

DEVELOPING TEA CULTURE ASSOCIATED WITH EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM IN THAI NGUYEN, VIETNAM

Nguyen Thi Huyen¹, Le Thi Minh Hong²

Thai Nguyen College, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Thai Nguyen is renowned as a famous tea-producing region in Vietnam, characterized by a long-standing history and distinctive product quality. In the context of sustainable tourism development and the growing demand for cultural experiences, integrating tea culture with experiential tourism is emerging as a potential direction to enhance economic value and promote the local image. This article focuses on analyzing the potential, current status, and factors influencing the development of tea culture associated with experiential tourism in Thai Nguyen. Based on this foundation, it proposes several solutions to effectively exploit tea cultural resources and develop specialized tourism products, thereby contributing to boosting the local economy and preserving traditional cultural values.

Keyword: tea culture, experiential tourism, Thai Nguyen tea.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the trend of experiential tourism associated with local cultural identity has received increasing attention and experienced robust development. Tourists are no longer merely seeking simple sightseeing destinations; instead, they desire to actively participate in, feel, and explore the distinctive cultural values of each region. In this context, leveraging indigenous cultural resources for tourism development has become a crucial orientation for numerous localities in Vietnam. Thai Nguyen – a midland and mountainous region in Northern Vietnam – has long been renowned for its high-quality tea products, particularly in tea-growing areas such as Tan Cuong, La Bang, or Trai Cai. Beyond being a primary agricultural product, Thai Nguyen tea is deeply intertwined with the cultural life, customs, and identity of the local people, thereby fostering a unique tea culture. This constitutes a valuable cultural resource that can be exploited to develop various forms of experiential tourism. Consequently, the integration of tourism and tea culture has been shaping a specific line of tourism products that carry the distinctive identity of Thai Nguyen (Nguyen Thi Huyen, 2026).

However, in reality, the development of tea culture associated with tourism in Thai Nguyen has not yet been commensurate with its inherent potential. Tourism products still lack diversity, experiences lack depth, and promotional as well as organizational activities remain limited.

Therefore, researching the development of tea culture associated with experiential tourism in Thai Nguyen holds both theoretical and practical significance. It contributes to enhancing the value of the tea industry, stimulating local economic development, and preserving traditional cultural values within the context of integration and development.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS FOR DEVELOPING TEA CULTURE ASSOCIATED WITH EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM

2.1. The concept and characteristics of tea culture

Tea culture is understood as the totality of material and spiritual values related to the process of growing, processing, enjoying, and communicating through tea. This is not merely the production and consumption of a beverage, but it also reflects the lifestyle, customs, aesthetics, and life philosophy of the community. In Vietnam, tea culture is deeply imbued with community spirit, simplicity, and sophistication, expressed through the ways of making, inviting, and enjoying tea within social relationships.

Tea culture possesses several basic characteristics: (i) traditionality and inheritance across multiple generations; (ii) symbolic representation of elegance, tranquility, and harmony; (iii) community spirit, connecting people in social communication; and (iv) distinct

locality, manifested through tea varieties, processing methods, and tea-enjoying styles of each region.

2.2. The concept of experiential tourism and its role in modern tourism development

Experiential tourism is a type of tourism in which tourists directly participate in practical activities at the destination, thereby forming profound and personalized perceptions of the local culture, people, and environment. Unlike traditional tourism, which leans towards sightseeing, experiential tourism emphasizes interaction, learning, and feeling (Nguyen Chau Anh, 2024).

In the current context, experiential tourism plays a crucial role in enhancing the attractiveness of destinations, prolonging the length of stay, and increasing tourist expenditure. Simultaneously, this type of tourism contributes to preserving and promoting indigenous cultural values by "revitalizing" traditional activities into tourism products.

2.3. The relationship between tea culture and experiential tourism

Tea culture and experiential tourism have a close, mutually supportive, and complementary relationship in the development process. Tea culture is not only a traditional cultural element but also a distinctive tourism resource, providing the content foundation for designing and developing experiential tourism products. Conversely, experiential tourism acts as an effective "conduit" to spread, promote, and increase the value of tea culture in the modern context.

First of all, tea culture is the core resource for formulating tourism products. Constituent elements such as the process of growing and caring for tea, processing techniques, the art of tea making, tea-enjoying spaces, and related communication rituals can all be transformed into experiential activities for tourists. This is precisely the difference compared to mass tourism types, as tourists not only observe but also directly participate, interact, and profoundly feel the indigenous cultural values.

Conversely, experiential tourism contributes to "revitalizing" tea culture, preventing traditional values from fading by recreating and developing them in contemporary life. Through tourism

activities, tea culture is widely introduced to domestic and international tourists, thereby raising community awareness of the value of tea, while concurrently creating motivation for local people to preserve and promote the traditional craft. It can be said that experiential tourism is the bridge connecting tea culture with the market and the public.

Combining these two elements allows for the formation of a specific and diverse tourism product system. Tourists can participate in experiencing tea plucking on the hills, learning about the manual tea roasting process, practicing traditional tea making, enjoying tea with artisans, or attending tea festivals deeply imbued with local identity. These experiences provide not only entertainment value but also educational significance, helping tourists gain a deeper understanding of the culture, people, and history of the tea region.

Not stopping at cultural values, the combination of tea culture and experiential tourism also generates positive socio-economic effects. Tourism activities contribute to expanding output markets for tea products, enhancing value-added through experiential services, and simultaneously creating more jobs and income for local people. Besides, building the brand of "tea associated with tourism" also helps elevate the position of tea products in the market, especially in the context of increasingly fierce competition.

However, for this relationship to promote sustainable effectiveness, there needs to be appropriate orientation and organization to ensure harmony between tourism exploitation and cultural preservation. If developed in the right direction, tea culture and experiential tourism will not just be two separate fields but will become a valuable ecosystem, contributing to boosting local economic development while preserving traditional cultural identity.

2.4. The content of developing tea culture associated with experiential tourism

Developing tea culture associated with experiential tourism is an integrated process that requires a close combination of harnessing traditional cultural values and organizing modern tourism activities. The development content does not stop at creating tourism products but also encompasses various aspects related to

conservation, organization, operation, and promotion. Specifically, as follows:

Firstly, developing distinctive tourism products based on tea culture

This is the core content, determining the attractiveness and competitiveness of tea tourism. Products must be designed to offer profound experiences, creating a differentiation from other types of tourism. Not merely stopping at visiting tea hills, products should integrate multiple activities such as experiencing tea plucking, manual tea processing, learning about tea history and culture, and learning how to make and enjoy tea according to traditional rituals. Simultaneously, attention must be paid to the creative element in product development, combining it with other types of tourism such as ecotourism, community-based tourism, and culinary tourism to form a diverse chain of experiences, meeting the increasingly high and personalized demands of tourists.

Secondly, preserving and promoting traditional cultural values related to tea

Tourism development cannot be separated from the task of cultural preservation. Values such as folk knowledge on planting and caring for tea, manual processing techniques, the art of tea making, tea-enjoying rituals, and tea cultural spaces need to be preserved and passed down to future generations. Preservation is not only significant for heritage conservation but also serves as the foundation for creating authenticity and depth for tourism products. Besides, there needs to be a supportive mechanism for artisans, craft villages, and local communities in maintaining and promoting these cultural values in the context of modernization.

Thirdly, developing tourism infrastructure and services to facilitate experiences

A synchronized infrastructure system is a necessary condition to improve the quality of experiential tourism. It is necessary to invest in upgrading the transportation system to tea regions, constructing specialized experiential zones, aesthetic and culturally distinct tea-enjoying spaces, as well as developing accommodation models such as homestays associated with local culture. In addition, supplementary services such as culinary, tour guides, and tea product display and introduction

areas should also be emphasized to create a complete value chain, enhancing tourist satisfaction.

Fourthly, enhancing the capacity of local communities to participate in tourism activities

The local community is a crucial subject in the development of tea tourism. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen training and foster skills for the locals, including communication skills, customer service, experience guiding, and especially storytelling capabilities regarding tea culture. Capacity building not only helps improve service quality but also creates conditions for residents to participate more deeply in the tourism value chain, thereby increasing their income and improving their livelihoods. Simultaneously, the proactiveness and creativity of the community in developing tourism products suitable to local characteristics should be encouraged.

Fifthly, strengthening promotional activities, brand building, and tourism market connections

To attract tourists, promoting and building a tea tourism brand is absolutely necessary. It is vital to build a destination image associated with a clear and consistent message about the distinctive tea culture. Applying digital technology and communicating on social media platforms, tourism websites, and through experiential videos will contribute to expanding market reach. Additionally, there needs to be enhanced collaboration with travel agencies to build specialized tea tours and routes, as well as the organization of tea events and festivals to promote the image and create highlights to attract domestic and international tourists.

Thus, developing tea culture associated with experiential tourism is a highly integrated direction, requiring synchronized coordination among multiple elements ranging from products, infrastructure, and human resources to the market. The harmonious combination between preserving cultural values and effectively harnessing them for economic goals will contribute to creating sustainable development, elevating the position of the tea industry as well as the destination's image in the current context of integration.

3. CURRENT STATUS OF DEVELOPING TEA CULTURE ASSOCIATED WITH EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM IN THAI NGUYEN

3.1. Potential for developing tea culture associated with experiential tourism

Thai Nguyen belongs to the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region, with an area of 837,453 hectares based on the consolidation of the two provinces of Thai Nguyen and Bac Kan (Thai Nguyen Provincial People's Committee, 2026). With favorable natural conditions, a mild climate, and soil suitable for the growth of tea plants, Thai Nguyen has long been known as the "tea capital" of Vietnam. The large tea cultivation area coupled with outstanding product quality has created the Thai Nguyen tea brand with a strong reputation in domestic and international markets.

Famous tea regions such as Tan Cuong, La Bang, and Trai Cai not only possess distinctive natural landscapes with lush green tea hills but also preserve long-standing traditional values in tea production and processing. Cultivation experience, secrets of manual tea roasting, and the art of enjoying tea have been accumulated and passed down through many generations, creating a rich and characteristic foundation for tea culture. This is an essential cultural resource for developing differentiated experiential tourism products.

Besides, tea culture in Thai Nguyen is not only manifested in tea products but also reflected in the lifestyle, behavior, and communication of the local people. The art of enjoying tea, with its sophistication, unhurriedness, and rich philosophical nature, is a distinctive cultural trait that can attract tourists, especially those who love exploring cultural depths. Activities such as tea plucking, tea roasting, tea making, enjoying tea, or participating in daily life with local people can all be "touristified" and transformed into authentic and engaging experiences.

Furthermore, Thai Nguyen has a geographical advantage as it is located near the capital city of Hanoi – a major economic, political, and tourism center of the country. This facilitates the connection of tour routes, attracting a large number of domestic and international tourists. The transportation system is increasingly being invested in and upgraded, especially inter-regional connecting routes, contributing to shortening travel time and improving destination

accessibility. This is a crucial factor helping Thai Nguyen to have the conditions to effectively develop experiential tourism associated with tea culture.

Not only that, in the context of the growing trends of experiential tourism, agricultural tourism, and green tourism, Thai Nguyen has many opportunities to exploit its existing advantages. Today's tourists' demands do not stop at sightseeing but also lean towards personalized experiences associated with nature and indigenous culture. This further highlights the potential for developing tea tourism in Thai Nguyen in the current period.

3.2. Current status of developing experiential tourism products associated with tea culture

In recent years, Thai Nguyen has begun to pay attention to and exploit the value of tea culture for tourism development. Several community-based tourism and ecotourism models associated with tea regions have been formed, especially in the Tan Cuong area and some tea cooperatives. Experiential activities such as visiting tea hills, plucking tea, learning about the processing process, and enjoying tea on-site have been introduced to serve tourists, initially creating a certain appeal.

Many cooperatives and tea production facilities have made efforts in combining production with tourism activities. Tea fields are planned and cared for with a landscape-oriented approach, creating "check-in" highlights for tourists. Simultaneously, processing areas, product display areas, and tea-enjoying spaces have also been invested in and constructed to enhance the experience. Typically, Tuyet Huong Cooperative in Dong Hy with about 30 hectares of raw tea area has focused on developing tea according to VietGAP standards, while concurrently investing in experiential spaces such as a tea-making area and a tea hill sightseeing area, contributing to attracting tourists (Minh Tam, 2025).

In addition, some periodically organized tea events and festivals, such as the Thai Nguyen Tea Festival, have contributed to promoting the image of tea and tea culture to the broad public. These activities not only attract tourists but also create opportunities for exchange, trade promotion, and enhancing the brand value of tea products. Besides, combining the introduction and sale of tea products at tourist destinations also helps

increase economic value and generate revenue for local people.

However, despite these initial development steps, the current status of developing experiential tourism associated with tea culture in Thai Nguyen still has many limitations. Tourism products are still spontaneous, small-scale, lacking in linkage, and not yet professionally organized. Experiential content is still monotonous, primarily stopping at sightseeing and simple trials, neither deeply exploiting cultural values nor creating a clear differentiation compared to other localities.

Moreover, the lack of experiential programs with clear scripts, the shortage of professional tour guides, and limitations in organization also reduce the attractiveness of tourism products. Promotional activities are not yet strong, failing to effectively utilize digital platforms and modern media to reach a broader market.

Overall, despite having much potential and positive initial steps, the development of tea culture associated with experiential tourism in Thai Nguyen is not yet commensurate with its existing advantages. This poses a requirement for more synchronized and effective solutions in the coming time to maximize the exploitation of tea culture's value serving sustainable tourism development.

3.3. Limitations and causes

Despite possessing outstanding potential in natural resources and tea cultural values, the development of tea culture associated with experiential tourism in Thai Nguyen still faces numerous limitations, affecting the exploitation efficiency and competitiveness of the destination. These limitations stem from both internal local factors and objective conditions during the development process.

Firstly, tourism products are undiversified and lack professionalism.

Currently, tourism products associated with tea culture in Thai Nguyen mainly focus on basic activities such as visiting tea hills, experiencing tea plucking, or enjoying tea on-site. However, these activities are still spontaneous, lacking systematic investment in content and organizational format. The majority of experiential programs have not been designed with clear scripts, lack cohesion among activities, and have not yet formed a

complete experiential chain for tourists. Simultaneously, the elements of education, cultural storytelling, and experiential depth remain limited, making the products not truly attractive to tourist groups seeking in-depth cultural understanding or international visitors. This makes it difficult to create a distinct differentiation compared to other localities that also develop agricultural and experiential tourism.

Secondly, infrastructure and tourism services are still limited.

Although the whole province has 787 tourist accommodation establishments, including 95 hotels (10 three-star hotels, 7 two-star hotels, 3 one-star hotels, and 76 standard hotels) along with 691 guesthouses and standard accommodations, this system is unevenly distributed and primarily concentrated in the central area. In famous tea regions such as Tan Cuong, La Bang, and Vo Tranh – places with great potential for experiential tourism development – there is still a shortage of high-quality accommodations, especially characteristic resorts associated with tea culture (Tung Lam, 2026). Besides, supplementary services such as culinary, tour guides, transportation, rest stops, and public restrooms remain lacking and unsynchronized, reducing the quality of tourists' experiences. Tourism infrastructure has not truly met the requirements of large tourist groups or tourists with high demands for amenities and services.

Thirdly, human resources serving tourism are lacking and limited in skills.

Human resources in tea regions are mainly local residents, who have long-standing experience in tea production and processing but lack tourism knowledge and skills. The majority have not been formally trained in communication, customer service, organizing experiential activities, or interpreting tea culture. This leads to uneven service quality, a lack of professionalism, and difficulty in meeting the expectations of tourists, especially international ones. In addition, the contingent of professional tour guides with deep knowledge of tea culture is still insufficient to develop in-depth and high-quality tourism products.

Fourthly, tourism promotion and marketing activities are not yet effective.

The promotion of Thai Nguyen tea tourism currently has not been implemented in a synchronized and professional manner. The building of the "tea tourism" brand lacks consistency and has not yet created a clear characteristic image in the market. Besides, the application of digital technology and communication on online platforms, social networks, or modern promotional channels remains limited, failing to fully exploit the potential of reaching domestic and international customers. Tourism marketing programs and linkages with travel enterprises are infrequent and lack depth, resulting in a volume of tea tourism visitors that is not commensurate with the potential.

The causes of the aforementioned limitations stem from various factors. First of all, the planning for tea tourism development is not yet truly clear and synchronized, leading to spontaneous development and a lack of long-term orientation. Furthermore, investment capital for tourism remains limited, especially investment in infrastructure and product development. The coordination among stakeholders such as local authorities, enterprises, cooperatives, and residential communities is not yet tight, lacking an effective linkage mechanism. In addition, awareness of the role of experiential tourism in local economic development in some places is not yet comprehensive, leading to the under-exploitation of existing potentials.

The limitations and causes outlined above indicate that the development of tea culture associated with experiential tourism in Thai Nguyen still has many issues that need to be resolved. This is also an important practical basis for proposing appropriate solutions to more effectively exploit tea cultural values, enhance the quality of tourism products, and move towards sustainable development in the coming time.

4. SOLUTIONS FOR DEVELOPING TEA CULTURE ASSOCIATED WITH EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM IN THAI NGUYEN

Based on the analyzed potentials and current status, to effectively develop tea culture associated with experiential tourism in Thai Nguyen, it is necessary to synchronously implement the following solutions:

Firstly, perfecting planning and development orientation.

It is necessary to formulate a master plan for tea tourism development towards integrating agriculture, culture, and tourism. In which, clearly identify key tea regions such as Tan Cuong, La Bang, and Trai Cai to focus investment and form characteristic tourist destinations. Simultaneously, integrating tea tourism development into the socio-economic development strategy of the province will help ensure consistency and long-term viability.

Secondly, diversifying and enhancing the quality of experiential tourism products.

Tourism products need to be designed towards increasing the experiential nature and cultural depth. In addition to traditional activities such as sightseeing and tea plucking, it is necessary to develop programs such as learning to make tea, enjoying tea with artisans, experiencing the tea processing, or "a day as a tea farmer" tours. The building of tea cultural stories must also be emphasized to create a distinctive mark for tourism products.

Thirdly, developing tourism infrastructure and services.

Investing in upgrading the transportation system to tea regions and improving technical facilities serving tourism are crucial factors. It is necessary to develop accommodation models such as homestays, tea-enjoying spaces, experiential zones, and support services to meet the increasingly diverse needs of tourists. Simultaneously, encouraging the participation of enterprises in investing in tea tourism development.

Fourthly, enhancing the quality of local human resources.

It is necessary to organize training and coaching programs on tourism skills for local residents, including communication, guiding, serving, and experiential activity organizing skills. Besides, raising community awareness about the role of tourism in economic development also contributes to promoting the active participation of the people. The role of tea artisans needs to be promoted in transmitting and spreading cultural values.

Fifthly, promoting marketing activities and brand building.

It is necessary to build an effective communication strategy to promote the image of Thai Nguyen tea associated with experiential tourism. Enhance the application of digital technology, social networks, and online platforms to reach tourists. Simultaneously, organize tea events and festivals to create highlights and attract tourists, gradually building a professional and competitive tea tourism brand.

Sixthly, strengthening linkages and developmental cooperation.

Promote linkages among stakeholders such as local authorities, tourism enterprises, tea cooperatives, and residential communities to form a complete tourism value chain. Concurrently, strengthen cooperation with travel agencies to develop and exploit tea tour routes. Learning from successful models domestically and internationally is also an important basis for improving development effectiveness.

5. CONCLUSION

Developing tea culture associated with experiential tourism is a suitable direction aligning with modern tourism development trends, while effectively utilizing the existing cultural values and resources of Thai Nguyen. With the advantage of being a famous tea region along with a distinctive tea culture, Thai Nguyen holds immense potential to develop this type of tourism. However, for effective exploitation, there needs to be synchronized investment ranging from planning, products, and infrastructure to human resources and promotional activities. Implementing these solutions systematically and sustainably not only contributes to enhancing the economic value of the tea industry but also preserves and promotes local cultural identity, moving towards sustainable tourism development in the future.

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