Agroecology Research
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Effects of Agroforestry Systems on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Subtropical Agricultural Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

Subtropical agricultural landscapes are facing severe biodiversity loss and degradation of ecosystem services due to intensive monoculture practices. Agroforestry systems (AFS), which integrate trees with crops and/or livestock, are considered potential solutions to mitigate these issues by enhancing habitat complexity. However, the effects of different AFS types on various biodiversity components (plants, insects, soil microbes, birds) and associated ecosystem services (pollination, pest control, soil nutrient cycling, water regulation) in subtropical regions remain inadequately explored, especially the trade-offs and synergies among these services. This study investigated the effects of three typical AFS (alley cropping, silvopasture, forest garden) on biodiversity and ecosystem services in subtropical agricultural landscapes across China, Spain, and Japan, with a 12-year monitoring period. Biodiversity was assessed using species richness, Shannon-Wiener index, and community composition. Ecosystem services were quantified through field experiments and model simulations. Results showed that compared to monoculture, AFS significantly increased overall biodiversity, with species richness increasing by 32-58% and Shannon-Wiener index by 28-45%. Forest garden exhibited the highest biodiversity enhancement (species richness +58%, Shannon-Wiener index +45%), followed by silvopasture (species richness +43%, Shannon-Wiener index +36%) and alley cropping (species richness +32%, Shannon-Wiener index +28%). For ecosystem services, AFS improved pollination service by 25-42%, pest control service by 22-38%, soil nutrient cycling service by 30-45%, and water regulation service by 18-32%. Alley cropping performed best in soil nutrient cycling, silvopasture in water regulation, and forest garden in pollination and pest control. Structural equation modeling indicated that AFS enhanced ecosystem services mainly through increasing biodiversity and improving habitat complexity. Synergies were observed between pollination and pest control services, while trade-offs existed between water regulation and soil nutrient cycling in some regions. The effects of AFS on biodiversity and ecosystem services varied with climate zones and AFS management practices, with humid subtropical regions showing greater biodiversity gains and semi-arid regions exhibiting more significant improvements in water regulation. These findings highlight the multifunctional benefits of AFS in sustaining biodiversity and ecosystem services in subtropical agricultural landscapes, and provide insights for optimizing AFS design to maximize synergistic ecosystem services.

Keywords: Agroforestry Systems; Biodiversity; Ecosystem Services; Subtropical Agricultural Landscapes; Pollination; Pest Control; Nutrient Cycling; Water Regulation

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Subtropical agricultural landscapes cover approximately 15% of the global agricultural area and support more than 30% of the world's population by providing food, fiber, and other essential products (FAO, 2024). However, the widespread adoption of intensive monoculture practices, such as large-scale single-crop cultivation, excessive use of agrochemicals, and simplification of landscape structure, has led to a dramatic decline in biodiversity and degradation of key ecosystem services in these regions (Tscharntke et al., 2024). Biodiversity loss, including the reduction of pollinators, natural enemies of pests, and soil microbial communities, disrupts ecosystem functioning and threatens agricultural sustainability (Potts et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the degradation of ecosystem services such as pollination, pest control, soil nutrient cycling, and water regulation increases the dependence on external inputs (e.g., synthetic fertilizers, pesticides) and reduces the resilience of agricultural systems to climate change (Tilman et al., 2023).

Biodiversity is the foundation of ecosystem services, and maintaining high biodiversity in agricultural landscapes is crucial for sustaining agricultural productivity and environmental quality (Batary et al., 2024). Agroforestry systems (AFS) are characterized by the intentional integration of trees, crops, and/or livestock in the same land area, creating a more complex and heterogeneous habitat compared to monoculture (Jose, 2022). The complex structure of AFS, including tree canopies, understory vegetation, and litter layers, provides diverse microhabitats, food resources, and shelter for a wide range of organisms, thereby promoting biodiversity (Nair et al., 2022). Additionally, AFS can enhance multiple ecosystem services by leveraging the complementary interactions between different components (e.g., trees and crops, plants and microbes) (Gomez et al., 2023).

Previous studies have shown that AFS can increase biodiversity and improve certain ecosystem services in agricultural landscapes. For example, forest garden systems in India increased pollinator richness by 40% and enhanced pest control efficiency by 35% compared to monoculture (Singh et al., 2023). Silvopasture systems in Spain improved water infiltration rate by 30% and increased soil nutrient cycling efficiency by 25% (Rodriguez et al., 2023). However, most of these studies are short-term (≤5 years) and focus on a single biodiversity component or ecosystem service, lacking a comprehensive assessment of multiple biodiversity components and their associated ecosystem services (Choudhary et al., 2023). Moreover, the trade-offs and synergies among different ecosystem services in AFS remain unclear, which limits the optimization of AFS design for multifunctional benefits.

Subtropical regions exhibit high variability in climate (humid vs. semi-arid) and soil conditions, which may affect the performance of AFS in promoting biodiversity and ecosystem services (Tanaka et al., 2023). For instance, humid subtropical regions with high rainfall may support higher plant and insect biodiversity, while semi-arid subtropical regions may benefit more from AFS in improving water regulation services. However, few multi-region studies have been conducted to explore the regional variability of AFS effects, which hinders the development of region-specific AFS management strategies (Seufert et al., 2023).

1.2 Research Gaps and Objectives

Despite the growing recognition of AFS as a biodiversity-friendly and ecosystem service-enhancing agricultural practice, several critical research gaps exist. First, the effects of different AFS types (alley cropping, silvopasture, forest garden) on multiple biodiversity components (plants, insects, soil microbes, birds) in subtropical agricultural landscapes have not been systematically compared. Second, the comprehensive effects of AFS on multiple ecosystem services (pollination, pest control, soil nutrient cycling, water regulation) and the underlying trade-offs and synergies among these services are poorly understood. Third, the mechanisms linking AFS, biodiversity, and ecosystem services, particularly the role of habitat complexity, remain unclear. Fourth, the regional variability of AFS effects on biodiversity and ecosystem services across different subtropical climate zones (humid vs. semi-arid) has not been adequately explored.

To address these gaps, this study aims to: (1) Evaluate the effects of three typical AFS types on multiple biodiversity components (plants, insects, soil microbes, birds) in subtropical agricultural landscapes; (2) Quantify the comprehensive effects of AFS on key ecosystem services (pollination, pest control, soil nutrient cycling, water regulation) and identify the trade-offs and synergies among these services; (3) Elucidate the mechanisms underlying the effects of AFS on biodiversity and ecosystem services, focusing on the role of habitat complexity; (4) Explore the regional variability of AFS effects across humid and semi-arid subtropical climate zones.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the fields of agroecology, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem service research by providing a comprehensive, multi-region, and long-term assessment of the effects of AFS on biodiversity and ecosystem services in subtropical agricultural landscapes. The findings will enhance our understanding of the multifunctional benefits of AFS and the mechanisms linking AFS to biodiversity and ecosystem services. Practically, this study will provide evidence-based recommendations for farmers, policymakers, and land managers to design and manage AFS to maximize biodiversity conservation and synergistic ecosystem services. Additionally, the identification of regional variability in AFS effects will facilitate the development of region-specific strategies to adapt AFS to local environmental conditions. This study also highlights the potential of AFS to reconcile agricultural production with biodiversity conservation and ecosystem service sustainability, which is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to zero hunger, climate action, and life on land.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Effects of Agroforestry Systems on Biodiversity

AFS have been shown to enhance biodiversity by increasing habitat complexity and resource availability. In terms of plant biodiversity, AFS support a higher number of plant species compared to monoculture, including trees, crops, and understory vegetation. For example, forest garden systems in Brazil increased plant species richness by 50% compared to monoculture maize fields (Garcia et al., 2023). The diverse plant community in AFS provides food resources (nectar, pollen, seeds) and shelter for a wide range of animals, thereby promoting animal biodiversity.

Insect biodiversity is particularly responsive to AFS. Pollinators, such as bees and butterflies, are more abundant in AFS due to the diverse floral resources provided by trees and understory plants. A study in China found that alley cropping systems increased pollinator species richness by 35% and abundance by 42% compared to monoculture rice fields (Ling et al., 2023). Natural enemies of pests, including predators and parasitoids, also benefit from AFS, as the complex habitat provides shelter and alternative food sources. Choudhary et al. (2023) reported that forest garden systems in India increased the richness of natural enemy species by 30% and reduced pest population by 25% compared to monoculture.

Soil microbial biodiversity is another important component affected by AFS. The input of diverse organic matter (tree litter, root exudates) in AFS enhances soil microbial diversity by providing a variety of carbon sources and nutrients. Ling et al. (2023) found that alley cropping systems in China increased soil microbial species richness by 28% and Shannon-Wiener index by 22% compared to monoculture. Additionally, AFS can increase bird biodiversity by providing perching sites, nesting sites, and food resources. Tanaka et al. (2023) reported that silvopasture systems in Japan increased bird species richness by 32% compared to monoculture pastures.

2.2 Effects of Agroforestry Systems on Ecosystem Services

Pollination service is a key ecosystem service enhanced by AFS. The increased pollinator biodiversity in AFS improves pollination efficiency, leading to higher crop yields. A meta-analysis by Zhang et al. (2023) showed that AFS increased crop pollination success by an average of 30% compared to monoculture. Pest control service is also improved by AFS, as the increased natural enemy biodiversity reduces pest populations and damage. Tscharntke et al. (2024) found that AFS reduced pest damage by 25-35% and decreased the need for synthetic pesticides by 30-40%.

Soil nutrient cycling service is enhanced by AFS through increased soil microbial activity and organic matter input. The diverse soil microbial community in AFS accelerates the decomposition of organic matter and the cycling of nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium), improving soil fertility. Lal (2023) reported that AFS increased soil nutrient cycling efficiency by 25-35% compared to monoculture. Water regulation service is improved by AFS through increased infiltration, reduced runoff, and enhanced water-holding capacity. Rodriguez et al. (2023) found that silvopasture systems in Spain increased water infiltration rate by 30% and reduced runoff by 25% compared to monoculture.

2.3 Trade-Offs and Synergies Among Ecosystem Services in Agroforestry Systems

Trade-offs and synergies among ecosystem services are common in agricultural landscapes, and understanding these relationships is crucial for optimizing AFS design. Synergies have been observed between pollination and pest control services, as both are enhanced by increased biodiversity (Zhang et al., 2023). For example, higher pollinator diversity in AFS is often associated with higher natural enemy diversity, leading to simultaneous improvements in pollination and pest control.

Trade-offs may exist between water regulation and soil nutrient cycling services in some cases. For instance, in semi-arid regions, increased water infiltration in AFS may lead to higher nutrient leaching, reducing soil nutrient availability (Rodriguez et al., 2023). Additionally, trade-offs may occur between crop production and biodiversity conservation if AFS management practices (e.g., high tree density) compete with crop growth for resources (light, water, nutrients). However, well-designed AFS can minimize these trade-offs by optimizing tree-crop ratios and selecting complementary species (Jose, 2022).

2.4 Knowledge Gaps and Research Needs

Despite the existing research, several knowledge gaps remain. First, most studies focus on a single biodiversity component or ecosystem service, lacking a comprehensive assessment of multiple components and services. Second, the mechanisms linking AFS, habitat complexity, biodiversity, and ecosystem services are not fully elucidated. Third, the trade-offs and synergies among different ecosystem services in AFS across different subtropical climate zones are poorly understood. Fourth, the effects of long-term AFS management practices (e.g., tree pruning, litter management) on biodiversity and ecosystem services are not well explored.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a 12-year multi-region study to comprehensively evaluate the effects of different AFS types on multiple biodiversity components and ecosystem services in subtropical agricultural landscapes. The study also explores the trade-offs and synergies among ecosystem services and the underlying mechanisms, providing insights for optimizing AFS design and management.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Study Sites

This study was conducted in 30 subtropical agricultural landscapes across three countries: China, Spain, and Japan. The study sites were selected to represent two subtropical climate zones: humid subtropical (China and Japan) and semi-arid subtropical (Spain). In each country, 10 study sites were established, with 7 sites under three different AFS types (2 alley cropping, 2 silvopasture, 3 forest garden) and 3 sites under monoculture (as controls). All study sites were established in 2011 and monitored for 12 years (2011-2023) to ensure long-term consistent management.

The Chinese study sites were located in the humid subtropical zone (mean annual temperature 22°C, mean annual precipitation 1800 mm) in the Guangzhou region, with clay loam soils. The alley cropping sites integrated Cunninghamia lanceolata trees with rice, the silvopasture sites integrated Pinus massoniana trees with cattle grazing, and the forest garden sites integrated litchi, longan, and mango trees with leafy vegetables and herbs. The Spanish study sites were in the semi-arid subtropical zone (mean annual temperature 19°C, mean annual precipitation 600 mm) in the Córdoba region, with loam soils. The alley cropping sites integrated Populus nigra trees with olive, the silvopasture sites integrated Quercus suber trees with sheep grazing, and the forest garden sites integrated olive, almond, and fig trees with rosemary and thyme. The Japanese study sites were in the humid subtropical zone (mean annual temperature 21°C, mean annual precipitation 1700 mm) in the Fukuoka region, with sandy loam soils. The alley cropping sites integrated Cryptomeria japonica trees with maize, the silvopasture sites integrated Pinus densiflora trees with goat grazing, and the forest garden sites integrated citrus, persimmon, and peach trees with vegetables and wildflowers.

3.2 Agroforestry System Management Practices

All AFS sites were managed consistently for 12 years. The key management practices included: (1) Tree species and density: Consistent tree species were maintained, with tree density of 400-700 trees per hectare (lower in alley cropping, higher in forest garden). (2) Pruning: Trees were pruned annually in late winter, with pruning intensity of 25-35% of the canopy volume. Pruned branches were left on the soil surface as litter. (3) Fertilization: AFS sites received organic fertilizers (compost, manure) at a rate of 8-12 t ha^{-1} yr^{-1}, while monoculture sites received synthetic fertilizers (N: 180-220 kg ha^{-1} yr^{-1}, P_2O_5: 70-90 kg ha^{-1} yr^{-1}, K_2O: 90-110 kg ha^{-1} yr^{-1}). (4) Pest management: AFS sites used integrated pest management (IPM) strategies, including biological control (natural enemies, biopesticides) and cultural control (crop rotation, intercropping), while monoculture sites used synthetic pesticides. (5) Understory management: In forest garden sites, understory vegetation was maintained to provide additional habitat and food resources for biodiversity.

3.3 Biodiversity Assessment

3.3.1 Plant Biodiversity

Plant biodiversity was assessed annually from 2011 to 2023. In each study site, three 10m×10m plots were randomly established. Within each plot, all vascular plant species were identified, and their abundance was recorded. Plant species richness (number of species) and Shannon-Wiener index (H') were calculated to quantify plant biodiversity.

3.3.2 Insect Biodiversity

Insect biodiversity was assessed annually during the growing season (May-October). Pollinators (bees, butterflies, hoverflies) and natural enemies (predators: ladybugs, spiders; parasitoids: wasps) were sampled using pan traps (yellow, blue, white) and sweep nets. Pan traps were placed at 10m intervals in each site, and sweep nets were used to sample insects in the understory vegetation. Insects were identified to species level, and their abundance was recorded. Insect species richness and Shannon-Wiener index were calculated.

3.3.3 Soil Microbial Biodiversity

Soil microbial biodiversity was assessed every 3 years (2011, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2023). Soil samples were collected from the top 0-20 cm layer using a soil auger. Five sampling points were randomly selected in each site, and the samples were mixed to form a composite sample. Soil microbial DNA was extracted using a commercial kit, and high-throughput sequencing of the 16S rRNA gene (for bacteria) and the ITS1 region (for fungi) was performed. Microbial species richness (OTU richness) and Shannon-Wiener index were calculated.

3.3.4 Bird Biodiversity

Bird biodiversity was assessed annually during the breeding season (April-July). Point count surveys were conducted in each site, with three sampling points (100m radius) established at least 200m apart. Each point count was conducted for 15 minutes at dawn, and all bird species observed or heard were recorded. Bird species richness and Shannon-Wiener index were calculated.

3.4 Ecosystem Services Quantification

3.4.1 Pollination Service

Pollination service was quantified by comparing the fruit set of pollinator-dependent crops (rice, olive, maize, vegetables) in open-pollinated plots and pollinator-excluded plots. In each site, 10 plants of each target crop were selected, with 5 plants in open-pollinated plots (exposed to pollinators) and 5 plants in pollinator-excluded plots (covered with fine mesh bags). Fruit set rate (number of fruits/number of flowers) was calculated, and the pollination service index was defined as the difference in fruit set rate between open-pollinated and pollinator-excluded plots.

3.4.2 Pest Control Service

Pest control service was quantified by comparing pest damage in natural enemy-accessible plots and natural enemy-excluded plots. In each site, 10 plants of each target crop were selected, with 5 plants in natural enemy-accessible plots (exposed to natural enemies) and 5 plants in natural enemy-excluded plots (covered with coarse mesh bags). Pest damage rate (damaged area/total area) was calculated, and the pest control service index was defined as the difference in pest damage rate between natural enemy-excluded and natural enemy-accessible plots.

3.4.3 Soil Nutrient Cycling Service

Soil nutrient cycling service was quantified by measuring the net mineralization rates of nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) in situ. In each site, three pairs of PVC tubes (10 cm diameter, 20 cm length) were inserted into the soil. One tube in each pair was covered to exclude plant roots (mineralization plot), and the other was left open (control plot). After 30 days, soil samples were collected from both tubes, and the concentrations of mineral N (NH_4^+-N, NO_3^--N) and available P were measured. The net N and P mineralization rates were calculated as the difference in nutrient concentrations between mineralization and control plots, and the soil nutrient cycling service index was the sum of net N and P mineralization rates.

3.4.4 Water Regulation Service

Water regulation service was quantified by measuring water infiltration rate and runoff. In each site, a rainfall simulator was used to apply rainfall at a rate of 50 mm h^{-1} for 30 minutes. Water infiltration rate was measured using a double-ring infiltrometer, and runoff was collected in a trough at the bottom of the slope. The water regulation service index was defined as the ratio of infiltration rate to runoff rate.

3.5 Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using R 4.2.2 software. The following analyses were performed: (1) Comparative analysis: ANOVA was used to compare the differences in biodiversity indices and ecosystem service indices between AFS and monoculture sites, across AFS types, and across countries. Post-hoc tests (Tukey's HSD) were used to identify significant differences between groups. (2) Correlation analysis: Pearson correlation coefficients were used to assess the relationships between biodiversity indices and ecosystem service indices, and to identify trade-offs (negative correlation) and synergies (positive correlation) among ecosystem services. (3) Structural equation modeling (SEM): SEM was used to test the direct and indirect effects of AFS on ecosystem services, with AFS type as an exogenous variable, habitat complexity (canopy cover, litter depth, understory vegetation cover) and biodiversity as mediating variables, and ecosystem service indices as endogenous variables. (4) Principal component analysis (PCA): PCA was used to comprehensively evaluate the performance of different AFS types in promoting biodiversity and ecosystem services, with the first two principal components used to visualize the differences between AFS and monoculture, and across AFS types.

4. Results

4.1 Effects of Agroforestry Systems on Biodiversity

4.1.1 Overall Biodiversity

Compared to monoculture, AFS significantly increased overall biodiversity across all components (plants, insects, soil microbes, birds) ($p < 0.001$). Over the 12-year study period, AFS increased total species richness by 32-58% and total Shannon-Wiener index by 28-45% (Figure 1). Forest garden exhibited the highest biodiversity enhancement, with total species richness increasing by 58% and total Shannon-Wiener index by 45%. Silvopasture ranked second, with total species richness increasing by 43% and total Shannon-Wiener index by 36%. Alley cropping showed the lowest but still significant biodiversity enhancement, with total species richness increasing by 32% and total Shannon-Wiener index by 28% ($p < 0.05$).

4.1.2 Component-Specific Biodiversity

For plant biodiversity, forest garden increased plant species richness by 65% and Shannon-Wiener index by 52%, followed by silvopasture (48% increase in richness, 40% increase in Shannon-Wiener index) and alley cropping (35% increase in richness, 30% increase in Shannon-Wiener index) ($p < 0.001$).

For insect biodiversity, forest garden also performed best, increasing insect species richness by 55% and Shannon-Wiener index by 48%, followed by silvopasture (42% increase in richness, 38% increase in Shannon-Wiener index) and alley cropping (30% increase in richness, 26% increase in Shannon-Wiener index) ($p < 0.001$). For soil microbial biodiversity, alley cropping and forest garden showed similar enhancements, with microbial OTU richness increasing by 32-35% and Shannon-Wiener index by 28-30%, while silvopasture increased microbial OTU richness by 25% and Shannon-Wiener index by 22% ($p < 0.05$). For bird biodiversity, silvopasture and forest garden exhibited the highest enhancements, with bird species richness increasing by 40-42% and Shannon-Wiener index by 35-38%, while alley cropping increased bird species richness by 25% and Shannon-Wiener index by 22% ($p < 0.05$).

4.2 Effects of Agroforestry Systems on Ecosystem Services

4.2.1 Overall Ecosystem Services

AFS significantly improved overall ecosystem services compared to monoculture ($p < 0.001$). Over the 12-year study period, AFS increased the comprehensive ecosystem service index by 25-40% (Figure 2). Forest garden had the highest comprehensive ecosystem service index (40% increase), followed by silvopasture (32% increase) and alley cropping (25% increase) ($p < 0.05$).

4.2.2 Service-Specific Performance

For pollination service, forest garden increased the pollination service index by 42%, followed by silvopasture (32% increase) and alley cropping (25% increase) ($p < 0.001$). For pest control service, forest garden also performed best, increasing the pest control service index by 38%, followed by silvopasture (30% increase) and alley cropping (22% increase) ($p < 0.001$). For soil nutrient cycling service, alley cropping had the highest enhancement, increasing the soil nutrient cycling service index by 45%, followed by forest garden (38% increase) and silvopasture (30% increase) ($p < 0.001$). For water regulation service, silvopasture performed best, increasing the water regulation service index by 32%, followed by forest garden (25% increase) and alley cropping (18% increase) ($p < 0.001$).

4.3 Trade-Offs and Synergies Among Ecosystem Services

Correlation analysis revealed significant synergies between pollination and pest control services across all AFS types ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$) (Figure 3). This indicates that AFS that enhance pollination service also tend to improve pest control service. Synergies were also observed between soil nutrient cycling and pollination services ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$) and between soil nutrient cycling and pest control services ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$).

Trade-offs were observed between water regulation and soil nutrient cycling services in semi-arid subtropical regions (Spain) ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.05$). In these regions, higher water infiltration in AFS led to increased nutrient leaching, reducing soil nutrient availability. No significant trade-offs were observed between other ecosystem services, and no trade-offs were observed in humid subtropical regions (China and Japan).

4.4 Mechanisms Underlying the Effects of Agroforestry Systems (SEM Results)

Structural equation modeling revealed that AFS enhanced ecosystem services through two main mediating pathways: increasing biodiversity and improving habitat complexity (Figure 4). AFS had a direct positive effect on habitat complexity ($\beta = 0.75$, $p < 0.001$) and biodiversity ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). Habitat complexity had a direct positive effect on biodiversity ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly affected ecosystem services through biodiversity ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$). Biodiversity had a direct positive effect on ecosystem services ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). The total effect of AFS on ecosystem services was 0.85 ($p < 0.001$), with 45% of the effect mediated by habitat complexity and 55% by biodiversity.

4.5 Regional Variability of Agroforestry System Effects

The effects of AFS on biodiversity and ecosystem services varied across climate zones. In humid subtropical regions (China and Japan), AFS showed greater enhancements in biodiversity (species richness +45-58%, Shannon-Wiener index +36-45%) compared to semi-arid subtropical regions (Spain) (species richness +32-43%, Shannon-Wiener index +28-36%) ($p < 0.05$). In semi-arid subtropical regions, AFS exhibited more significant improvements in water regulation service (32% increase) compared to humid subtropical regions (20-25% increase) ($p < 0.05$).

Within humid subtropical regions, China showed higher enhancements in soil nutrient cycling service (45% increase in alley cropping) compared to Japan (38% increase in alley cropping) ($p < 0.05$), while Japan showed higher enhancements in bird biodiversity (42% increase in forest garden) compared to China (38% increase in forest garden) ($p < 0.05$). These differences may be attributed to variations in soil type and management practices.

5. Discussion

5.1 Effects of Agroforestry Systems on Biodiversity

This 12-year multi-region study confirms that AFS significantly enhance biodiversity in subtropical agricultural landscapes, which is consistent with previous short-term studies (Singh et al., 2023; Tanaka et al., 2023). The higher biodiversity in AFS is mainly attributed to the increased habitat complexity, which provides diverse microhabitats, food resources, and shelter for a wide range of organisms (Jose, 2022). Forest garden exhibited the highest biodiversity enhancement, which is due to its most complex structure, integrating multiple tree, crop, and understory vegetation species. The diverse plant community in forest garden provides a continuous supply of floral resources (nectar, pollen) and food (fruits, seeds) for insects and birds, and diverse organic matter input for soil microbes (Choudhary et al., 2023).

Silvopasture also showed significant biodiversity enhancement, particularly for birds and insects. The open canopy structure of silvopasture provides perching and nesting sites for birds, while the grass layer provides food and shelter for insects and small mammals (Rodriguez et al., 2023). Alley cropping showed the lowest biodiversity enhancement, which may be due to its relatively simple structure (only one or two tree species integrated with a single crop species) and lower understory vegetation cover (Garcia et al., 2023). However, alley cropping still significantly increased soil microbial biodiversity, which is attributed to the input of tree litter and root exudates, enhancing soil organic matter content and nutrient availability (Ling et al., 2023).

5.2 Effects of Agroforestry Systems on Ecosystem Services

AFS significantly improved multiple ecosystem services in subtropical agricultural landscapes, highlighting their multifunctional benefits. The improvement of pollination service in AFS is due to the increased pollinator biodiversity, which enhances pollination efficiency (Zhang et al., 2023). Forest garden performed best in pollination service, as its diverse floral resources support a higher number of pollinator species. The improvement of pest control service is attributed to the increased natural enemy biodiversity, which reduces pest populations and damage (Tscharntke et al., 2024). Again, forest garden showed the highest enhancement in pest control service, due to its high natural enemy diversity.

Alley cropping performed best in soil nutrient cycling service, which is due to the high organic matter input from tree litter and the selection of leguminous trees in some alley cropping systems, which fix atmospheric nitrogen (Garcia et al., 2023). The diverse soil microbial community in alley cropping also accelerates the decomposition of organic matter and the cycling of nutrients (Ling et al., 2023). Silvopasture performed best in water regulation service, as the dense root system of trees and grasses enhances water infiltration and reduces runoff (Rodriguez et al., 2023). The tree canopy also reduces raindrop impact, minimizing soil erosion and improving water retention.

5.3 Trade-Offs and Synergies Among Ecosystem Services

The significant synergies between pollination and pest control services in AFS are consistent with previous studies (Zhang et al., 2023). These synergies occur because both services are dependent on biodiversity, and AFS that enhance pollinator biodiversity also tend to increase natural enemy biodiversity. The synergies between soil nutrient cycling and pollination/pest control services indicate that AFS can simultaneously improve multiple ecosystem services, which is crucial for sustainable agricultural development.

The trade-off between water regulation and soil nutrient cycling services in semi-arid subtropical regions is an important finding. In these regions, higher water infiltration in AFS leads to increased nutrient leaching, as the excess water carries nutrients below the root zone (Rodriguez et al., 2023). This trade-off can be minimized by optimizing AFS management practices, such as adjusting fertilization timing and rate to match crop nutrient uptake, and selecting tree species with deep root systems to capture leached nutrients. No trade-offs were observed in humid subtropical regions, which may be due to higher crop nutrient demand and more balanced water-nutrient dynamics.

5.4 Mechanisms Underlying the Effects of Agroforestry Systems

The SEM results confirm that AFS enhance ecosystem services mainly through increasing biodiversity and improving habitat complexity. Habitat complexity is a key driver of biodiversity in AFS, as it provides diverse microhabitats and resources for organisms (Jose, 2022). The increased biodiversity, in turn, enhances ecosystem services by improving the efficiency of ecosystem processes (e.g., pollination, pest control, nutrient cycling) (Batary et al., 2024). Additionally, habitat complexity directly affects ecosystem services by improving soil structure, enhancing water infiltration, and reducing runoff (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

The positive feedback loop between habitat complexity and biodiversity in AFS contributes to the long-term sustainability of biodiversity and ecosystem services. As AFS mature, the habitat complexity increases (e.g., tree canopy cover expands, litter layer accumulates), leading to further increases in biodiversity, which in turn enhances ecosystem services and promotes habitat development.

5.5 Regional Variability and Adaptive Management

The regional variability of AFS effects on biodiversity and ecosystem services highlights the need for adaptive management strategies. In humid subtropical regions, where biodiversity potential is high, forest garden is recommended to maximize biodiversity conservation and pollination/pest control services. In semi-arid subtropical regions, where water scarcity is a major constraint, silvopasture is recommended to improve water regulation service, while optimizing management practices to minimize trade-offs with soil nutrient cycling.

Within the same climate zone, variations in soil type and management practices also affect AFS performance. For example, in humid subtropical regions with clay loam soils (China), alley cropping is more effective in improving soil nutrient cycling, while in sandy loam soils (Japan), forest garden is more effective in enhancing bird biodiversity. This indicates that AFS design should also consider local soil conditions to maximize benefits.

5.6 Implications for Sustainable Agriculture

The findings of this study have important implications for the adoption of AFS in subtropical agricultural landscapes to promote biodiversity conservation and ecosystem service sustainability. First, farmers should select AFS types based on local environmental conditions and management goals. For example, if the main goal is to conserve biodiversity and improve pollination/pest control, forest garden is preferred; if the main goal is to improve soil nutrient cycling, alley cropping is suitable; if the main goal is to improve water regulation, silvopasture is recommended. Second, optimizing AFS management practices, such as maintaining appropriate tree density, pruning intensity, and understory vegetation cover, can enhance habitat complexity and maximize biodiversity and ecosystem services. Third, policymakers should support the adoption of AFS by providing financial incentives, technical training, and biodiversity monitoring programs.

Additionally, AFS can contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation by enhancing carbon sequestration (through tree biomass and soil organic carbon) and improving the resilience of agricultural systems to climate change (through increased biodiversity and water regulation) (Lal, 2023). This highlights the potential of AFS to address multiple global challenges, including biodiversity loss, climate change, and food insecurity.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the study focused on three AFS types, and the findings may not be generalizable to other AFS types (e.g., agrosilvopasture, riparian agroforestry). Future studies should include a wider range of AFS types. Second, the study did not evaluate the economic benefits of AFS for biodiversity and ecosystem services. Future studies should conduct cost-benefit analyses to evaluate the economic viability of AFS. Third, the study did not account for the effects of climate change (e.g., increased temperature, altered rainfall patterns) on the relationship between AFS, biodiversity, and ecosystem services. Future studies should investigate how climate change will affect AFS performance and develop adaptive management strategies. Fourth, the study focused on aboveground and soil microbial biodiversity, and the effects of AFS on belowground animal biodiversity (e.g., earthworms, nematodes) remain unclear. Future studies should include belowground animal biodiversity to provide a more comprehensive assessment.

6. Conclusions

This 12-year multi-region study demonstrates that agroforestry systems (AFS) significantly enhance biodiversity and improve multiple ecosystem services in subtropical agricultural landscapes. Compared to monoculture, AFS increase overall species richness by 32-58% and Shannon-Wiener index by 28-45%, and improve pollination service by 25-42%, pest control service by 22-38%, soil nutrient cycling service by 30-45%, and water regulation service by 18-32%.

Different AFS types exhibit distinct strengths: forest garden performs best in promoting biodiversity, pollination, and pest control; alley cropping in soil nutrient cycling; and silvopasture in water regulation. Synergies exist between pollination and pest control services, while trade-offs occur between water regulation and soil nutrient cycling in semi-arid subtropical regions. The effects of AFS on biodiversity and ecosystem services are mediated by increased habitat complexity and biodiversity, and vary across climate zones and soil types.

These findings confirm the multifunctional benefits of AFS and provide evidence-based recommendations for optimizing AFS design and management in subtropical agricultural landscapes. By adopting region-specific AFS types and management practices, we can conserve biodiversity, enhance ecosystem services, and promote sustainable agricultural development, contributing to the achievement of global Sustainable Development Goals.

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