

The Digital Preservation and Communication of Traditional Chinese Tea Culture and Arts: A Case Study of China's National Tea Museum

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms play a significant role in the preservation and communication of digital culture and arts in the contemporary digital age. The China National Tea Museum is using digital platforms actively and effectively to generate user-friendly content and communicate it to the diversified and geographically dispersed digital public. However, the museum still needs to adopt many innovative ways to efficiently gratify the needs of the digital public regarding their interests in

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1. INTRODUCTION

The protection and communication of traditional Chinese culture and art in the digital era is an important feature of Chinese government efforts to safeguard traditional values, the values which connect people with their soil and communicate them to youth to keep them in touch with their roots and develop their consciousness. To reiterate, in today's age, digital technologies play a significant role in the protection and transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to another. Ours is an age of profound and prolonged media transition. The emergence and popularization of new media technologies what some people call 'hybrid media ecology', has created more opportunities for a bottom-up consumer driver approach compared to the top to down traditional approach. According to China Internet Network Information Center, up to June 2019, 854 million populations in China were Internet users, and 99.1% of them, that is, 847 million access to the Internet via the mobile network [1]. This high penetration of internet users through a mobile network provides many opportunities for the protection and dissemination of traditional culture and arts.

Previous studies explored various dimensions of digital media and traditional Chinese culture. For

example, Tian investigated the influence of digital media on traditional cultural communication [2]. Likewise, Meng examined Tai Chi and the spirit of Chinese Traditional Culture [3], Ma & Yu studied the digital display of Shaoxing Opera Culture in the digital media age [4], whereas, Hu scrutinized the integration strategy of traditional media in the mobile Internet era [5]. In another study, Zhang, Yousaf & Xu evaluated the strategies, issues, and prospects of communicating traditional Chinese culture and arts in the digital era [6]. In addition, Lu & Bu argued that the fusion of technology, traditional art and culture provides the likelihood of protection and dissemination of traditional Chinese tea culture [7]. Yu contends that the integration of the digital art creative industry and tea culture has profound cultural significance as well as commercial value for Chinese society [8].

Chinese president Xi Jinping accentuated the digitization of traditional Chinese culture. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), General Secretary Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized the need to inherit and carry forward the Chinese traditional culture. With this emphasis on cultural renaissance from the top leadership of the country, the digitalization of a large number of museums has been carried out in China [9]. However, there is little research on the role of the

China National Tea Museum in the protection and dissemination of traditional Chinese tea culture to both internal and external audiences. To bridge this gap in the literature, therefore, this essay investigates some of the digital strategies used by China's National Tea Museum in Hangzhou for the protection and communication of traditional tea culture and arts to the digital publics in the digital era.

1.1 Contribution to the Existing Body of Knowledge

This study aims to enhance and enrich our understanding of the digital strategies used by China's National Tea Museum to preserve and communicate Tea culture. It contributes to the existing literature in four ways; firstly, it intends to identify the digital platforms used by the China National Tea Museum for the preservation and communication of a long tradition of tea in China. Secondly, this study is useful to document the issues and challenges faced by the China National Tea Museum in this process. Thirdly, it enlists the achievements of the China National Tea Museum which can serve as a guideline for other organizations in the world in general and China in specific. Lastly, this essay suggests some policy guidelines for the government to improve the current strategies and make them more effective and practical for the preservation and transmission of Traditional Chinese Tea Culture and arts.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The Emergence of Digital Platforms

This section intends to review the studies related to digital platforms, digital publics, and digital culture and art communication. Zhang, Yousaf & Xu differentiated between traditional culture and arts. In their view, the former includes philosophers, emperor etiquette, and folk customs; whereas, the latter covers painting, calligraphy, music, drama, paper cutting, shadow arts, Tai Chi Chuan, Kongfu and other forms of art (p. 64) [6]. Taşkıran argued that digital communication provides unique opportunities for target audiences in reaching and consuming arts and cultural content free of charge, and without time and place restrictions [10] [14]. UNESCO pointed out that due to the rise in cultural tourism, the number of museums around the world has increased from 22,000 in 1975 to 55,000 today across the globe. The use of digital platforms by these museums provides more opportunities for the propagation of traditional culture and arts to diverse digital publics. Taşkıran noted that digital media have aroused interest in communicating information about cultures by making the contents of culture and arts in new communication mediums accessible to large target audiences [11].

2.2 The Emergence of Digital Public and Their Needs

Digital platforms have given rise to the digital publics. The needs and motives of the digital public are quite different from traditional media publics. The public find their motives and needs more easily gratified by the digital media compared to the other forms of media. It is noted that the news media technologies and platforms have provided us with both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities are how we make this cyberspace more pluralistic and democratic for the discussion and participation of digital publics, and challenges are how we ensure that this democratic cyberspace is available to gratify the needs of the digital public [12].

2.3 China's National Tea Museum Role

China's National Tea Museum, located in Hangzhou, is the only tea museum in the country specialized in the preservation and communication of tea and tea culture in China. It mainly consists of two branches: *Shuangfeng* and *Longjing*. The former was opened in 1991 while the latter in 2015. The museum has multiple functions such as cultural display, scientific research on tea, promotion of tea culture and arts, academic exchange, tea art training and interactive session with tea lovers and visitors. The Shuangfeng branch comprises tea history hall, tea category hall, tea information hall, tea sets hall, tea customs hall, purple clay hall, etc. Historically speaking, tea was discovered in China. From China, it traveled to other parts of the world. In ancient times, tea has used as medicine and food rather than a drink. From medicine and food, it evolved as a drink. The tea hall displays the historical evolution of tea in ancient China during the Han, Tang, and Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties. Moreover, this hall exhibits different and unique ways of tea making and presenting ceremonies in the aforementioned dynasties.



Figure 1: Ancient time tea presetting stove from the Han dynasty

In the Tea category hall, there are displayed samples of about 100 kinds of tea. The most prominent among these tea categories are green tea, black tea, oolong tea, yellow tea, white tea, and dark tea. This variety of teas illustrates Chinese people's love for tea. The tea information hall provides information teaspoons and practical guidance about the cultivation, and presentation of tea. Tea sets hall exhibits hundreds of various kinds of tea utensils including teapots, teacups, tea trays, tea storage boxes, tea grinds, teaspoons, tea measures, and many others from Wei, Jin, Song, Ming, Qing dynasties and modern china. For instance, here you can witness rough ceramic pots from Wei and Jin dynasties; black glazed teacups from the Song dynasty; purple clay teapots from the Ming dynasty; Famille rose tureens from the Qing dynasty and ivory teaspoons from modern china. As the old saying goes, “utensil is the father of tea”.

The tea costumes hall is a mirror of typical Chinese tea costumes. For example, Tibetans drink hot buttered tea in their tents. In contrast, the Dai people in Yunnan put tea leaves in a clay pot and roast till scent comes out of the teapot, and then they pour it in the hot water to prepare tea in their bamboo houses. However, people in Sichuan drink a bowl of tea while chatting on bamboo chairs. Conversely, Anhui tea salesmen sell tea in the front room and produce tea at the back of the house.



Figure 2: Tea sets from various dynasties



Figure 3a: Typical Tea costumes found in China

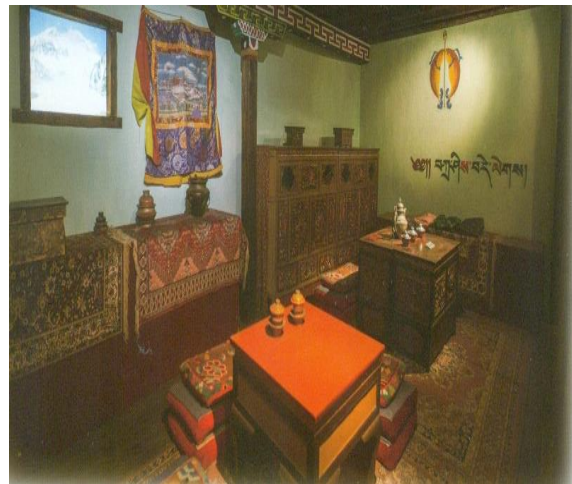


Figure 3b: Typical Tea costumes found in China

The world tea hall presents the story of how tea traveled from China to the rest of the world. There are more than 60 countries and areas that produce tea across the globe. The people who live in different countries have different ways of cultivating, making and drinking tea.



Figure 4: Tea ceremony and TV presentation

China Tea Brand Hall displays tea produced in more than 21 provinces by more than 80 million farmers in China. This hall demonstrates the most famous brands of tea with their geographical regions stretched in the different periods of China’s history.



Figure 5: Different famous brands of tea in China

2.4 Protection and Communication of Traditional Tea Culture and Arts for Digital Publics

The China Tea Museum uses two-fold strategies to protect tea culture in the digital era, which is to say both in the exhibition and academic areas. In the first place, in terms of exhibitions, special digital exhibition halls are made to display and introduce different forms of tea to the digital public. In the digital cybersphere, the visitors can visit the museum using their mobile phones to listen and watch the different commentaries. For this purpose, temporary exhibitions adopt hotspot

collection methods to save exhibition materials and make them available to the public for continuous access. In the second place, in terms of academics, new topics are introduced to store tea culture data in the form of a database and integrate the contents of tea culture to facilitate the needs of subsequent research. The museum has established new media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat public accounts to directly disseminate publicity, promotion, and persuasion-related content to the digital public. In this vein, it is noted that digital preservation of culture and arts have many advantages, “the preserved collections can be accessed locally and remotely via the internet by students, teachers, researchers and common public” (p. 150) [13].

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Challenges of China National Tea Museum

China National Tea Museum faces many issues. Firstly, the lack of technical manpower is one of the biggest issues the museum encounters during content production. It has to rely on external companies hired to generate specific content intend to promote and display the tea culture and arts for the consumption of the digital public. This outsourcing of the content production makes the cost higher and the subsequent supervision of the content is also compromised. Secondly, unlike other cultural heritages, tea culture is constantly changing and developing with the changing sociological patterns of our societies. Thirdly, achieving the maximum protection of tea culture and communication at a limited cost. Lastly, the operation of Weibo and WeChat public accounts has increased the operational burden of the museum and affected the daily work of the museum workers. Fourthly, to handle more and more work, the museum hires more manpower, spends more energy and resources. This increased pressure affects the quality of content production and sharing for the digital public.

3.2 Achievements of the China National Tea Museum

The achievements of the China Tea Museum mainly include; firstly, the establishment of a database of China’s six major teas, which makes the existing categories of Chinese tea more standardized. Secondly, the preservation of these teas is advantageous to the healthy development of the entire tea industry in China. Thirdly, every year, more than 600,000 people come to the museum, including important heads and political figures of some countries such as Japan, South Korea, Germany, Britain, France, and other countries. These exchanges include the exchange of tea parties, tea art performances, lectures

on the kinds, ways of preparation, and presentation of tea, and forums to discuss different forms of tea found in different provinces of the country. Lastly, with these information dissemination platforms, the public's awareness of the tea museum's functions is also increasing. In this regard, the messages broadcast on WeChat continue to create an atmosphere that stimulates a love for tea culture.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay concludes that digital platforms play a vital role in the preservation and communication of digital culture and arts to the digital public in the present-day digital age. The China National Tea Museum is playing a substantial role to gratify the needs of geographically dispersed digital publics in the country and abroad. The preservation of traditional tea culture and arts employing user-friendly techniques to efficiently gratify the needs of the digital public regarding their interests in traditional tea culture and arts is no less contribution.

4.1 Policy recommendations

This essay suggests some policy guidelines. Firstly, the China National museum needs to have its own skilled and professional content production team to preserve the constantly evolving and complex tea culture. Secondly, the museum should adopt a bilingual approach to extend its reach and access to the global public interested in traditional Chinese tea culture and arts. To fulfill this gap, the museum's website needs to have both Chinese and English versions offering identical content. Thirdly, to make this communication process with the digital publics more interactive and effective there is a need to create live interactive discussion groups to engage the digital publics and address their queries about traditional tea culture and arts. Fourthly, to ensure that cyberspace is pluralistic and respects multiple points of view, the tea culture and arts-related activities need to be encouraged to develop favorable discourses for the promotion of traditional tea culture and arts among the international heterogeneous digital publics. Through these activities, the international digital public can feel the vibrancy and profoundness of diverse and extensive Chinese traditional culture and arts. Finally, the cooperation among the tea museums in the world must be enhanced to increase the visibility of the traditional Chinese tea culture and arts in the world. For this purpose, international social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, etc. can be utilized to magnify the visibility of the traditional tea culture and arts. To conclude, these initiatives can increase and the visibility and respectability of the traditional Chinese tea culture and arts among the diversified digital publics.

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