

Tourist experiences at Tan Cuong tea village in Vietnam: A sense of tea production, tea arts and culture-bridge

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Abstract

Driven by the strategic planning diversification of tea- planting areas in Northern Vietnam, development modes have emerged through eco-tourism, this papers initially explored tourist experiences at famous Tan Cuong tea villages where other resources for in-depth craft village tourism have undergone visible and lively transformations. Adopting quantitative approach, 150 valid questionnaires were used as the exploratory research data, the results indicated that in the light of natural scenery, the combination of tea production, tea planting, tea processing and tea tasting have enhanced the quality tourist experience, a sense of tea arts while activities of on-site tea village visitation acts as a culture bridge. Meanwhile, it is recommended that the tourism services at tea village destination are in need of improvement compared to its favorable potentials for tea eco-culture tourism which also contributes to the development of the local tea industry in rural Northern Vietnam.

Key words: Tea tourism, tourist experience, Tan Cuong tea village, Northern Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development city-countryside duality and the emergence of marginal villages, communities in northern Vietnam rural areas, it is important to diversify the rural economy to enhance development capacity, and create local employment opportunities which are still dominated by agriculture activities (Trinh, T. T., Ryan, C., & Bui, H. D.; 2020). In particular, the demand and the rise of the experience economy has led to transformations of many sectors, including hospitality & tourism even in village- based one though it brings with its impacts and changes in relationships between host communities, visitors, natural environment, and expressions of culture (Fafurida, F., 2023; Lindberg, K., et al., 2001). Many sites of cultural history and heritage are ideally suited to become tourist destinations for they encompass the unique features of a place that reflects its history, lifestyle or environment while concepts such as health and well-being, the spiritual consumption demand have gradually taken root in people's consciousness (Hou, R., & Wen, C; 2021).. It is well- argued and analyzed that tea is an agricultural product with social and cultural connotations, and its production and consumption are believed to have the potential to combine with "tea-travel' tourism to enhance the livelihood of a place (Jolliffe, 2007). There is indeed a link between tourism and agriculture widely recognized and implemented as a method to support rural development and reduce poverty, especially in developing countries (Torres and Momsen, 2011).

Located in the mountains of Thái Nguyên Province in Northern Vietnam, Tân Cương tea village with tea cultivation is renowned as the home of the 'most fragrant tea', a living heritage in the country while its tea growing and processing knowledge becomes a national intangible cultural heritage. The villages benefit from its favorable conditions such as reputed tea resources and natural scenery of huge tea hills and nationally famous tea brand in agriculture industry. According to Vietnam National Authority of Tourism (VNAT, 2023) and Thai Nguyen Provincial Craft Village Association, it is estimated that Thai Nguyen has more than 20,000 hectares of tea specialized in cultivation with an output of about 240,000 tons. The whole province has more than 65 cooperatives, over 120 tea production companies and nearly 200 tea villages with many products that have won international awards. The famous green tea hills of Thai Nguyen are merely agricultural products of the Northern Midlands and Mountains Region, and also gradually becoming tourist products, loved by visitors. However, it is not fully explored how that tea village tourism or eco-tea-based tourism becomes a channel to attract both domestic on-site tourists and international potential tourists interested in experiential activities at this destination. The paper is necessarily to explore and examine the perceptions of tourist at Tan Cuong tea villages. The tourist experience and the development of tea village tourism have become a research focus that cannot be ignored by tourism academics. Tourist perception can be measured of a long-term stable visitor flow scale or the quality of tea culture tourism development, experiential activities as the high tourism performance affects future tourist behaviors, effectively builds a good reputation and image of tourist destinations to achieve revenue benefit growth. Thereby, local businesses would have foresight: better understand the experience, expectation and desires of tourists to plan, implement appropriate strategies, support concurrently to serve visitors and provides a useful reference for realizing the sustainable development of the tea tourism industry and tea agriculture. In particular, the core is tourist experience at tea villages in the light of ecology in which tea activities also aims

achieve the goal of sustainability in socio-economic and cultural development of regional ecological advantages and tea industry advantages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tea is not only an important agricultural product, for example, for export product but also a dedicated drink in F&B services that reflects the tea traditions of their location are offered (Joliffe, L; 2004). Tea industry has been enlarged due to the influence of market discipline and the revival of traditional tea culture. As a result, many tea culture phenomena appeared especially after 1990s, such as the appearance of tea culture tourism, forums of tea, tea culture associations and various tea drinks (Xu, X; 2014; 2023). For many visitors, visitation to a tea craft village may be conceived as involving a process of continuing involvement in process of tea production and tea drinking through pursuing an interest in tea history, culture and tea drinking tradition, local tea arts. Visitors gain benefits related to the experience of tea village visitation that shapes and meets the visitor's needs for information, intellectual stimulation and better understanding through these onsite visits as part of a holiday. Given this literature, tea tourism commonly understood as the integration of tea and tourism is considered the new state tourism model that combines the historical tea culture features with the ecological environment and leisure activities (Zhou, Q., Zhu, K., Kang, L., & Dávid, L. D; 2023). Through the beautiful natural landscape and rich human characteristics, natural resources, human resources, tea culture connotation, etc., into one, it is possible to meet the needs of different occupations and different ages of tourists by covering a variety of tourism types such as cultural tourism, leisure tourism, folklore tourism, health tourism, agricultural tourism, and so on. it is suggested that the satisfaction at tea derived from this interactive process is arguably enhancing the enjoyment of the holiday that may be more predisposed to learn more about a given locality, region or country and then to have "deep" involvement with tea arts and tea lovers.

The tea industry's experience-based tea culture tourism mode has been gradually accepted by the majority of tourists, as it not only covers the general nature of tourism (Dávid, L.; 2021) including elements such as consumption, leisure, social and aesthetic attractions, but also shows the uniqueness that is different from other types of tourism. In particular, the tea village tourism includes elements of tea culture, tea folklore (Yu, S.-D.; Zhang, J.; 2022) and tea stories (Choffnes, D. Terroir; 2022) while there is also an argument that it is an eco-tourism activity in term of that the core is tourist experience and ecology that aim at tourism performance and the conservation of nature (Diallo, M.F.; Diop-Sall, F.; Leroux, E.; Vachon, M.-A.; 2022).

Ryan (2000) attempted to look at the tourist experience from different perspectives due to the variety of tourists products consumed and number of suppliers involved at the place of delivery. A complementary relationship established between the objective (place) and the subjective (tourist experience of that place) makes sense in totality, even in the contemporary times and tourist experience was termed as 'messy' and indicated that "they may be unclear in meaning when located within the totality of an individual's experience, and are all the messier because, paradoxically, tourist experiences can be rich, enriching and cathartic" Ryan (2000 pg. 43-49). Tourists are segmented as 'tea knowledge and skill learners', 'leisure enjoyers' and 'enthusiastic experiencers' with their characteristics respectively. Other factors of destination attributes, basic conditions, environment, tea related destination factors, Shen, J., & Chou, R. J. (2022). have highlighted the development experiences of integrating tea tourism with ancient village preservation in the light that rural revitalization is not only contributing to the rural changes toward a sustainable future while tea village's tangible and intangible cultural tea landscape builds a sense of place and the support by local clans is of importance. The participation of local talents, its workshop, the spatial types of the old- new mixture have shaped its local culture and industrial characteristics that impact on the tea-culture tourism. Many scholars have used tourism performance to study and explain tourist loyalty, tourists' willingness to revisit and destination enhancement paths (Denstadli, J.M.; Jacobsen, J.K.; .2011) among other factors

RESEARCH DESIGN

Study Area

The Tân Cương commune village in Thai Nguyen Province, one of the best places for tea leaves and other tea-related products in all of Việt Nam was selected to be the case study, It is located 75 km to the Northern Vietnam of Ha Noi capital, is the home to the country's largest tea-growing area. This exceptional tea here has a delightful taste that will enchant even the most discerning tea enthusiasts. The first sip leaves a harsh flavour on the tip of the tongue, but it quickly turns into a rich sweet flavour when the tea is taken in. In recent years, Thái Nguyên Province has come up with multiple strategies to develop the local economy in both agriculture and tourism ones for businesses, cooperatives, and farmers who grow tea to be able to meet the aims of preserving and expanding the Tân Cương speciality tea area. One of the striking tourism activities here is the tTea festival

that is an opportunity to honor the traditional professions of the people of Tan Cuong; to meet, exchange and share experiences of tea growers, processors, producers and traders in Tan Cuong in particular and the whole country in general. This is also a cultural festival of Thai Nguyen ethnic people to contribute to promoting and introducing Tan Cuong tea products, promoting eco-tourism, community tourism and attracting investment, bringing the Tan Cuong tea brand of Thai Nguyen increasingly developing.

Research approach

There were two rounds of data collection. The first, a preliminary round that obtained qualitative data and the second, the pilot of the survey, a more focused round of data collection that formed the major component of the study. The data collection was conducted at 3 tea households that have tourism business, the tea village visitation. The respondents were approached at the Tea houses with the help of the host, and they were asked if they were willing to fill in the questionnaire and so they were asked to take and complete the questionnaire on completion of their visit and the questionnaires were collected and while potential respondents could be sitting while they took rest after visiting the village. A form indicating the nature of the research was also provided to them. Days for data collection were the whole weekdays and on the weekends during the summer time in late April to May 2024. During this time, there are several tea festivals that allowed authors to take in-depth interview as the primary exploration for this research. Total of 150 questionnaires were collected and after excluding invalid questionnaires such as incomplete submissions

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part is the demographic information, the second part is the information on tourists' behavioral characteristics, and the second part is the importance and performance rating given by visitors to various attributes of tea village visitation. As in this study area, tea farmer households can establish products unique to a tea house as evidenced in Figures 1 and 2. This paper is reporting exploratory and descriptive data for the tourist's experience perception and overall satisfaction with tea craft village visitation

Figure 1. Tea village tourism activities offered at tea village visitation (photos by first author).



Figure 2. Tourists' visitation at tea village



RESULTS

A descriptive analysis of the demographic information (of the tourists based on the data .150 valid questionnaires showed that 45.3% male tourists and 51.3 %) female tourists were interviewed. The age of the interviewed tourists was mainly concentrated between 25 and 60 years old, and the number of young and middle-aged (25-40 years old) interviewed tourists was the largest, 45.3%) while the age under 25 seemed not interested in tea village visitation. The education level of the interviewed visitors was mainly concentrated around college or bachelor's degree, and their permanent residence was mostly in the North (local) at 85.3 % and surrounding cities/provinces. The results have the similar findings with work of Zhou, Q., Zhu, K., Kang, L., & Dávid, L. D. (2023) to conduct research on Tea Culture Tourism Perception at tea tourism town of Wushan.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the samples (N = 150).

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender				
Male	68	45.3	45.3	45.3
Female	77	51.3	51.3	96.7
N/A	5	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	
Age				
< 25 years old	0	0	0	0
25 - 40 years old	68	45.3	46.6	46.6
41 – 60 years old	59	39.3	40.4	87.0
60 years old	23	14.7	11.0	97.9
Total	150	100.0		
Education				
High school graduate	9	6.0	6.1	6.1
Undergraduate	110	73.3	23.8	29.9
Post graduate	21	20.7	19.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0		
Residence				
The South	5	3.3	3.4	3.4
The Central	8	5.3	5.4	8.8
The North	128	85.3	87.1	95.9
Overseas	9	2.0	4.1	100.0

Perceptual scores

This analysis was to simply assess the descriptive statistics to see what respondents perceived at tea village visitation. Table 2 showed the tourists' evaluation of tea craft tourism village in Tan Cuong. There are 11 perspectives of tourists' evaluation of tourism performance at tea craft village in Tan Cuong which are being served with accessibility for searching tea village information, natural tea hill scenery of landscape features, tea and tourism activities, engaging experience in tea production and tea drinking on site with the host. Tourists think the above factors are very important in which "tea packaging activities on site" has the highest mean score (4.52), and then "Learning about tea craft villages" and "Experience of being taught how to make tea by a tea artisan" are also the most significant factors in positive feeling at tea village though "Talking about tea with other tea lovers" are not the highest level of satisfaction but still get 4.39 mean score. Additionally, visitors from different provinces and region in Vietnam are immersed in the fresh green space with the faint scent of tea, as well as have many interesting experiences when 'transforming' into tea growers harvesting green tea buds, tea plantation, tea production, tea tasting with tea artisans, tea lovers and sales of Tan Cuong tea product. The tea workshops, establishment introduce and serve visitors with a variety of onsite and hand-on attractive activities suitable for different ages and groups such as families with children, the elderly, large groups to enjoy tea-related experience. It seems that many of these latter tourists are experienced in travel and hence demanding of perceived authenticities, comfort, information that acts as tea arts and culture bridges.

Table 2. Tourists' evaluation of tea craft tourism village in Tan Cuong

Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. D
Engaging in tea packaging activities on site	145	2	5	4.52	.602
Learning about tea craft villages	146	2	5	4.51	.590
Experience of being taught how to make tea by a tea artisan	146	3	5	4.51	.566
Taking beautiful photos and videos about tea craft villages, tea hills	146	2	5	4.51	.578
Experience of drinking tea and local tea products	145	3	5	4.48	.554
Finding out information about the tea production area	144	2	5	4.48	.614
Participating in tea picking activities	145	2	5	4.46	.624
Experience and participate in tea roasting activities	146	2	5	4.46	.634
Participating in crushing tea leaves	146	2	5	4.45	.655
Drinking tea and talking to tea artisans	146	3	5	4.43	.609
Talking about tea with other tea lovers	145	2	5	4.39	.637
Valid N (listwise)	146				

Overall tourist Satisfaction at tea craft villages in Thai Nguyen province

Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. D
I am willing to recommend this Tan Cuong tea craft village to my friends	147	1	5	4.86	.510
I would love to enjoy dishes prepared with tea plants at this location	149	2	5	4.72	.658
I am going to revisit to this attraction in the near future	148	2	5	4.70	.577
Village tourism activities here have been developed well compared to their potentials	149	1	5	4.07	.956

The green tea fields have become an indispensable destination and satisfaction for visitors to explore in Tan Cuong, Thai Nguyen province. where keeps documents and artifacts related to tea in the flow of history, and also honors and promotes tea cultivation. In addition, visitors can experience at tea production establishments, participate in tea harvest and processing and especially enjoy delicious tea cups with local people, artisans, and tea- lovers. It is worth noting from the results in Table 2 that the tourists interviewed think that “village tourism activities here have been developed well compared to their potentials” has the least mean score. In particular, the development potential and an important resource at this scenic tea area is favorable and advantageous that would need to plan these perspectives as the direction for future improvement and for the development of Tan Cuong tea tourism village to further improve the tourist service performance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although with the development of the times, Tan Cuong tea and tea village tourism in Thai Nguyen province is facing many challenges. Though an increasing number of tourists have picked tea sightseeing, and tea culture tourism activities that have become popular, but the high-level, specialized tea culture tourism development model has not yet been established, and the development of tea culture tourism is also stagnant. This research initially explored and reported with the description of analyzing and recording facts before the formal survey. Data obtained commonly among visitors includes: 1/ The profiles of visitors/tourists (Table 1,2). This is illustrated in this study where Table 2 indicates strong scores for the views that the engagement and involvement in tea packaging activities on site is significant. In short, in common with much of tourism people visit a tea village, just as they undertake many holidaying activities, with a view that they attribute importance to the activity for many different reasons that include the cognitive, emotive and congruency with interests and image (Trinh, T. T., & Ryan, C.; 2017). If this is the case then arguably failure to satisfy occurs not because of the generic nature of the tea village site but because of the failure to satisfy those motives of learning and the need for engagement with the tea farmer, ‘tea lover audience’.

On the other hand, from the shallow experience to the ‘in- depth” experience as the on-site interaction within tourism activities of tea village visitation of tea plantation, tea leaf picking, tea tasting, drinking with other companions, buddies, and tea- lovers, tea artisans, tea farmers aroused with the mental, spiritual, physical health benefits from tea consumption. “Tea-travel” resources combining tea village, tea houses, workshops and tourism, visitors demand, pay more and more attention to the natural- closeness, spiritual and well- being values that tea- related destination has become hotspot for the benefits to tourists and for promoting the local tea culture, driving the local social-economic development sustainably.

Teahouse culture at Tan Cuong tea village had both its historical and local attributes. There is an important point the paper to highlight in term of the fact that: the “modern tea” and “traditional tea” in tea house as a social expression, it is not simply referring to the time difference, but more likely to indicate “modernization” and tea art performances while the teaching the people how to do traditional tea production should also be a component for significant findings in terms of tradition tea arts and culture-bridge. Some of the traditions have been continuously inheriting and innovating in order to adapt the circumstances of the society, such as the new forms and social functions appeared in every dynasty (Zhou, Q., Zhu, K., Kang, L., & Dávid, L. D; 2023).

Everything has two sides, and every change in tea consumption traditions has its own reasons. It may be argued that one specific feature of the tea village tourism is the nature of the “tea and village” itself. In terms of future research there is much to be done, and the authors are hoping to build upon this paper for next stage of future work. Tan Cuong tea village tourism northern rural Vietnam and in Thai Nguyen province are as yet still relatively new developing tourist destinations, mainly from farmer households and as is the case, developments occur with increasing rapidity, especially when external cultural and financial capital becomes increasingly involved with a destination. In this case, this is likely to have some implication for visitation at the tea village in service performance as a tourist destination. Equally, are there differences in the patterns of group interactions between members of a tour group and those who arrive independently at the tea village visitation? It will also be of interest to examine how tea artisans play significant role in in –depth experience of tourists. There therefore remains much to be done and it is hoped that such work can be completed in the future. Furthermore, changes in tea drinking tradition are inevitable as “modern teahouses” (the requirements for convenience and equality.) has increased dramatically which means that there has been the perspectives of inheritance and innovation from ancient tea traditions that combine the tea production with eco- tea culture tourism to aim the sustainable development and tea culture, tea tradition preservation that allow tea performance in terms of tea tasting, talking, drinking traditional. in a “unique atmosphere of being spiritual approach. The increased technology of mass media, mass production (tea packages) all made great contributions to the changes in tea tourism or such modern tea activities break the barriers of traditional tea culture tourism approach. Therefore, adding value, the potential of tea resources (on-site visit, learning experiences from tea leaf planting, tea tasting, tea related tourism such as well-being, gastronomy with tea products) haven’t been fully discovered in Tan Cuong tea village in Thai Nguyen rural northern Vietnam

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