

A Brief Analysis of the Transmission Path, Local Transformation and Contemporary Challenges of Southeast Asian Tea Culture

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Abstract: *Based on communication theory, this paper systematically sorts out the dissemination process, localization evolution and challenges faced by modern development of Chinese tea culture in Southeast Asian countries. Relying on the important channel of "Maritime Tea Road", Chinese tea culture is deeply integrated into Southeast Asian society, intertwined and interactively influenced by local religious beliefs, social structure and colonial history, and thus derived unique tea culture forms such as Myanmar Zen tea and Singapore's diversified tea meals. Under the dual tension of globalization and localization, contemporary Southeast Asian tea culture shows a trend of "re-traditionalization", and its communication practice provides an important and valuable paradigm for cross-cultural research. This paper proposes the concept of constructing a "symbiotic communication ecology" to provide solid theoretical support for the sustainable development of Southeast Asian tea culture.*

Keywords: Tea culture; Southeast Asia; Cross-cultural communication; Localization; Cultural identity; Communication ecology.

1. THE COMMUNICATION SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOUTHWARD EXPANSION OF THE TEA ROAD

Southeast Asia, as a key hub of the "Maritime Silk Road", has been the frontier for the spread of Chinese civilization since ancient times. In this land, different civilizations have intersected and collided, forming a unique cultural landscape. As one of China's most representative cultural symbols, the process of tea spreading southward is not just a history of material exchange, but also a vivid epic of cross-cultural communication.

Dating back to the Tang Dynasty, the "Manshu" recorded the ancient tea-horse road between Yunnan and Myanmar. The ancient roads winding through the mountains carried the exchange of tea and the cultures of various ethnic groups. In the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He's fleet sailed across the ocean and brought tea seeds to Java, sowing the seeds for local tea planting. Later, overseas Chinese took "tea baskets" to Southeast Asia. The tea baskets were loaded with not only tea, but also a strong sense of homesickness and the taste of their homeland. In modern times, in the tea gardens of the colonists, tea is closely linked to the flow of capital. It can be said that the spread of tea culture in Southeast Asia is intertwined with multiple narratives such as religious influence, commercial trade exchanges, political power games, and the inheritance of immigrant memories.

However, most of the academic research on Southeast Asian tea culture remains at the level of folklore records, lacking in-depth theoretical explanations of its dissemination mechanism. In fact, the dissemination of tea culture in Southeast Asia is a dynamic process of "encoding-decoding-recoding", and it is also a typical example of the mutual integration and mutual promotion of communication studies and regional cultural studies. In-depth exploration of this process is of great significance for understanding the laws of cross-cultural communication and the evolution of culture.

2. THREE PATHS OF TEA CULTURE DISSEMINATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

2.1 Religious Spread

In Southeast Asia, Theravada Buddhist temples play an important role as "sacred nodes" for the spread of tea culture. Taking Myanmar as an example, the tradition of "Zen and tea are one" has completely ritualized tea drinking. Monks not only use tea to offer to Buddha every day, but also use tea to entertain guests. The teahouse (Lahpet yei) in the temple has become the spiritual center of the community. Here, every time you drink tea, it contains respect for Buddha and the perception of life. The aroma of tea and the Zen of Buddhism blend with each

other, deeply affecting the spiritual world of the local people. The Lanna Dynasty in northern Thailand, influenced by the Dai culture of Yunnan, developed a unique "ancient tree tea sacrifice" ceremony. In their eyes, tea is endowed with the special attribute of a spiritual medium. By offering sacrifices to ancient tree tea, people hope to communicate with the gods and pray for good weather, peace and prosperity. According to data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 2023, Myanmar's per capita annual tea consumption reached 2.5 kilograms, of which temples accounted for 31%. This data strongly confirms the powerful role that religious paths play in the dissemination of tea culture. The sacredness of religion provides a solid spiritual foundation and a broad mass base for the dissemination of tea culture.

2.2 Immigrant Network

In the 19th century, a large number of immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong went to Southeast Asia. They not only brought the labor and technology from their hometown, but also transplanted the Gongfu tea customs there intact. In Singapore, the "Chayuan" tea house still retains the tea-making technique of "Guan Gong patrolling the city" in the Chaoshan area. When the tea artist holds the teapot and evenly pours the tea into each teacup, the skillful movements seem to be performing a cultural heritage that spans time and space, allowing people to feel the strong Chaoshan style. In the "Overseas Chinese Museum" in Penang, Malaysia, there is a set of exquisite Nyonya silver-inlaid tea sets on display. This set of tea sets is not only exquisitely crafted, but also highlights the important function of tea sets as a carrier of cultural memory. Every pattern and every decoration carries the immigrants' longing for their hometown and their expectations for a new life.

What is more noteworthy is that Chinese tea companies, such as Wan Yu Xing founded by Zhang Bishi, have built a huge transnational trade network. They actively promoted the cultivation of Pu'er tea in the mountainous areas of Vietnam and Laos, forming a trinity of "immigration-commerce-culture" communication chain. Immigrants promoted tea to a wider market through commercial trade, and also spread tea-related cultural customs and production techniques, allowing tea culture to take root in new lands.

2.3 Colonial Grafting

During the colonial period, the invasion of European powers not only changed the political and economic landscape of Southeast Asia, but also had a profound impact on the local tea industry. In 1827, the Netherlands introduced Assam tea species to Java; in 1929, Britain opened tea plantations in Malaya. These colonial agricultural reforms completely reshaped the tea industry in Southeast Asia. In the Bandung tea plantation in Indonesia, the Dutch-style "Teh Tarik" is still preserved. Interestingly, during the tea party, workers will repeatedly pull up and pour the boiling hot black tea to form a unique foam. This action seems simple, but it is actually a working-class deconstruction of European afternoon tea, fully demonstrating what Homi Bhabha described as "resistance in colonial imitation." While accepting the tea customs brought by colonization, the workers also incorporated their own understanding and creation, expressing their response to colonial culture in a unique way.

3. LOCALIZATION HAS BECOME A LOCALIZATION PARADIGM FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN TEA CULTURE

3.1 Fusion of Objects

Faced with the unique tropical climate of Southeast Asia, local people have made ingenious transformations in tea utensils and achieved integration with local culture. In Hue, Vietnam, people use diamond-patterned bamboo tea baskets to replace traditional porcelain jars to store tea. Bamboo tea baskets not only have good air permeability, which can effectively cope with the tropical humid climate and prevent tea from getting damp and deteriorating, but also its exquisite diamond-patterned weaving process also shows the local handicraft characteristics. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, red pottery jars are used to ferment "rice-scented tea" (Miang). The double-ear shape of this red pottery jar is unique, which not only combines the practical characteristics of Dai water jars, but also draws on the simple style of Central Plains tea jars. This transformation of utensils vividly confirms Marshall McLuhan's theory of "the medium is the message" - the material carrier itself has become a distinctive representation of cultural adaptation, and each tea utensil tells the collision and integration of local culture and foreign tea culture.

3.2 Reconstruction of Rituals

In Southeast Asia, the ritual of tea culture has also undergone reconstruction, showing the characteristics of being closely integrated with local life scenes. Singapore's "Ya Kun Coffee Shop" is a typical example. It cleverly combines Chinese tea, English toast and Malay kaya jam, becoming the local national breakfast. Here, the scene of drinking tea has completely shifted from the traditional literati gathering to the "coffee shop" (Kopitiam) in the market. This "third space" (Homi Baba) practice based on the postcolonial context has made tea culture an important catalyst for ethnic integration. People of different races and cultural backgrounds gather here to enjoy this unique breakfast together, enhance communication and understanding in the process of tea tasting, and make tea culture transcend the original cultural boundaries and become a bond connecting different ethnic groups.

3.3 Symbol Translation

Burmese fermented tea (Lahpet) mixed with beans and sesame is not only a delicious local specialty food, but also endowed with profound national narrative connotations. In Myanmar, this seemingly ordinary tea pickle has been upgraded to a "national unity dish". During the military government period, the "a cup of tea to promote national unity" campaign gave the tea stall (Lahpet thoke) the function of political discipline. This case deeply reveals how food culture is requisitioned by power discourse as an ideological carrier. In a specific historical context, the cultural symbol of tea pickles has become a symbol of cohesion of national consciousness and promotion of national unity.

4. THE DISSEMINATION DILEMMA UNDER THE WAVE OF GLOBALIZATION HAS BROUGHT NEW CHALLENGES TO THE MIGRATION OF TEA CULTURE TO THE SOUTH

4.1 Intergenerational Divide

With the deepening of globalization and the rapid development of digital technology, the lifestyle and values of the younger generation have undergone tremendous changes, which has also brought challenges of intergenerational discontinuity to the inheritance of traditional tea culture in Southeast Asia. In Hanoi, Vietnam, young people prefer to choose Starbucks' cold brew tea, and have little interest in the traditional "tea ceremony" (Trà đạo). According to data from the Vietnam Tea Association in 2022, the average age of traditional "tea ceremony" practitioners has reached 62 years old. In Manila, the Philippines, the enrollment of tea art schools has dropped by 40% in five years. These phenomena all reflect the alienation of digital natives from the slow-paced traditional tea culture. They are more accustomed to the fast-paced and convenient modern lifestyle. The traditional tea culture is facing the crisis of inheritance discontinuity among the younger generation.

4.2 Capital Incorporation

In the context of globalization, the power of capital has also had a negative impact on the spread of Southeast Asian tea culture, and the phenomenon of capital co-optation has emerged. In order to pursue commercial interests, multinational tea companies have commercialized the tea-offering ceremony of the Akha people in Chiang Rai, Thailand, and launched the "Tea Garden Tourism" project. The tea-offering ceremony, which originally had sacred significance, has gradually given way to the performance of consumerism under commercial operations and has become a tool to attract tourists. In Java, Indonesia, organic tea is labeled as "Zen" and exported at a high price. However, local tea farmers, driven by economic interests, have turned to planting and producing instant tea powder. This phenomenon is a typical manifestation of what Appadurai called "fractures and differences in the global cultural economy." The profit-seeking nature of capital has impacted the true value of tea culture.

4.3 Ecological Paradox

In the process of spreading, Southeast Asian tea culture is also facing a severe ecological paradox. In order to expand the area of tea plantations and obtain more economic benefits, some regions do not hesitate to destroy the ecological environment. In order to open up new tea plantations, 27% of the original forests in northern Laos were cut down (WWF, 2023), which not only led to the reduction of local biodiversity, but also destroyed the ecological balance. In Myanmar, the excessive use of fertilizers in tea plantations has caused serious pollution of the Irrawaddy River, affecting the living water and ecological environment of surrounding residents. When the Western demand for "organic tea" conflicts with the survival rights of indigenous peoples, the spread of tea culture faces severe ethical torture. How to protect the ecological environment while developing the tea industry has

become an urgent problem to be solved.

5. BUILDING A SYMBIOTIC TEA CULTURE COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEM HAS BECOME A WAY OUT

5.1 Media Innovation

The advent of the digital age has brought new opportunities for the dissemination of tea culture, and media innovation has become an important way to build a symbiotic communication ecology. Malaysia's "Tealive" tea brand actively embraces new technologies and has developed an AR tea history APP. Users only need to scan the cup to present a three-dimensional animation of the Malacca Tea Port, and vividly understand the development of local tea history. This innovative way makes boring historical knowledge vivid and interesting, greatly attracting the attention of young people.

Chiang Mai University in Thailand has made full use of the short video platform and opened a TikTok "One-minute Tea Art Class". Through short and concise videos, traditional tea art skills are presented in an intuitive and vivid way, allowing more people to easily learn and understand traditional tea art. Such practices fully confirm Henry Jenkins' "participatory culture" theory. New media has given the public the ability to become the main body of cultural communication, making the dissemination of tea culture more extensive and in-depth.

5.2 Educational Empowerment

Education plays a fundamental role in the inheritance and dissemination of tea culture. The practice of community tea colleges has laid a solid foundation for building a symbiotic communication ecology. The "High Mountain Tea Community College" was established in Baguio City, Philippines. The college invited elders of the Igorot tribe to serve as teachers to teach students the ecological knowledge of terraced tea gardens. Students not only need to learn theoretical knowledge, but also personally participate in practical activities such as soil remediation. This model that combines cultural inheritance with ecological education has formed a localized closed loop of knowledge production. Through education, not only can the younger generation understand and master traditional tea culture and ecological knowledge, but also cultivate their sense of identity and responsibility for local culture, providing talent guarantee for the sustainable dissemination of tea culture.

5.3 Policy Coordination

Transnational cooperation and policy support are important guarantees for building a symbiotic tea culture communication ecology. The ASEAN Tea Industry Alliance actively promotes the joint application for the "Maritime Tea Road" to protect and inherit the tea cultural heritage along the "Maritime Tea Road" and enhance its international influence. China and Malaysia jointly restored the site of the "Yu Rong Tea House" in Penang, and Vietnam included the teahouses on Hanoi's 36 Lines Street in the scope of intangible cultural heritage protection. These transnational actions and policy initiatives have built an institutional guarantee framework for the dissemination of tea culture. Through the power of governments and organizations, resources are integrated and cooperation is strengthened, providing strong support for the inheritance and development of Southeast Asian tea culture.

6. TEA AS A MEDIUM FOR DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS

The history of the spread of tea culture in Southeast Asia has profoundly revealed a truth: the flow of culture is by no means a one-way transplant, but a process of continuous negotiation of meaning between different cultural subjects. From the solemn Buddhist temple Zen tea to the bustling market tea stalls, from the plantations in the colonial period to today's ecological tea gardens, tea has always been like what McLuhan called a "liquid medium", connecting the past and future of Southeast Asia.

In the aroma of tea, we can feel the collision and integration between different historical periods and cultures. It has witnessed the spread of religion, the struggle of immigrants, the impact of colonization, and has also experienced the transformation of localization and the challenge of globalization. In today's world, with mutual learning among civilizations becoming a global proposition, building a "symbiotic communication ecology" that respects cultural diversity, focuses on ecological sustainability, and ensures intergenerational fairness is not only related to the

survival of a cup of tea, but more importantly, it provides wisdom from the East for building a community with a shared future for mankind.

Tea, a small leaf, carries a heavy history and rich cultural connotations. It builds a bridge of communication between different civilizations and promotes mutual understanding and friendly exchanges among people of all countries in the world.

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