

THAI NGUYEN TEA CULTURE IN VIETNAM: PRESERVING AND ENHANCING THE HERITAGE OF TRADITIONAL VALUES

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ABSTRACT

Thai Nguyen is a province located in the midland and northern mountainous region of Vietnam, renowned for its tea cultivation and processing industry. Tea-growing villages account for approximately 90% of the traditional craft villages in the province. Tea is an indispensable beverage in every household, deeply ingrained in daily life and present in every corner of society. This article focuses on three key issues: (1) General perspectives on culture, tea culture, cultural heritage, and the preservation and promotion of heritage values. (2) The current state of tea cultivation in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam. (3) Thai Nguyen's tea culture and the challenges of preserving and enhancing its cultural values in the context of integration and development. The primary research methods employed include field surveys, statistical analysis, and synthesis and evaluation techniques. Tea culture has been officially recognized as a national cultural heritage. Preserving its values and ensuring the active participation of various social stakeholders in its conservation and development for economic growth is of paramount importance.

Keyword: Vietnamese Tea Traditions, Thai Nguyen Tea Culture, Cultural Heritage, Preservation and Enhancing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tea is a crop that is highly influenced by ecological conditions throughout its growth process. Tea plants are widely distributed, ranging from 30° South to 45° North latitude. Thai Nguyen Province, with its midland and mountainous terrain, enjoys a climate characterized by four distinct seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. The region receives an average annual rainfall of 2,000 to 2,500 mm, and the total annual sunshine hours range from 1,300 to 1,750. These natural conditions are ideal for the growth and development of tea plants.

Currently, Thai Nguyen boasts several renowned specialty tea regions, including Tan Cuong (Thai Nguyen City), Phuc Thuan (Pho Yen City), Trai Cai, Minh Lap, Song Cau (Dong Hy District), Khe Coc, Tuc Tranh (Phu Luong District), and La Bang (Dai Tu District). These tea-growing villages have long been associated with the tea culture that embodies the unique identity of Thai Nguyen's ethnic communities.

Preserving and sustainably developing Thai Nguyen's tea villages plays a critical role in driving economic restructuring, enhancing rural employment, and improving the livelihoods of local residents. It also helps safeguard the landscapes and cultural spaces of the tea villages, accelerating industrialization and modernization while contributing to the development of new rural areas.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

Field Survey Method: The primary goal of field surveys is to verify, adjust, and supplement collected data; cross-check and catalog specific research subjects; and preliminarily assess the necessary elements for the preservation and enhancing of Thai Nguyen tea culture. During the research process, the author conducted surveys in large-scale tea villages where tea culture is deeply intertwined with the lives of the local people across generations.

Statistical Method: This indispensable method was used to analyze quantitative aspects closely linked to qualitative phenomena and processes related to preserving and enhancing tea culture and developing traditional tea villages. Additionally, statistical methods were employed to study the current state of development in traditional tea villages through key performance indicators.

Comprehensive Analysis and Literature Review: The author collected scientific reports, conference proceedings, statistical data from relevant agencies, books, journals, and published works related to preserving, enhancing cultural values, and developing the tea industry in Thai Nguyen Province. All data and materials were meticulously selected, analyzed, and processed to support the research findings.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Culture and Tea Culture

Culture is a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted concept. Therefore, depending on specific professional perspectives and different cognitive objectives, there are various interpretations and definitions of culture. However, these interpretations tend to revolve around certain consistent themes. Presently, there are two main approaches to defining culture. The first focuses on descriptive definitions that enumerate the elements of culture, while the second highlights definitions that emphasize its distinctive characteristics. Despite their differences, these approaches converge on one point: the close relationship between humans and nature. Culture is an adaptive product of human interaction with the natural world [12].

According to UNESCO, "Culture today can be considered the sum total of the distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional traits that characterize a society or a social group. Culture encompasses art and literature, lifestyles, basic human rights, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. It provides people with the ability to reflect on themselves. Through culture, individuals express themselves, become self-aware, and recognize themselves as an evolving entity, constantly reassessing their achievements and tirelessly seeking new meanings and creating outstanding works" [8].

****Tea culture**** is reflected in the methods of brewing and enjoying tea, as well as the ways people interact with tea and the aesthetics surrounding the act of tea drinking. Tea culture represents the essence of a nation.

Across the globe, many countries cultivate tea, each with unique traditions of tea consumption. Scientific research has shown that green tea is a treasure trove of bioactive compounds, including polyphenols, alkaloids, amino acids, vitamins, flavonoids, fluoride, tannins, and saponins. Drinking tea embodies various aspects of human cultural behavior. For Vietnamese people, tea is considered a cultural hallmark due to its widespread popularity. It reflects customs and the character of the Vietnamese people, fostering a culture of savoring fine tea while engaging in conversations and sharing personal thoughts.

Vietnamese tea culture exudes simplicity, sincerity, and equality across social classes. From high-ranking professionals to farmers, whether during festive celebrations or solemn events, all Vietnamese people drink tea and offer tea to guests as a gesture of hospitality and respect.

3.1.2 Preserving and Enhancing Cultural Heritage

Heritage encompasses relics, monuments, or landmarks of a nation, such as forests, mountain ranges, lakes, deserts, buildings, architectural ensembles, and ethnic cultures. These hold natural value, as well as tangible and intangible cultural significance, passed down from ancient times and preserved to this day. Such heritage is considered the wealth of each nation.

According to UNESCO's research, world heritage is classified into three categories: natural heritage, cultural heritage, and mixed heritage.

Cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements. It represents spiritual and material creations of historical, cultural, and scientific value, passed down through generations.

According to the World Heritage Convention, cultural heritage is defined as follows [1][7]:

- **Monuments:** Architectural works, sculptural and painting works, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings, and constructions. These may exist as individual buildings or linked structures that, due to their architectural design, uniformity, or location within a landscape, possess outstanding global value in terms of history, art, and science.
- **Sites:** These include works created by humans or combined human-natural creations, as well as areas containing archaeological sites of outstanding global value in terms of history, aesthetics, ethnology, or anthropology.

In Vietnam, tangible and intangible cultural heritage are considered integral parts of the national cultural treasure. They are closely interconnected, mutually reinforcing and honoring one another, yet remain relatively independent:

- **Tangible cultural heritage** is the physical, material form that embodies the vibrant memories of humanity and serves as tangible evidence of human cultural and civilizational systems.
- **Intangible cultural heritage** is non-material, passed down and expressed through oral traditions, apprenticeship, and other professional secrets.

Intangible cultural heritage includes Language, scripts, folk literature, folk performing arts, social customs and beliefs, traditional festivals, traditional handicrafts, and folk knowledge.

Tangible cultural heritage includes Historical-cultural monuments, scenic landscapes (relics), artifacts, antiques, and national treasures.

According to Vietnam's Cultural Heritage Law [7]:

- **Intangible cultural heritage** refers to spiritual products of historical, cultural, and scientific value, preserved in memory or writing, transmitted through oral traditions, professional secrets, performances, and other forms. It includes language, scripts, literary works, performing arts, lifestyle, customs, festivals, traditional craft secrets, traditional medicine, culinary culture, ethnic costumes, and other folk knowledge.
- **Tangible cultural heritage** refers to physical products of historical, cultural, and scientific value, including historical-cultural monuments, scenic landscapes, artifacts, antiques, and national treasures.
- **Historical-cultural monuments:** These are constructions, sites, and associated artifacts, antiques, or national treasures with historical, cultural, and scientific significance.
- **Scenic landscapes:** These include natural scenery or areas combining natural landscapes with architectural constructions of historical, aesthetic, or scientific value.
- **Artifacts:** These are items passed down with historical, cultural, and scientific value.
- **Antiques:** These are items of outstanding historical, cultural, and scientific value, over 100 years old.
- **National treasures:** These are exceptionally rare items of national historical, cultural, and scientific significance.
- **Definitions and Activities Related to Cultural Heritage:**
- **Replicas of artifacts, antiques, and national treasures:** These are items created to mimic the original in shape, size, material, color, decoration, and other details.
- **Collections:** These are systematically gathered, preserved, and organized groups of artifacts, antiques, national treasures, or intangible cultural heritage items for studying history, nature, and society.
- **Exploration and archaeological excavation:** These are scientific activities aimed at discovering, collecting, and studying artifacts, antiques, national treasures, and archaeological sites.

- **Preservation:** This involves protecting and maintaining the existence of historical-cultural monuments, scenic landscapes, artifacts, antiques, and national treasures while preventing deterioration without altering original elements.
- **Restoration:** This refers to repairing, reinforcing, or embellishing historical-cultural monuments and scenic landscapes.
- **Rehabilitation:** This involves reviving destroyed historical-cultural monuments and scenic landscapes based on scientific evidence of their original states.

Preservation aims to protect and maintain the existence of phenomena in their original forms, preventing loss, alteration, or transformation [6]. To preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage, two conditions must be met:

- The heritage must be regarded as a quintessence, an indisputably recognized genuine value.
- It must possess the ability to endure over time amidst inevitable changes in human material and spiritual life, particularly in the context of globalization [3][10].

Cultural heritage is approached progressively, from the familial level, village level, urban level, to the national level, built and protected collectively by ethnic communities. Preservation of cultural heritage aims to fulfill the educational function of culture, promote a humane lifestyle, and train high-quality human resources to advance national development.

Preservation must retain the heritage's value while exploiting and promoting it in a cycle of preservation → promotion → preservation. Cultural heritage preservation is not just about safeguarding assets for national identity superficially but preserving for sustainable development.

3.2 Preserving and Enhancing the Tea Culture of Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

3.2.1. Development of Tea Cultivation in Thai Nguyen Province

Thai Nguyen is a key tea-growing region and the province with the largest tea cultivation area and production in Vietnam. With favorable soil and climate conditions, coupled with the expertise of local farmers in cultivation and processing, Thai Nguyen tea has become increasingly popular in both domestic and international markets over the years.

The province's tea cultivation area, production volume, and yield have steadily increased annually. In 2015, Thai Nguyen had 21.1 thousand hectares of tea plantations, producing 202 thousand tons of fresh tea leaves. By 2023, tea production in the province had reached 264.4 thousand tons, accounting for 23.5% of Vietnam's total tea output. The tea cultivation area expanded to over 22.2 thousand hectares, with nearly 17.3 thousand hectares (more than 77%) planted with new, high-yield, and high-quality varieties. Intensive farming practices and adherence to VIETGAP and organic standards have also grown significantly.

In 2023, the value of processed tea products from Thai Nguyen reached 12.3 trillion VND. The province has developed over 15 tea farming models following the VietGAP standards, as well as one UTZ-certified model and one Biocer International-certified model, primarily managed by cooperatives and traditional tea craft villages [4].

Table 1. Tea cultivation area, production, and yield in key regions of Thai Nguyen, 2023

Tea Region	Area (thousand ha)	Production (thousand tons)	Average Yield (quintals/ha)
Thai Nguyen City	1.5	22.9	152.6
Dong Hy District	3.9	45.4	116.4
Dai Tu District	6.6	79.1	119.8
Phu Luong District	4.1	45.3	110.4
Dinh Hoa District	2.7	30.7	113.7

Source: [4]

Dai Tu District has the largest tea cultivation area and production in Thai Nguyen province. However, its average yield is lower than that of Thai Nguyen City. This discrepancy can be attributed to Thai Nguyen City's Tan Cuong

tea region, which is renowned as the most famous tea-growing area in the province and across Vietnam. Tan Cuong benefits from favorable soil and climate conditions, combined with advanced cultivation and processing techniques, resulting in exceptional quality tea, earning it the title "First-Class Tea." Currently, the Tan Cuong tea region spans over 1.3 thousand hectares, with an average yield exceeding 155 quintals per hectare. The specialty tea products from Tan Cuong include 17 OCOP-certified items, ranging from 3-star to 5-star quality.

Thai Nguyen province is home to 38 enterprises, 163 cooperatives, 251 traditional tea craft villages, and over 91,000 households engaged in green tea processing, distributed across various districts and cities. Despite facing intense external competition, the people of Thai Nguyen have preserved, protected, and developed traditional tea villages as a way of safeguarding their cultural heritage. Tea cultivation not only drives economic development and transforms rural landscapes but also remains deeply rooted in the cultural identity of Thai Nguyen's people.

Table 2. Tea Craft Villages in Thai Nguyen: Area, Number of Households, and Workforce

No.	Tea Craft Village	Area (ha)	Total Households in the Village	Total Workforce	Year Recognized
1	Traditional Tea Craft Village - Hong Thai 1 Hamlet	72	123	420	2014
2	Traditional Tea Craft Village - Hong Thai 2 Hamlet	87	141	308	2011
3	Traditional Tea Craft Village - Cay Thi Hamlet	25	80	198	2012
4	Traditional Tea Craft Village - Khuon 2 Hamlet	51	68	245	2011
5	Traditional Tea Craft Village - Song Cau	54	75	247	2010
6	Traditional Tea Craft Village - Ca Phe	68	100	236	2010
7	Traditional Tea Craft Village - Trai Cai	72	100	240	2010

Source: [5]

The traditional tea craft villages in the Tan Cuong and Trai Cai tea regions boast relatively large cultivation areas. Most households in these villages actively participate in tea production, resulting in a substantial workforce. On average, each village has over 200 workers engaged in traditional tea-related activities. However, there are noticeable disparities among the villages in terms of area, household participation, and workforce size.

Currently, Thai Nguyen holds one geographically indicated tea brand, "Tan Cuong," and six collective trademarks, including "Thai Nguyen Tea," "La Bang Tea," "Vo Tranh Tea," "Tuc Tranh Tea," "Trai Cai Tea," and "Pho Yen Tea." These brands represent renowned tea regions with numerous traditional craft villages that have firmly established the quality and reputation of both their regional tea products and the traditional tea craft villages themselves [9].

In addition, Thai Nguyen actively promotes its tea products to international markets, ensures quality control for its tea plants, and builds global trust in the province's tea products. Efforts are also being made to attract domestic and international investment in tea cultivation and processing to produce high-quality, diverse tea products that meet global demand and consumer preferences.

The consumer market plays a pivotal role as the driving force behind production. Thai Nguyen's tea market is extensive, encompassing local, regional, and national markets. Furthermore, Thai Nguyen tea is exported to various countries worldwide. Major export destinations include Pakistan, Russia, the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, with export volumes exceeding 5.8 thousand tons.

In 2020, the collective trademark "Thai Nguyen Tea" was successfully registered for protection in the United States, China, and Russia. Efforts are ongoing to secure trademark registration in Japan and South Korea. This achievement

underscores the overall quality of Thai Nguyen tea and its traditional craft village products, creating a strong foundation and promising opportunity to expand into global markets.

3.2.2. Preserving and Enhancing Thai Nguyen Tea Culture in the Context of Integration and Development

In 2013, the Prime Minister of Vietnam approved the project "Preserving and Enhancing the Tangible and Intangible Cultural Values of Thai Nguyen Tea," aiming to honor the unique cultural values of Thai Nguyen tea and encourage the creation of new cultural values for both domestic and international communities. As part of this initiative, traditional tea-growing regions renowned for their heritage and production methods, such as Tan Cuong (Thai Nguyen City), Trai Cai (Dong Hy District), La Bang (Dai Tu District), Vo Tranh, Tuc Tranh (Phu Luong District), and Diem Mac (Dinh Hoa District), have been studied, documented, and restored to preserve their unique intangible cultural elements associated with tea and tea products [1].

From 2011 to 2024, Thai Nguyen successfully organized three tea festivals on national and international scales. These festivals not only served as a catalyst for socio-economic development but also played a vital role in preserving and enhancing the tangible and intangible cultural values of Thai Nguyen tea. They were instrumental in elevating the quality and value of tea products while safeguarding the cultural heritage of traditional tea craft villages amidst economic changes during the integration process. Notable examples include Tam Tra Thai Cooperative, Tien Yen Tea and Community Tourism Cooperative, Hao Dat Tea Cooperative, and the Tan Cuong Tea Cultural Space.

When discussing Thai Nguyen tea, the most renowned brand is Tan Cuong tea. The cultivation and processing of Tan Cuong tea began in the early 1920s. Currently, the Tan Cuong tea region, which includes Tan Cuong, Phuc Trieu, and Phuc Xuan communes in Thai Nguyen City, is famous for its exceptional quality, thanks to favorable soil and climate conditions as well as superior cultivation and processing skills. Known as the "First-Class Tea Region," Tan Cuong tea products have been recognized among the Top 100 Vietnamese Specialty Gifts by the Vietnam Record Association. Acknowledging the economic and cultural significance of this region, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Vietnam has listed the knowledge of Tan Cuong tea cultivation and processing as part of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage. This recognition highlights the distinctive values of Thai Nguyen's tea culture and the growth of its specialty tea regions.

In recent years, many localities in Thai Nguyen province have invested in and developed community, agricultural, and eco-tourism centered around tea culture. These efforts have contributed to preserving and enhancing both the tangible and intangible cultural values of Thai Nguyen, boosting tourism and improving the operational efficiency of the tea industry. In Tan Cuong commune, for example, the Tan Cuong Tea Cultural Space spans 2.6 hectares and includes two provincial-level historical and cultural sites. This area holds great potential for developing community-based tourism linked to tea culture. The commune is home to 15 cooperatives and 20 effective tea production and processing facilities. The annual "Spring Tea Flavor - Tan Cuong Specialty Tea Region" festival, held every January, attracts many visitors from both within and outside the province. This festival provides a strong foundation and promising opportunities for the growth of agricultural and rural community-based tourism tied to the local tea culture.

In the current trend of integration and development, regional culture and cultural heritage serve as essential foundations for tourism development. Today, tourists—especially international visitors—favor sustainable tourism that immerses them in nature and allows them to experience simple, authentic lifestyles without harming the natural environment [2]. Among these preferences, green tourism is a leading choice. Responding to this trend, Thai Nguyen has invested in developing tea village tourism. Integrating tea production and processing with tea village tourism offers "dual benefits" for the economic and cultural development of each tea region. Beyond economic objectives, tea village tourism aligns with and satisfies the growing demand for green and eco-tourism, contributing to the diversification of local tourism products.

The awareness of local communities regarding community-based and agricultural tourism linked to tea culture and indigenous values has also shown positive progress. In addition to improving infrastructure, these communities actively organize visits to and learn from well-established community-based tourism sites in other provinces to enhance service quality.

Preserving and enhancing cultural values through these methods has not only gathered artisans and cultural leaders at the grassroots level but also fostered the active participation of ethnic communities. These communities are the true cultural stewards, playing a central role in maintaining and preserving the unique cultural beauty of their localities. In traditional tea craft villages, this approach aligns with sustainable development principles, emphasizing the preservation of resources and the environment. This ensures that tourism development is closely linked with the effective preservation and enhancing of cultural and natural values.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thai Nguyen tea culture, in particular, and cultural heritage, in general, provide us with a sense of identity, a deeper understanding of the past, and connections to the present and future. In this context, culture acts as a vital force, a key element in affirming national prestige, symbolizing our lineage, and fostering pride across generations. From an economic perspective, it is an invaluable gift bestowed by nature and our ancestors for future generations. Therefore, preserving and enhancing the value of cultural heritage should be a top priority for both localities and the nation as a whole. For Thai Nguyen, tea has shaped its unique identity, contributed to its cultural distinctiveness, and improved the quality of life for its residents.

To preserve and enhance the cultural value of tea and develop tea products, Thai Nguyen province should consider the following:

- (1) **Diversifying Promotional Activities:** Continue to expand methods of promoting and showcasing the potential of Thai Nguyen's tea-growing regions to both domestic and international audiences. This can be achieved through campaigns on mass media platforms, participation in fairs, exhibitions, and showcases, as well as highlighting Thai Nguyen's tea tourism and cultural heritage. Organize training programs in community tourism for tea farmers and tea craft villages to build a capable local tourism workforce and mobilize the involvement of local communities in tourism activities.
- (2) **Focusing on Preserving and Developing Traditional Tea Regions:** Emphasize the conservation and development of traditional tea-growing areas while maintaining traditional production methods. Develop intra-provincial and inter-provincial tourism routes connected to tea festivals, including tours and destinations linked to tea craft villages.
- (3) **Establishing Organic and Sustainable Tea Production Zones:** Build concentrated tea production zones aligned with organic and safety standards. Create sustainable production chains and enhance the application of advanced technology in tea processing.
- (4) **Encouraging Participation in Garden Tourism Networks:** Encourage households to join "Garden Tourism" networks by renovating their homes to welcome tourists. Furthermore, local authorities should establish partnerships and ensure profit-sharing agreements between tour operators and residents in tea craft villages. This is critical to sustaining and developing tourism in these villages. When residents perceive tangible benefits, they are more likely to maintain production, preserve their craft, and take an active interest in learning tourism practices, enabling them to excel in the tourism industry.

By implementing these measures, Thai Nguyen can both preserve its cultural heritage and create opportunities for sustainable development in the tea industry, contributing significantly to its local economy and cultural identity.

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