

# The Dissemination of Chinese Tea Culture Based on Encoding/Decoding Theory

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Tea has a history of thousands of years in China and it plays an important role in the working-life and daily life of people. Tea culture rich in connotation is an important part of Chinese traditional culture, and its existence and development are also of great significance to the diversified development of world culture. Based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, this paper analyzes the problems in the spreading of Chinese tea in and out of the country and provides solutions from the perspective of encoding, communication, and decoding. It is expected to provide a reference for the domestic and international dissemination of Chinese tea culture.

*Keywords:* tea culture, encoding, decoding, communication

## Introduction

Originated in China, tea has a history of more than 4,000 years, and some ethnic minority areas still maintain ancient tea-related customs (Zhao, 2000, p. 37). The development and dissemination of tea culture embodies the hard work, life pattern, and collective wisdom of Chinese ancestors of different ethnic groups, and reflects their labor for production, artistic creation, ideological concepts, and social customs related to tea. Tea culture is composed of two aspects: "substance" and "spirit". In a broad sense, it refers to the sum of material and spiritual wealth about tea created by human beings in the process of social history. The narrow sense of tea culture refers specifically to the "spiritual wealth" of tea created by human beings (Zhao, 2005, p. 19). Tea culture embodies and contains material and spiritual civilization of a certain place and a certain period. Rooted in Chinese traditional culture, its origin and transmission process is the history of unity, cooperation, and common development of Chinese nationalities. Since the 1980s, tea culture has gradually sprung up in the mainland of China (Yu, 2005, p. 42). The spread of tea culture has not only a positive influence on the development of Chinese traditional culture and the integration of world cultures, but also a far-reaching historical significance for the better integration of Chinese tea into the world and the sustainable development of tea culture.

## Method for Study

Stuart Hall argues that discourse is like a commodity that also goes through the four stages of production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction as described by Marxism (Chen & Lin, 2014, p. 100). The production of television discourse is the encoding of information. Once the encoding of the information is completed, it begins to enter the circulation process, which is the process of the information being transmitted from the encoder

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to the audience. Decoding refers to the audience's perception and interpretation at the consumption stage of the information that has been encoded and transmitted through media communication. Encoding/decoding theory represents a groundbreaking change in the research paradigm on audience's reception of information, shifting communication paradigm from behavior-based stimulus-response model to individual cognitive thinking model. It is argued that communication effects are influenced by the decoder's interpretation of the message based on his or her cultural influences, and it is proposed that individuals may resist or negotiate the ideological power (Evan, 2015, p. 14).

So far, studies on tea culture can be divided into three categories. The first category is about agricultural and historical culture, which provides a systematic description on the history of tea and tea culture, as well as the archaeological aspects of agriculture. The second is the regional socio-cultural category, which is a study of a certain region or a certain variety of tea and culture, combined with cultural tourism, tea drinking customs, etc. The third is the study of tea culture from the perspective of communication science, which mostly focuses on the study of the dissemination of tea culture from a ritual perspective or cross-cultural perspective. In summary, it can be seen that there is a lack of research on the dissemination path of Chinese tea culture based on encoding and decoding theory.

## **Findings**

### **Lack of Encoding**

In the process of spreading Chinese tea culture, the government, enterprises, academia, and the media, all tend to confuse the marketing of tea itself with the dissemination of tea culture, limiting the goal of tea culture dissemination only to whether the marketing of tea is successful or not (Ding, 2006, p. 3). In the encoding stage, some Chinese wrongly regard the process of tea sales as that of the dissemination of Chinese tea culture. This leads to the fact that in the process of tea culture coding, both the encoder and the audience will limit tea culture to the commodity attributes of tea, while ignoring the history and spirit in tea, deviating from the original goal of tea culture dissemination (Wang & Zhao, 2005, p.23). Actually tea is not only a commodity, but also a vehicle for culture. If tea is just encoded as a commercial commodity, the development of Chinese tea culture will be in trouble.

### **Communication Effect Needs to Be Strengthened**

We should not only actively excavate, organize, and summarize the cultural connotation when disseminating tea culture both at home and abroad, but also need a scientific and effective dissemination method. Due to the lack of excavation, collation, and publicity for tea culture, the tea ceremony, tea art, and other unique Chinese cultural connotations will be lost. Moreover, the media publicizing tea as antiquated and traditional culture or just a drink for old people, such stereotypes made a great negative impact on the young people, so the young people will more admire and follow western culture (Jing, 2012, p. 72), assuming that it represents trend and fashion, drinking tea has become an outdated practice and a patent for the hermits or the aged, and the healthy way to disseminate tea culture gradually fades away. Nowadays the dissemination of tea culture-related products focuses only on the spread of the content, lacking the derivative products formed by the reprocessing and recreation of cultural elements, and as a result, the concept of tea culture is unclear to tourists. Furthermore, different audience groups and different communication carriers need different ways of presenting tea culture, which requires multiple creation and re-expression of the cultural elements in the tea products, but most of

Chinese tea culture products are not divided into groups, and the transmission is not targeted through different channels, resulting in ineffective communication. In the communication process, the interaction between the coder and decoder helps to produce meaning in communication activities. However, when disseminating Chinese tea products to foreigners, we rarely set up the channels for communication and interaction between the two sides, but only focus on the unilateral transmission of tea culture, regarding audience only as a passive side to accept information, weakening the interaction between the decoder and the encoder during the dissemination process. As a result, foreign decoders cannot understand Chinese tea culture deeply enough, and Chinese encoders cannot get the audience's feedback in time to prepare for a secondary encoding of tea cultural elements contained in tea products.

### **Audience Being Hard to Be in Dominant Position in the Decoding Process**

When it comes to decoding effect, whether for domestic or foreign audiences, the decoding of Chinese tea culture would frequently encounter the problem that it is difficult for the decoders to be in a dominant position. The main reasons are as follows: First, there are many varieties of Chinese tea, and different regions have their own tea and culture rich with strong regional flavor, while the audience lacks a certain understanding of tea culture with local features due to the limitations of geographic space and knowledge background, which leads to the decoders' bias in understanding the connotation and value expressed by the cultural signs rich in local characteristics. Secondly, the encoders will make tea products artistic, while the decoders will feel puzzled and fail to understand their symbolic expression, resulting in poor communication; thirdly, the audience's understanding of cultural symbols is not fed back to the encoders through effective channels, or the encoders do not pay enough attention to the audience's feedback, so there is a lack of targeted secondary encoding, which leads to the audience being in a negotiated position or an oppositional position to the encoded information.

## **Solutions**

### **Encoding: Innovative Encoding Model**

As the birthplace of tea culture in the world, China is known for a rich variety of tea products which is classified into six major categories according to their color or processing technology: black tea, green tea, oolong tea, white tea, black tea, yellow tea, and many different sub-categories within each major category, such as Xinyang Mao Jian, Xihu Longjing, Wuyi Rock Tea, etc., and thus it is an advantage to encode the diversity of Chinese tea into various cultural products. Unfortunately, Chinese tea is still in the pre-brand era, and the value of tea is mainly determined by its taste. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on developing international market and establishing Chinese tea brands. Scholars have already done some researches on tea culture, and we can take advantage of these research results and encode them into tea products. And multilingual translation and marketing promotion can help to attract the interest of foreign audiences. Tea tool is an important part of tea culture, and there are many kinds of Chinese tea tools, including tea picking tools, tea steaming tools, tea drying tools, tea brewing tools, and so on (Zhang, 2014, p. 176). Therefore, in the encoding stage, we should highlight the unique features of Chinese tea which distinguish it from those in other tea-producing countries such as Britain and Japan, using diversified tea leaves and Chinese tea tools as code carriers to spread Chinese tea culture to the world.

### **Communication: Exert Government Leadership & Broaden Communication Channels**

The government's dissemination of tea culture is different from the general cultural dissemination through mass media. The government can use a variety of ways to spread official information and explain government

actions to the outside world in order to achieve the desired effect (Liu & Cui, 2011, p. 45). Therefore, the words, actions, policies, and practices of the government are the most practical and efficient kind of dissemination. The international communication of tea culture should not be limited to the development and operation of the tea industry. Therefore, promoting Chinese tea culture only by the marketing of tea products is obviously not enough, and we also need government intervention to support and promote the cultural concept, spiritual connotation, and humanistic values of tea. The internet and computer programs can help us broaden our communication channels, and we can use it to establish an authoritative platform for the international communication of tea culture, and integrate tea culture network resources. And we can also develop a series of online courses about tea culture, highlighting the cultural and historical heritage of Chinese tea culture in terms of tea classification, tools, brewing techniques, etc. Thus we can change the mode of communication from traditional media to diversified social media.

### **Decoding: Integrate Culture and Tourism & Improve Decoders' Participation**

By increasing the interaction, decoders can actively participate in the process of decoding tea culture, so that the decoders can shift from negotiated position or oppositional position to dominant position (the product being interpreted as the producer intended). Mutual cooperation can provide an interactive channel for both sides, strengthening the audience's understanding of tea culture, eliminating the decoders' stereotypes and misunderstandings about Chinese tea culture, and helping to realize the change of decoders' position to be dominant. At present, tea culture and tourism have achieved a preliminary combination, but their interaction is still far from enough (Wang & Tao, 2004, p. 110). Through tea culture tourism, decoders can not only understand tea culture carriers, but also feel and experience tea culture activities and tea production process personally (Li, 2008, p. 56). Therefore, on the basis of in-depth research and sufficient evidence, tea culture tourism products should be vigorously developed to enhance the participatory, interactive, informative, and interesting aspects of tea culture activities, so that decoders can enter a commonly ritualized field with ease and become familiar with tea cultures. In terms of feedback, interactive processes and links should be set up to enhance the sense of participation and experience of both sides of the transmission, attracting the audience to obtain high participation in the interaction, preventing decoders from aberrant or oppositional decoding.

### **Secondary Encoding: Collect Feedback & Improve Quality**

Secondary encoding seems to be a feedback process that is neglected by the encoders at the end of the circulation, but it is of great significance. Encoders need to pay attention to feedback in the late stage of communication to improve their secondary encoding quality when facing the deviation of encoder or decoder. Generally speaking, the audience would have a desire to express their opinions on the information they received, and the establishment of a reasonable feedback mechanism is an urgent issue to be solved in the late stage of circulation, and only when the feedback really reaches the encoder can the secondary encoding be achieved and improved. The audience's feedback on the tea culture products will be collected, and then this feedback will be carefully sorted out. Through some new and popular ways like mass media, the feedback is investigated to keep abreast of the audience's preferences when enjoying tea performances, and the encoders will reflect on the results of the survey and transform them into secondary encoding ideas in order to improve the quality for further or next encoding. In this way, the encoders can better verify the effectiveness of the communication about the symbolic meaning preset by the code. For the development of derivative products of tea, the secondary encoding experience of other cultural and creative products can also be referred to. On the basis of catering to the audience's

mentality and their habits, tea culture symbols are further encoded into all aspects of the audience's life, such as developing better tea drinks and tea candies, etc., breaking up the traditional encoding paradigm of tea product, further arousing the decoders' interest, striving to make the audience accurately decode the meaning conveyed by the encoder, preventing the decoders from misinterpretations, spreading Chinese tea culture, and generating social benefits, while also bringing certain economic benefits.

### Conclusion

China is facing serious problems in the transmission of tea culture at the present time. Supported by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, this paper analyzes its weaknesses and the difficulties in the processes of encoding, communication, and decoding. For solutions, in the encoding stage, we should propose the innovative encoding mode by highlighting the diversity of Chinese tea varieties and tools. In the communication stage, government should play a leading role, broadening and changing dissemination channels from the traditional to the modern. And the decoders' participation should be stimulated through the integration of culture and tourism, and the problems of Chinese tea culture can also be solved by collecting decoder's feedback for secondary encoding in a way that can arouse the audience's interest, with a view to promoting the domestic and international dissemination of Chinese tea culture and allowing more people to experience the charm of tea.

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