end, represents the philosophical concept of samsara. On the other hand, the circle can also be regarded as an embodiment of the constant turning of the Dharma wheel (Zhang, 1989).

In the Tibetan pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain, the circular metaphor, is manifested throughout the entire pilgrimage route from the moment pilgrims leave home to their return. Pilgrims consciously shape these pilgrimage routes into a “loop”, a conscious cultural practice that extends the core logic of Tibetan circumambulation (*kora*) to the cross-regional pilgrimage trajectory.

The pilgrimage routes to Jizu Mountain followed by Tibetans consist of three paths—eastern, central, and western. Pilgrims departing from Northwest Yunnan, Mangkang in Tibet, and other areas generally take the western and central routes. The western route passes through major towns including Deqin, Weixi, Lijiang, and Heqing. The central route passes through major towns including Deqin, Zhongdian (Shangri-La), Lijiang, and Heqing. The eastern route begins in Muli County, Sichuan, crosses the Jinsha River, and enters Yunnan via Ninglang, passing through major towns including Muli, Ninglang, Yongsheng, and Heqing.

The coverage aligns to the distribution of Tibetan communities that preserve the tradition of pilgrimaging to Jizu Mountain. Notably, the Naxi people—who have close interactions with Tibetans—also share the tradition of pilgrimaging to Jizu Mountain. Field investigation confirms that pilgrims from Deqin, Zhongdian, and Lijiang all explicitly acknowledge their hometowns’ traditions of pilgrimaging to Jizu Mountain, while pilgrims from counties in Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, know of Jizu Mountain but have not established a pilgrimage tradition. It can be observed that the traditional Tibetan pilgrim population for Jizu Mountain is roughly distributed across Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Lijiang City in Yunnan Province, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County in Sichuan Province, and various counties in eastern Nyingchi City and southeastern Qamdo City in the Tibet Autonomous Region.



Figure 1. Tibetan pilgrimage route to Jizu Mountain.

Two distinct types of return journeys emerge from Jizu Mountain. For the first one, pilgrims move freely after completing the Jizu Mountain pilgrimage, and subsequent actions are no longer related to the pilgrimage. A Tibetan pilgrim from Badi, Deqin County, recalling her family's pilgrimage to Jizu Mountain during the previous rooster year (2017), described their arrangements after descending the mountain as follows: "After returning, we didn't worry about anything—we just went to the county town to have fun".

In the second scenario, the pilgrimage continues as an uninterrupted sacred process that only concludes upon returning to their hometown or the ritual starting point. For those using Lijiang as the starting point of this loop, the return route follows: Xiaguan—Dali City—Eryuan—Jianchuan—Lijiang, finally dispersing from Shigu in Lijiang according to their respective onward routes. For those starting from Deqin County, the return route follows: Jizu Mountain—Dali—Heqing—Lijiang—Weixi—Yanmen—Yunling. Both routes begin from a

certain starting point and trace a clockwise “circle”. They do their utmost to avoid overlapping paths. The deliberate pursuit of a “circle” in the Jizu Mountain pilgrimage routes can be regarded as a manifestation and transformation of the circumambulation ritual on a larger scale, maintaining consistency with the traditional Tibetan sacred mountain circumambulation mode in the overall structure of the Jizu Mountain pilgrimage.

Even the first group whose journey ends at Jizu Mountain provides evidence of this conscious adherence to circular routes. Pilgrims from Badi, a town south of Deqin County, typically take the western route to Jizu Mountain. To form a closed “circle” like pilgrims taking the central route, they would need to return by the central route, which runs counterclockwise. A counterclockwise route is considered inauspicious in Tibetan Buddhism and therefore culturally illegitimate; typically, only Bon practitioners perform Circumambulation rituals counterclockwise. Under these circumstances, treating Jizu Mountain itself as the final destination of the pilgrimage journey appears to be the optimal choice. While this fails to form a complete closed loop geographically, it also does not violate the cultural taboos.

However, such a “circle” differs fundamentally from mountain circumambulation. The most crucial difference is that this circle, formed by an outward and return journey, does not have a sacred site serving as a central axis in the way that mountain circumambulation does, with the mountain itself being the ritual’s core and focal point. The “circle” of the Jizu Mountain pilgrimage journey is more of a metaphorical projection of the Tibetan cosmology rather than circumambulating Jizu Mountain itself. The relationship between pilgrims and the sacred mountain is established after entering Jizu Mountain, through the process of ascending the peak and burning incense and worshiping at sacred sites along the way until reaching the summit. The various rituals along the outward journey thus become, to some degree, extensions of the rituals performed at places where deities manifested along the ascent route. It is both a clockwise circle and a summit ascent with Jinding Temple and Huashou Men on Jizu Mountain as its destination.

This constitutes a practice of the “circular metaphor” within Jizu Mountain’s multi-ethnic cultural context, and also represents the continuation of Tibetan Buddhism’s circumambulation pilgrimage mode and its sacred spatial conception amid a multi-ethnic cultural context.

Circumambulation Practices at Sacred Sites on Jizu Mountain

The circular metaphor is not only embodied in the macro pilgrimage route, but also deeply embedded in the micro ritual practices at sacred sites on Jizu Mountain itself. Although the Tibetan pilgrims adopted the summit ascent mode, they practiced circumambulation at various local points in the pilgrimage to establish connection with the deities or sacred sites.

As introduced earlier, the Tibetan pilgrimage route ascend from the mountain foot to Jinding Temple or Huashou Men. Circumambulation rituals are performed at nearly all the sacred sites. They circumambulate the entire Shizhong Temple, the Guanyin statue in front of Huideng Nunnery, they circumambulate, they circumambulate the Crown Prince Pavilion at Huashou Men, and the main hall and circumambulate the Lengyan Pagoda at Jinding Temple. During circumambulation, pilgrims silently recite the six-syllable mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum” or some sutras, and turn prayer wheels if they carried them.

Rq, a native of Deqin County in Diqing Prefecture, came to pilgrimage at Jizu Mountain with his wife, son, and relatives from the same county. Their group is a typical example of this hybrid practice. Rq’s group first held a departure ceremony at Qudenggé in Deqin to pray for a smooth journey, and then drove to Jizu Mountain, passing through Shangri-La and Lijiang, obtaining keys at Tianzi Cave in Heqing, and then entering Jizu

Mountain.⁵ This is his third time at Jizu Mountain. Under normal circumstances, they “don’t go every year, only go in rooster years. Our region’s greatest sacred mountain (Khawakarpo) is right here (referring to his hometown Deqin), and we go to circumambulate it once every year”.

After arriving at Jizu Mountain, they took the scenic area sightseeing bus to reach Shizhong Temple. Getting off at the Shizhong Temple parking lot, they did not perform any rituals at Shizhong Temple, but took the sightseeing bus to Yufo Temple and began hiking from there—a common choice for those with the elderly and children. They passed by the Guanyin statue below Huideng Nunnery, prostrating before the Guanyin statue and then circumambulating it three times. While passing through Tongwa Temple, they briefly paid respects to the deities in the main hall but did not circumambulate this temple nor light butter lamps. At Huashou Men, the group followed the procedure by offering candles and butter lamps, circumambulated the Crown Prince Pavilion three times, prostrated in worship before Huashou Men, sat briefly to chant sutras, and then proceeded to Jinding Temple. The rituals at Jinding Temple were also carried out methodically: Entering through the main gate, they first paid respects to the Golden Hall, then circumambulated the Lengyan Pagoda nine times, burned incense and lit butter at the incense burner behind, prostrated in worship before the Buddhas of the Three Ages in the main hall, and circumambulated the main hall three times. After a brief session of sutra chanting in front of the Golden Hall, Rq’s group descended the mountain, taking transportation the entire way down. For Rg’s group, circumambulation was present in almost every ritual at nearly every site.

This contrasts with Han Chinese Buddhist mountain pilgrimage at Jizu Mountain, even though both groups share the same routes and sacred destinations. Lay practitioner YX, a Chan Buddhist, traveled from Guangdong to Yunnan to pilgrimage at Jizu Mountain. Huashou Men was her primary destination on this trip, but due to limited time and plateau acclimatization issues, she chose to ascend by sightseeing bus and cable car, and then descend on foot. After getting off at Shizhong Temple, she went to Zhusheng Temple, as this was the incense-offering spot that visitors are directed to. There YX burned incense and prostrated in sequence at the front hall and main hall. The journey continued without further ceremony as she took the bus to Yufo Temple, and then rode the cable car to the top. At Jinding Temple, the final stop, she first prostrated at the Golden Hall and main hall, and then circumambulated the main hall three times (a rare circumambulation act for Han pilgrims). After taking a vegetarian meal at Jinding Temple, she proceeded to Huashou Men, burning incense and prostrating at Guanyin Temple and Tongwa Temple along the way. Finally, she sat in meditation and chanted sutras before the site. She then descended the mountain on foot.⁶

A comparison between these two cases reveals the fundamental divergence between Tibetan and Han pilgrims on Jizu Mountain. Tibetan pilgrims primarily employ circumambulation as their main engagement, with prostration and mantra chanting as supplements, thus retaining their essential practice while adapting to the mountain’s spatial layout. Han Chinese pilgrims, on the other hand, focus mainly on prostration and incense offering, with circumambulation being optional and secondary.

Conclusion

As a sacred site converging multiple ethnicities and faiths, Jizu Mountain is not merely a space where Han and Tibetan cultures encounter. It is also a site where the interaction, exchange, and integration of the two occur:

⁵ Rq, male, Tibetan, 41 years old. Interviewed on March 30, 2025, in Jizu Mountain.

⁶ Yx, female, Han, 50 years old. Interviewed on February 27, 2025, in Jizu Mountain.

Tibetan pilgrims adapted to the summit ascent mode in their overall process, while preserving the “circular metaphor” in their specific site-specific worship. This interaction of cultural practices is not a unidirectional adaptation or assimilation, but rather a mutual accommodation between Han and Tibetan pilgrimage traditions at the level of concrete practice, based on bidirectional reference and fusion.

Beyond the aspects this paper focuses on, Jizu Mountain also hosts pilgrims from other cultural and religious backgrounds, who equally participate in the construction of this sacred space and the fusion of cultural practices. These include ethnic groups such as the Bai, Naxi, and Dai, as well as faiths including Theravada Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religions. The behaviors and roles of these subjects in the multicultural interactions at Jizu Mountain equally deserve attention.

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