

The Development of Tea Planting and Tea Culture Tourism in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam¹

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Abstract

This article analyzes the historical development of tea planting and production in Thai Nguyen province in the northern midlands of Vietnam based on documentary research. It also analyzes the patterns of tea culture tourism there by employing qualitative research methodology, using in-depth interview and participatory and non-participatory observation to collect data on site. The findings reveal that the province, which has a long history of green tea production, started large-scale plantation after French colonization and revived it during the Doi Moi reform, which was initiated in 1986. Experience-based tea culture tours in Thai Nguyen are becoming popular, mainly among foreign tourists seeking knowledge and beautiful scenery. The tea culture destinations and the tour packages provide sightseeing as well as opportunities to try tea-related activities, such as harvesting, production, and tasting. This article suggests that tea culture tourism in Thai Nguyen is developing quickly as a multilevel tourism form combining scenery sightseeing, learning, and hands-on experiences. However, it is still in the emerging stage and faces challenges of infrastructure on its road to development.

Keywords: Thai Nguyen, Vietnam, tea culture, tea culture tourism

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Introduction

Thai Nguyen, a province in northeast Vietnam that lies between Hanoi and the northern mountains, is regarded as the country's most important green tea region and time-honored tea center. While green tea is not one of Vietnam's major export goods, it is still a significant domestic consumer product. Thai Nguyen is well known for producing classic high-quality green tea for domestic demand (Tran Dai Nghia, 2008: 7). The province's tropical climate, altitude (about 600m above sea level), and alluvial soil (CCE, 2007: 13) make it a suitable place for planting tea.

The history of planting and producing tea in Thai Nguyen, from the 1880s until today, can be divided into the following four periods: emergence, interruption, restoration, and prosperity. Currently with the support of the government and local tea businesses, Thai Nguyen is promoting green tea and developing its tourism industry, which is beginning to attract attention from tea lovers around the world.

Tourism in Vietnam has become a key economic sector through ambitious governmental goals. With the development of the tourism industry, cultural tourism is viewed as a future trend in Vietnam. Although the word "culture" usually calls to mind stereotypes of arts and handicrafts, theorist Raymond Williams argued that culture is about the lives and habits of ordinary people (Smith, 2015: 2). Many travelers nowadays are interested in observing the daily routines of people whose lives are different from their own, while at the same time tourism designers and managers view culture as a resource for entertaining visitors.

Although the study of cultural tourism has drawn the attention of a broad scope of multidisciplinary academics, there is no exact definition of this term. A general definition was offered by the World Tourism Organization, which focuses on the travel motivations of tourists: "Cultural tourism includes movements of persons for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and other cultural tours, travel to festivals and other cultural events, visit to sites and monuments, travel to study nature, folklore or art or pilgrimages"

(Richards, 2003: 7). Williams (2001: 368) goes a little further, stating that cultural tourists are able to learn about the past, experience a series of recreational activities, and enjoy the natural and cultural environment of an area. From another perspective, Richards (2005: 236) and Smith (2015: 16) view cultural tourism as focusing not merely on consumption of the cultural products of the past but also on the contemporary culture or way of life of a people or region.

In addition, McKercher and Du Cros (2002: 4) define cultural tourism as an experimental and aspirational activity where interaction with culture can be unique, and tourists are educated as well as entertained in a series of activities or experiences. Moreover, Smith (2015: 17) points out that visitors gain new experiences of an “educational, creative, and entertaining nature” through interactive engagement with heritage, arts, and the culture of local communities. In short, the above-mentioned scholars consider cultural tourism to consist of activities where outsiders seek differences through experiencing the local way of life in terms of historical, cultural, and recreational achievements.

Tea has been viewed as a healthy drink for over five thousand years and incorporated into various societies as a significant tool for social interaction. Jolliffe (2007: 3) points out that tea is closely connected with the “ancient and modern history of the world trade and travel” and is regarded as a special theme or resource for tourism. His book, “Tea and Tourism: Tourists, Traditions and Transformations,” suggests a working definition of tea cultural tourism as “tourism that is motivated by an interest in the history, traditions, and consumption of tea.” It presents the idea that tea culture tourism is related to experiencing the many aspects of tea, from its history, growth, production, processing, and blending to consumption (Jolliffe, 2007: 10). In particular, experiencing the history of tea includes visiting historic sites and locations as well as exhibitions or museums to learn about the transformation and development of tea cultures and traditions. Tours include opportunities to stroll around and pick tea leaves in the tea garden, visit tea factories, and taste tea drinks in tea shops.

Moreover, the consumption experience will be influenced by many factors, especially host-guest relationships, the marketing of tea products, and the presentation of the way of drinking tea (Jolliffe, 2007: 4). In addition, tea culture tourism provides leisure-oriented activities and the “augmented resources” mentioned by McKercher and Du Cros (2002: 104), where, for example, tourists can choose to live in tea-themed hotels located adjacent to tea plantations and take part in tea events, such as tea parties and tea festivals.

In Vietnam, tea has been consumed for centuries and has become a key part of social rituals. Therefore, the combination of cultural tourism and tea has the potential to attract more public and governmental focus in the near future. Nevertheless, there are few studies on tea culture tourism in Vietnam partly because this industry is still at a fledgling stage. Most scholarship in English is on the technical development of the tea industry and the productivity of tea and organic tea farming. Thus, this article, aimed at filling the gap in academic resources, examines the historical background of tea planting and the creation of tea culture tourism as well as patterns and activities in Thai Nguyen. It will examine how tea culture is integrated into tourism in Thai Nguyen and will also identify the main tourists and what they consume from tea culture tourism.

The study applied qualitative research methodology as the main method. Documentary research was employed to analyze the historical development of tea planting and production in Thai Nguyen. In-depth interview and participatory and non-participatory observation were conducted on site in order to gain information about the development of the tea industry and investigate stakeholders’ views on the formation of tea culture tourism in Thai Nguyen.

The History of Tea Planting in Thai Nguyen

To trace the history of tea in Thai Nguyen, it is necessary to discuss its role in Vietnam as a whole. In fact, Vietnam’s involvement in tea cultivation dates back more than a thousand years (Nguyen Viet Dang

and Lantican, 2011: 208). Ancient Han inscriptions mention the growing and harvesting of tea by Vietnamese people (The Tea Tree in Ancient Books, 2015). In addition, it is recorded that “in May, the eighth year of Khai Bảo [Vietnamese era name], Dinh Lien [the Vietnamese crown prince] paid tribute to the Song Dynasty with gold, silk, rhinoceros horns, ivory and aromatic tea” (Nguyen Quy Dai, 2009).

Later, in the Tran Dynasty (13th to early 15th century), tea was regarded as having metaphysical value for the Vietnamese. A poem dedicated to King Tran Anh Tong (1276-1320), written by Chu Van An, mentions tea as a source of spiritual purity (Nguyen Quy Dai, 2009). Although poems and historical texts do not mention the activities or views of ordinary people, traditions and habits passed along from one generation to another reveal that tea was widely consumed by the peasant population as a part of social engagement in its simplest form in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese, before the coming of French colonialists, cultivated two tea varieties: tea (var. *sinensis*²) plantations in the Red River delta and forest tea trees (var. *assamica* or wild tea) in the northern mountainous region. Tea plantations were located mainly in Ha Dong (now part of Hanoi) and hill areas in Nghe An, Thai Nguyen, and other provinces. Consequently, the custom of growing and drinking tea is rooted in the northern mountainous and midland people. However, it was not until the French colonial period that the tea yield in Vietnam increased dramatically.

Vietnam became a source of raw materials and investment opportunities under French colonization (Edwards and Phan Anh, 2014: 13). During that time tea, as an accepted means by which to pay taxes, prompted large-scale cultivation in Vietnam. Throughout the 19th century, the French began purchasing Vietnamese tea, surveying suitable areas for production from north to south, establishing tea research centers, and developing large tea plantations for producing processed black tea and green tea for export (Wenner, 2011: 14). Thai Nguyen was selected as one of several suitable areas for tea plantations.

² There are four recognized *Camellia sinensis* varieties, including var. *sinensis*, var. *assamica*, var. *pubilimba* and var. *dehungensis*.

In this way, tea has been cultivated and processed in Thai Nguyen province for hundreds of years (Dang Thi Minh et al., 2014: 107). Its reputation in history as the most famous tea in Indochina is attributed to two important contributors, Dr. Nguyen Dinh Tuan and Mr. Doi Nam. Nguyen Dinh Tuan (1867-1941) was the provincial judge of Thai Nguyen province who proposed to the French colonial government and King Bao Dai the establishment of a new administrative unit called Tan Cuong.³ Doi Nam (born in 1883) was sent by the French colonial government to Tan Cuong to reclaim new land and gather people from various places to establish tea farming villages.⁴

The history of Tan Cuong as a tea-growing center goes back to the early 20th century. At that time, Tan Cuong was a barren area where it was hard for people to make a living. Therefore, Nguyen Dinh Tuan worked with Doi Nam to help Tan Cuong people expand the tea-planting area, build tea-producing facilities, and open agencies to sell tea in Thai Nguyen and other provinces. In the first half of the 20th century, Thai Nguyen tea catered to the taste of French officials, elites, and foreign merchants and the brand name Tan Cuong became popular locally and internationally.

However, from 1945 to 1954, the production of tea was almost impossible to conduct because of disruption caused by the First Indochina War (generally known as the Indochina War in France, and as the Anti-French Resistance War in Vietnam) (Cain, 2017: 73). In the mid-1950s, however, the tea industry began to be revitalized because the socialist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north sought to transform economic relationships (Edwards and Phan Anh, 2014: 13). During that period, tea was considered a plant of high economic value, and consequently, many state-run tea plantations were founded, such as the Song Cau and Quan Chu plantations in Thai Nguyen province (Do Ngoc Van, 2012: 243). Additionally, tea-growing cooperatives were established (AsiaDHRRA and ASEAN Foundation, 2008: 62), and most

³ Quoted from the introduction board in Tea Cultural Space in Tan Cuong, a commune in Thai Nguyen that is regarded as the most popular tea village in the province.

⁴ Quoted from the introduction board in the Tea Cultural Space.

of the tea leaves were sold to the cooperatives for processing, and then to VINATEA⁵ for export to the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe. Do Ngoc Van (2012: 245) mentions that the green tea growing areas at that time were often small scale and scattered, mostly at the household level using the traditional green tea production equipment and technology which produced the classic green tea. In Thai Nguyen during that time the main variety was Trung Du tea, which was suitable for producing green tea, while black tea production took place in south Vietnam. Under the centrally-planned command system, the comprehensive industrial policy did little to promote efficiency after the collapse of the Comecon International Trading System or Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), an economic community of communist countries (Perkins and Vu Thanh Tu Anh, 1958: 7). Therefore, the country urgently needed to make a rapid transition to a market-oriented system to cope with the sluggish state-owned industries. In the 1980s, the government began to implement the *Doi Moi* reforms, leading to a market-driven economy and land reform by distributing state land to the private households. This policy allowed households and small farm owners to have their own tea plantations and they were given better farm level prices to motivate them to expand tea cultivation (Doutriaux, Geisler and Shively, 2008: 535). During this period, Thai Nguyen tea was sold in both domestic and foreign markets, of which the domestic market share for green tea was 70 to 80 percent. However, poor quality Thai Nguyen tea was often exported as black tea at very low cost. Therefore, the Thai Nguyen tea brand in the international market is not highly regarded compared to the domestic market (Portal of Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam, 2016).

Tea as a Cash Crop in Today's Thai Nguyen

Nowadays, tea is a plant for poverty reduction and wealth creation in Thai Nguyen. Davis and Phan Lam Thuy Quynh (2010: 3) point out

⁵ The acronym for the Vietnam National Tea Corporation. It focuses on tea exports and imports in Vietnam.

that a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development assessment of the period 2006-2010 determined that Thai Nguyen tea development is the most effective strategy for sustainable tea production. Therefore, the Thai Nguyen government views supporting the tea industry as an important strategy to improve local rural economies.

With expectations of continued development, the current priority is on developing tea plants with higher output and resistance to environment and pests. As a result, farmers have been encouraged to replace existing low-productivity stock with a range of approved higher yielding cultivars (Hopkins, 2018). Currently, the main acclimatized tea cultivars in La Bang commune⁶ are DT1⁷ and Phuc Van Tien. DT1 was imported in 1977 from Sri Lanka, where it was known for producing high-quality black tea (Punyasiri et al., 2017: 508). After being introduced, it was used to produce green tea in Thai Nguyen. Phuc Van Tien was imported from China in 2000 (Do Ngoc Van, 2012: 254). While it was produced as a white tea⁸ in China, it was used to produce green tea in Thai Nguyen to meet domestic demands. It is obvious that tea cultivars are processed and produced according to market demands, so DT1 and Phuc Van Tien were localized to produce green tea when it was imported in Thai Nguyen. In other words, localization occurs when techniques or products are transferred.

In addition to promoting the growth of tea yields, the Thai Nguyen government has also taken action to bring Thai Nguyen tea to the forefront and preserve tea culture by holding biennial tea culture festivals which not only promote tea products and tea culture but also develop tourism. For visitors, these festivals offer an opportunity to learn about the history and art of tea drinking as well as a way to taste signature teas. With the celebration of the first tea festival in 2011, the government also announced the completion of a museum known as the

⁶ La Bang is a commune in Thai Nguyen where the local community mainly grows tea for their livelihood.

⁷ DT1 is an estate selection from Drayton estate in Sri Lanka (Ranatunga, 2017: 3) that was introduced into Vietnam. It was categorized as a high-quality black tea in Sri Lanka (Kottawa-Arachchi, Gunasekare, Ranatunga, Punyasiri, and Jayasinghe, 2013: 313).

⁸ White tea is a kind of light fermented tea, compared to green tea, which is non-fermented, and black tea, which is full-fermented.

Tea Cultural Space in Tan Cuong. This museum presents the history of tea planting in Thai Nguyen, ancient tea wares, and tea processing appliances in order to preserve and promote tea culture.

In short, Thai Nguyen tea in the 2010s has already achieved a reputation for and recognition of high-quality green tea both nationwide and internationally under the support of the government and the efforts of the local people. This situation has laid the foundation for attracting people to taste tea and consume tea in Thai Nguyen.

The Development of Tea Culture Tourism in Thai Nguyen

Vietnam is endowed with a rich variety of tourism resources, including appealing landscapes of mountains, beaches, and historical sites. Since the 1980s, the *Doi Moi* reform has continued to drive Vietnam's tourism industry from non-existent to mature and the country is about to enter a new phase to expand its tourism resources (Hall and Page, 2016: 167). While Thai Nguyen in former times was not considered a tourist destination, with the popularity of classic green tea, the province has begun to attract domestic and international tourists. Tea culture tourism in Thai Nguyen is now at an embryonic stage and tea culture tour packages have been promoted only for the past two years and are generally not well known. The tour agencies in downtown Hanoi provide little information about Thai Nguyen compared with popular destinations like Halong Bay, Sapa, Ninh Binh, and others.

Interviews with tour agency staff (Mr. A [Pseudonym], 2018; Mr. B [Pseudonym], 2018) indicate that they do not arrange Thai Nguyen tea tours and there are virtually no inquiries about such tour packages. However, they are able to arrange travel by private car to destinations in Thai Nguyen at a high cost. Travelers can also search tourism information online by typing the keywords, "Thai Nguyen tea tour," to find travel agencies that are able to provide this service. They

are Red Lotus Travel,⁹ Footprint Travel¹⁰ and Indochina Explore Tours.¹¹ They have similar itineraries, which include strolling around tea plantations, picking tea leaves, learning about tea processing, tasting tea, learning ways of drinking tea and visiting tea cultural spaces. Among them, Red Lotus Travel agency provides the most complete itineraries and offers two choices of tea culture tour packages. Based on these factors, the researcher took part in this agency's tour package as a participant to observe the formation of tea culture tour in Thai Nguyen.

According to an interview with Mr. Nguyen Binh Thiep of Red Lotus Travel agency, the tea culture tour packages are organized through the collaboration of the agency and the local tea tour guide in Thai Nguyen. The former designs the tour packages and transports tourists to Thai Nguyen from Hanoi, while the latter provides information about tea cultivars, the way of drinking tea, and tea history. Nguyen Binh Thiep came up with the idea of arranging tea culture tours in 2016. At that time, village tours like the Bat Trang ceramic village tour and Bonsai village tour were becoming popular, and so he wanted to develop more tour resources in this direction. The local tea tour guide, Ms. Le Huyen, started to organize Thai Nguyen tea culture tours about two years ago at the suggestion of her foreign friends. Because she was born into a tea-farming family in Thai Nguyen, she grew up with abundant tea knowledge (Le Huyen, 2018). Most people who take the tour learned about it from friends' recommendations and book online, but the booking is usually offered just once a month. Most of the tourists are westerners, while some are from Asian countries and have strong interest in local tea culture and history.

The researcher was able to join the package tour of only one travel agency. However, based on the example of Red Lotus Travel, it can be inferred that tea culture tourism began during the past two years

⁹ Motorbike Tour to Thai Nguyen 1 day. <http://redlotustravel.com/motorbike-tour-to-thai-nguyen-tea-plantation.html> / Thai Nguyen Tour 2 days, 1 night. <http://redlotustravel.com/thai-nguyen-tour-2-days-1-night.html>

¹⁰ Tea Affair by Bike 1 day. <https://footprint.vn/travel-styles/cycling/tea-affair-by-bike-1-day>

¹¹ Thai Nguyen Overall Impression of Tea and Bike Tour. <https://www.indochinaexploretours.com/day-trip-vacation-activity/thai-nguyen-overall-impression-tea-bike-tour/>.

and that the Thai Nguyen tea culture tours are still not well-known domestically or internationally. Generally, those who are interested in green tea and tea culture in Thai Nguyen are mostly westerners, according to the information from the tour's review online and information from the tea tour guide.

The Presentation of Tea Culture Tourism in Thai Nguyen

At present, there are two main tea culture tour packages in Thai Nguyen: a one-day bike or motorbike tour (64-100 U.S. dollars per person), and a two-day-one-night tour (170-200 U.S. dollars per person). The price depends on the number of people in the tour group. Tan Cuong and La Bang communes are the primary tourist destinations where the tea-related activities mainly consist of visiting tea plantations, local tea markets and the tea museum; picking tea leaves, tasting tea drinks and tea dishes; and learning about tea-making processes and ways of drinking tea. In addition, tour packages also provide other services like a boat trip on Nui Coc lake, trekking to Kem Creek, and dining on sturgeon as a way to enrich the whole trip and make it more appealing. That is to say, the tea cultural activities in Thai Nguyen alone are still not colorful enough to satisfy tourists' demands. Among these two types of tour packages, the two-day-one-night tour is more established and complete for further illuminating how the tea culture elements are represented through the whole trip and what kinds of tea knowledge and culture can be achieved.

In this way, the tea culture elements of the two-day-one-night tour are categorized into the following six groups: sightseeing, tourism products, first-hand experience, human activities and knowledge acquisition, tea-related architecture and infrastructure, and historic relics. Sightseeing and tourism products correspond to scenery and consumption of tea products, respectively. In Thai Nguyen, tourists can visit tea plantations, Kem Creek, and Nui Coc Lake for relaxing. In terms of tourism products, Thai Nguyen classic green tea is the most attractive selling point with other scented tea and tea specialty dishes. First-hand experience and historical relics are classified in accordance

with interacting with local communities and heritage. When tourists take part in first-hand activities like picking and making tea, and viewing the historical relics (100-year old tea trees) and teaware, they can gain a knowledge of tea history, planting, rituals, tea quality, and more.

Tea Plantation and Household Workshops

Plantations in La Bang and Tan Cuong, where tea is grown in lines, provide idyllic views, tea picking service, and knowledge of tea cultivars and identifying methods from tour guides' explanations. In the tea plantations, the tea culture tour combines sightseeing with educational and first-hand experience.

Workshops situated in close proximity to tea plantations are an important part of tea culture tourism. Almost each household has machines to process tea, using techniques and machines that are very traditional and simple. This is the reason they produce the classic green tea, which Vietnamese prefer. Tourists are able to learn the process of making tea and take part in rubbing the tea leaves with their hands in the workshop.

An Duong Tra Center

In contrast to La Bang, Tan Cuong has large tea workshops and even tea factories which produce their own brands, one of which is An Duong Tra. Tan Cuong is best described as a "center" because it includes not only tea processing but also tea picking, tea tasting and shopping as well as creative tea dishes. Nguyen Binh Thiep built this center earlier and added a ship-shaped parterre¹² in which he transplanted 100-year old tea trees and added a small pond with bridges and pavilions to create a garden-like landscape for tourists and his customers (Nguyen Binh Thiep, 2018).

Here, tourists can have tea-related experiences ranging from picking to eating. They can learn the ancient way of processing tea by

¹² The ship-shaped parterre symbolizes that the ship will carry his hope of publicizing Tan Cuong tea far into the future.

using the oldest type of machine. Next they can taste the tea they have made and have tea specialty dishes. In addition, Nguyen Binh Thiep will invite tourists to the pavilion and serve them different teas to demonstrate ways of drinking. Tourists can taste both the signature classic green tea and the scented tea as well as learn the correct way of brewing tea. On top of that, tourists can also consume the high-quality Tan Cuong tea as souvenirs. In conclusion, this place provides tourists with multiple activities including knowledge acquisition, participation, shopping, and food tasting.

The Tea Cultural Space

The Tea Cultural Space, opened for the first tea festival, is a museum built by the government to preserve Thai Nguyen tea culture. The museum records the history of tea planting, shows the development of tea processing machines, exhibits the famous Thai Nguyen tea brands and their products, preserves different types of tea sets, and sells the specialty *matcha* peanut candy, which is usually consumed as a snack to accompany the tea. The site presents the attractive points of tea culture tourism to the tourists and can satisfy their curiosity in one trip. In short, tea culture tourism is a multilevel tourism form combining scenery sightseeing, learning, and hands-on experiences as well as tea products and food.

Conclusion

As a popular tea region, Thai Nguyen has experienced an eventful history in tea planting from ancient times until today. Its long history of tea endows it with rich tea cultural resources which have achieved governmental support and tea enthusiasts' attention in recent years. Owing to the popularity of green tea and promotion of the tea festival, tea culture tourism has evolved for the past two years with itineraries combining tea-related sightseeing, experiencing, and learning activities. With increasing focus on cultural heritage, growth in cultural tourism has attracted much attention to its influence on creating economic

development and preserving cultural resources. Tea culture tourism in Thai Nguyen currently is developing quickly and there is room for its growth because the area is culture oriented and environmentally friendly. However, it is still in the emerging stage and faces challenges of infrastructure on its road to development.

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