Study of Chinese Tea Culture Based on Meme Theory

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Keywords: Meme; Tea Culture

Abstract. Meme is the basic unit of culture, which emphasizes on transmission. Tea culture spreads to many other regions through cultural exchange via the ancient “Silk Road” and other channels of trade. Based on meme theory, the author explores that the history and development of Chinese tea culture and its influence around the world.

1. Introduction

From Collins English Dictionary and the Free Dictionary, tea has two related definition. The first is that tea is an evergreen shrub or small tree native to Asia, having fragrant, cup-shaped white flowers and glossy leaves. The other is an aromatic, slightly bitter beverage or drink made by steeping tea leaves in boiling water. The definition makes it clear that people always refer to a drink or beverage when we talk about tea.

China is the hometown of tea and the birthplace of tea culture, which has been going on for more than 4700 years and has continued to flourish all over the world.[1] Tea is any of various beverages made by steeping the leaves, flowers, fruits, or other parts of certain plants, such as herbal tea, peppermint tea. Tea is a constituent part of Chinese culture. China is an original producer of tea and is renowned for its skills in planting and making tea. Tea culture spreads to many other regions through cultural exchange via the ancient “Silk Road” and other channels of trade. In recent years, various forms of tea cultural activities has developed, including the tea culture festival, the tea art performance, the tea culture tourism, the tea culture leisure and so on, which take the tea culture activity as the main body, satisfying the people with the leisure by the sightseeing, the traveling, during which tea lovers feast their eyes on the beautiful scenery of the mountains and rivers. At the same time these tea-related cultural activities promote economic development.[2]

2. Explanation of Meme Theory

In his book The Selfish Gene, British scientist Richard Dawkins defended his newly coined word meme, which he defined as “a unit of cultural transmission”.⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary also includes the new coinage. According to the dictionary, meme is the basic unit of culture, transmitted by non-genetic means, especially by imitation, which may change in form, but remain unchanged in substance in the process of reproduction and transmission. Meme itself, like any good meme, caught on fairly quickly, spreading from person to person as it established itself in the language.

As can be seen from the above meme concept, unlike genes, which can only be passed vertically from one generation to the next, memes can be passed from one organism to another. At the same time, it can also spread between non-biological carriers or between biological and non-biological carriers, and the direction of transmission can be vertical or horizontal. However, once there is something new, if the existing memes can be skillfully combined, you can also get a very good dissemination effect. The meme theory emphasizes on transmission. Communication is the most important way of
expression with some approaches such as repetition and analogy emphasized; and the ways of transmission is the most critical part of the meme theory.

3. History of Tea Culture in China

Tea ceremony is originated in China yet more popular in Japan since it has been introduced to Japan during South Song Dynasty. When it came to Yuan Dynasty, tea ceremony was not that favored anymore in the central China. Tea culture is the general name of various cultural forms in which people express various ideas, beliefs, thoughts and feelings between people and nature, with tea meme as the carrier.

The legend of original discovery of tea is that Shen Nong, our ancestor, who tried more than one hundreds of plants before knowing the detoxification function and therapeutic effect of tea. In the Yin and Zhou Dynasties, tea had become a tribute. In the Qin and Han Dynasties, tea cultivation, trade and drinking had gradually expanded. Then in the Southern and Northern Dynasties, there were many cultural phenomena in which tea meme was regarded as a kind of custom. Because of the relative abundance of material life in Tang Dynasty, people have the condition to take tea as common, to pursue more spiritual enjoyment and create a beautiful life.[1] In different ethnic groups and regions of China, there are still a variety of tea drinking habits and customs. Tea meme spreads. With the development of tea material culture, the spiritual culture and system culture of tea are extended and developed in depth.

Chinese tea ceremony reflects the central idea of Taoism, Confucian and Buddhism and in fact it’s a combination of philosophy and life style. Through the whole set of ceremony—making tea, appreciating tea, smelling tea, enjoying tea, friendship is gradually increased. Such inherent moral and folk customs become an important part of spiritual life. A well-made cup of hot tea can warm the heart and soul of any tea lover, but it can be unpleasantly bitter or disappointingly tasteless when improperly steeped. Fortunately, it’s easy to prepare a tasty cup of tea. Decide what type of tea you want to brew and choose loose leaves or tea bags. Then heat your water and pour it over the tea. Let the tea steep for the right amount of time according to the tea type and then remove the tea. Enjoy your hot tea on its own or with milk and sugar. Chinese nation has written a brilliant page for its tea culture in the history of world civilization. The development and promotion of tea has been one of China’s principal contributions to the world.

4. Development of Tea Culture in China Based on Meme

Tea Culture is a representative traditional culture in China, rising in the Tang Dynasty, flourishing in the song and Ming dynasties, declining in the Qing Dynasty. China is the hometown of tea and the birthplace of tea culture. In different ethnic groups and regions of China, there are still a variety of tea drinking habits and customs. Just like genes, realization of tea culture meme also requires a variety of external factors involved. The theory of meme reveals the spreading mechanism of various thoughts, trends of thought and ideas.[3] Memes tend to be short lived, and the popularity of a meme can be said that its rise is also vigorous, its death is also rapid. Through imitation, memes are copied from one carrier to another. Tea Culture is the carrier of tea, and through this carrier to spread various arts. Tea Culture is a part of Chinese traditional excellent culture, and its content is very rich. The connotation of tea culture is actually a concrete expression of the connotation of Chinese culture.[2] Through making tea, enjoying tea, smelling tea, drinking tea, tasting tea and other customs combined with Chinese cultural connotation and etiquette, a kind of cultural phenomenon meme with distinct Chinese cultural characteristics, can also be said to be a etiquette phenomenon. Meme may remain unchanged in substance in the process of reproduction and transmission, taking tea procedure and some other manners related, unlike genes, which can only be passed vertically from generation to generation while
the style of having tea meme can be passed from one person to another. Tea culture meme can also spread between tea culture carriers and the direction of transmission can be vertical or horizontal.

However, once there is a new thing, if the existing memes can be skillfully combined, you can also get a very good dissemination effect. When the host accompanies the guest to drink tea, we should pay attention to the tea residue in the guest’s cup and pot. If we have drunk half of the tea, we should add boiled water to make the tea consistency consistent and the water temperature suitable. That is showing your appreciation to the guests. The process is a good meme and easily be transmitted by communication and imitation. Susan, a student of Richard Dawkins’s, accepted Dawkins’ idea that memes are transmitted from one person’s mind into another’s mind, in which the process is called mimicry. Anything that passes from one person to another person in this way is a mimicry. [7] Having a tea party friend is one of the most widespread social functions of tea culture. With the progress of society, tea-drinking culture meme has infiltrated into all areas of society, corners and all aspects of life. Although the tea customs meme of different ethnic groups are different, according to Chinese custom, whenever a guest comes in, no matter whether you want to drink tea or not, the host is indispensable to respect tea. In today’s market economy, competition is fierce, and we believe in survival of the fittest, which is the same as the living style. But the human sentiment is more indifferent, and the interpersonal relationship tends to be indifferent. Through tea houses, tea houses or tea art, friends get together, exchange information, exchange feelings, enhance understanding, communication and friendship. Tea culture meme is an elegant culture meme in which celebrities are willing to participate which spread the meme in a casual way although in the dissemination of competition of survival of the fittest, the final achievement of today’s cultural outlook is still very different.

5. Tea Culture Around the World

The habit of drinking tea and growing tea in other parts of the world was directly or indirectly transmitted from China. But one can find evidence that tea drinking was not just invented by the Chinese, but also in other parts of the world, such as India and Africa. A meme, a different subject can be taken, framed, and filled in with a different text. Although it is processed in different situations, the similarity can be accurately determined. Memes are the basic framework and information that make up things, but they are not finished. [5] The ancient Chinese tea culture, combined with the history, culture, economy and culture of various countries, evolved into tea in the United Kingdom, Japanese tea culture, Korean tea culture, Russian tea culture and Moroccan tea culture.

In Britain, drinking tea has become a part of life. It is a kind of etiquette for the English people to show their gentlemanly manners. It is also an indispensable procedure in important social activities. The Japanese tea ceremony was originated in Japan but was influenced by China. The Japanese tea ceremony has the rich Japanese national customs, and forms the unique tea ceremony system and the etiquette. South Koreans believe that tea culture is the root of Korean national culture. Regardless of national boundaries, race and beliefs, tea culture meme can unite the tea lovers and promote academic exchanges and economic and trade negotiations.

6. Conclusion

Tea has also become the world’s most popular green drinks, which is the most beneficial to physical and mental health. Memes are like the genes of living things that are unique. If the traditional culture is not well protected, its meme will gradually disappear, just like the extinction of species. If we can respect its uniqueness, and other cultural memes for collision, interaction, reproduction, we can make it adapt to the development of the times.[4] If we can preserve a unique meme with reproductive vitality for the human culture, it may bring an unexpected impetus to the development of human civilization. With the material enrichment, the improvement of spiritual life, will inevitably promote the rise of culture. The current world-wide hot tea culture is a good proof.
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