

Development Pathways for the Tea Economy in the Context of Rural Revitalization

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ABSTRACT

Under the comprehensive implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the tea industry, as a characteristic and advantageous sector in China, carries profound cultural traditions while facing significant opportunities for transformation and upgrading. This paper aims to systematically analyze the development pathways of the tea industry within the context of rural revitalization, employing methods such as literature review, current situation analysis, and strategy synthesis. The study reveals that the tea industry currently suffers from issues such as a monotonous variety structure, low standardization in production, insufficient brand influence, and weak driving force from leading enterprises. Accordingly, it is essential to fully leverage policy opportunities by establishing a whole-process quality standard system, enhancing brand empowerment through cultural elements, and fostering and strengthening leading enterprises. These measures will drive the tea industry toward improved quality, efficiency, and sustainable development, thereby providing robust support for the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas.

KEYWORDS

Rural Revitalization; Tea Economy; Development Pathways; Industrial Integration

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rural Revitalization Strategy, a major decision and deployment by China to address agricultural, rural, and farmers' issues, and to promote agricultural and rural modernization, is an inevitable requirement for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the Chinese Dream. As a traditional and advantageous industry in China's countryside, the tea industry holds a significant position in the rural economy. China is the world's largest producer and consumer of tea, boasting a rich history of tea cultivation and a profound tea culture. Statistics show that tea cultivation in China covers extensive areas across multiple provinces, with both tea yield and output value increasing annually. The tea industry not only provides employment opportunities and income sources for farmers but also plays a crucial role in promoting rural economic development, driving the inheritance of rural culture, and protecting the ecological environment.

However, in the context of rural revitalization, China's tea industry also faces numerous challenges. For instance, tea plant varieties are relatively singular and aging, affecting yield and quality; the level of standardized production is low with limited processing capacity, leading to inconsistent product quality; there is a scarcity of high-quality brands, resulting in insufficient brand benefits and difficulty in gaining a competitive edge in the market; and the development of the tea industry lacks the driving force of leading enterprises, with an unclear industrial agglomeration effect, hindering further industrial progress. Therefore, researching the development pathways for the tea economy under rural revitalization holds significant practical importance.

2. CURRENT DEVELOPMENT STATUS OF THE TEA INDUSTRY UNDER RURAL REVITALIZATION

As the place of origin for tea, China possesses an extremely long history of tea cultivation and a deep cultural heritage. After thousands of years of development and inheritance, the tea industry has become one of the important pillar industries in China's agricultural sector. In recent years, with the deepening implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, China's tea industry has exhibited unique developmental trends in terms of cultivation area, yield, and regional distribution [1].

Regarding cultivation area, tea planting in China is widespread, spanning multiple provinces. By 2023, the total national tea garden area had reached 3.4332 million hectares, showing a year-on-year increase of 3.09% and a sustained, stable growth trend. In terms of yield, with the steady expansion of tea garden area and continuous optimization of cultivation techniques, China's tea production has maintained steady growth. In 2023, the total output of dry raw tea reached 3.5187 million tons, marking significant growth compared to the previous year. Regarding technological application and development levels in production, continuous scientific and technological progress has led to significant improvements in the technical standards of planting, picking, and processing within China's tea industry. In planting, the coverage rate of clonal superior varieties has been increasing, reaching 68% by 2023. Clonal varieties offer advantages such as uniform growth, high yield, and good quality, laying the foundation for high-quality and high-yield tea production. In picking, although manual picking remains dominant in most tea gardens, mechanized picking technology is gradually being promoted and applied. Some large-scale tea gardens have begun using tea-picking machines, greatly improving picking efficiency and reducing labor costs. These machines can achieve precise picking based on tea growth conditions and requirements, ensuring tea quality. In processing, tea processing technology is continuously innovating, moving gradually from traditional manual methods towards mechanization, automation, and intelligence. The proliferation of intelligent equipment, such as the installation of over 21,700 units of imitation manual twisting robots, has significantly enhanced production efficiency [2].

3. PROBLEMS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEA INDUSTRY

3.1. Relatively Singular and Aging Tea Plant Varieties

In many tea-producing regions in China, the issue of singular tea plant varieties is prominent. Some areas have long cultivated the same variety, such as certain green tea regions primarily relying on a single traditional green tea cultivar, lacking varietal diversity. This monotonous varietal structure weakens the industry's resilience against market fluctuations and natural disasters. A decline in market demand for that particular variety or an outbreak of pests and diseases can severely impact the entire industry's economic returns [3].

The aging of tea plant varieties is also a significant concern. Some old-variety tea bushes have been cultivated for extended periods, suffering from degradation due to years of harvesting and environmental influences. These aging plants commonly exhibit problems like low yield, poor quality, and weak resistance to pests and diseases. For example, some large-leaf variety tea bushes introduced years ago now produce sparse buds and leaves after prolonged harvesting, leading to substantially reduced yields and inferior aroma and taste compared to new varieties. Relevant studies indicate that the yield of aging tea bushes is, on average, 20%-30% lower than that of new varieties. Furthermore, the content of nutrients such as amino acids and tea polyphenols is also reduced, resulting in lower tea quality that struggles to meet consumer demand for high-quality products.

Varietal singularity and aging not only affect yield and quality but also constrain the economic benefits of the tea industry. Low yields and poor quality impact farmers' incomes, increase production costs for tea enterprises, and compress profit margins. Simultaneously, teas from singular and aging

varieties have weaker competitiveness in the market, making it difficult to command higher prices, further restricting industry development [4].

3.2. Low Level of Standardized Production and Limited Processing Capacity

The level of standardized production in China's tea industry is relatively low, lacking unified standards and norms. In cultivation, management practices vary significantly among regions and farmers, with no uniform standards for fertilization, pest control, and picking times [5]. Some farmers, in pursuit of higher yields, overuse chemical fertilizers and pesticides, leading to excessive residues that compromise tea quality and safety. In picking, the lack of uniform standards results in some farmers picking leaves that are either too tender or too mature, adversely affecting the tea's taste and aroma.

The processing stage also faces numerous issues. Some tea processing enterprises employ outdated techniques and equipment, still relying on traditional manual or semi-mechanized methods, resulting in low production efficiency and unstable product quality. Some small-scale processing workshops operate in simple facilities with old equipment and lack the necessary quality inspection tools, making it difficult to guarantee processing quality. Non-standardized processing techniques are a common problem, as different masters apply varying levels of skill, leading to significant differences in the taste and aroma of the same type of tea. This low level of standardization and limited processing capacity results in inconsistent tea product quality in China, failing to meet domestic and international market demands for high-quality tea. In the international market, inconsistent quality hinders competition with teas from other producing countries, affecting China's tea exports. Domestically, as consumer expectations for quality rise, non-standardized tea products struggle to gain consumer trust, gradually losing market share to branded, standardized products.

3.3. Scarcity of High-Quality Brands And Insufficient Brand Benefits

Although China is a major tea producer, it has relatively few high-quality brands, and brand development lags. Many tea enterprises lack brand awareness and underinvest in brand building, resulting in low brand recognition and weak market competitiveness. Some focus solely on short-term profits, neglecting brand cultivation and maintenance, failing to establish a unique brand culture and image [6]. Furthermore, China's tea brand landscape is characterized by numerous, disorganized, and fragmented brands with low concentration, lacking nationally influential major brands. For instance, in the green tea market, while there are well-known brands like West Lake Longjing and Biluochun, beyond these exist a multitude of local and minor brands, leading to intense competition with little differentiation among them.

Insufficient brand benefits are another critical issue. Due to low brand recognition, Chinese tea products struggle to establish brand value in the market, resulting in relatively low prices. For example, although China leads in global tea exports, its average export price is about \$1-2 per kilogram lower than that of India and Sri Lanka. This is primarily due to the low international awareness and reputation of Chinese tea brands, leading to lower consumer recognition and willingness to pay premium prices. Domestically, insufficient brand benefits also hinder market expansion for Chinese tea products; some high-quality teas lack brand support, making it difficult to attract consumer preference.

3.4. Lack of Leading Enterprises To Drive Industry Development

Currently, the development of China's tea industry suffers from a lack of driving force from leading enterprises, constraining large-scale and intensive development. Most tea enterprises are small in scale, with weak financial capabilities, outdated technology, and limited market expansion and innovation capacities. These small enterprises struggle to achieve economies of scale, face higher

costs in raw material procurement, production, processing, and sales, and thus have weaker market competitiveness.

Leading enterprises play a crucial guiding and driving role in industrial development. They can reduce production costs and improve product quality through scale production; increase investment in R&D to drive technological progress across the industry chain; expand market channels to enhance product market share; and foster coordinated development among upstream and downstream enterprises to form a complete industrial chain. However, China's tea industry has few leading enterprises, and those that exist are often small in scale, limiting their potential impact. For example, in Fujian Province, a major tea-producing region, large-scale tea enterprises above a designated size account for only about 10% of the total, and the driving effect of leading enterprises is not pronounced. The absence of strong leading enterprises hinders the achievement of large-scale, intensive development in China's tea industry, resulting in an unclear industrial agglomeration effect and restricting further progress. The dispersed nature of industrial development makes it difficult to form a unified brand image and market competitiveness, and is unfavorable for optimal resource allocation and industrial transformation and upgrading.

4. DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE TEA INDUSTRY UNDER RURAL REVITALIZATION

4.1. Seize Contemporary Opportunities To Promote Tea Industry Development

The Rural Revitalization Strategy provides various policy supports and development opportunities for the tea industry. The government should strengthen planning and guidance, formulate relevant policies, and increase support for the tea industry. For instance, establishing special funds for tea industry development to support variety improvement, standardized production, and brand building. Simultaneously, encourages financial institutions to provide credit support to tea enterprises and farmers, reducing financing costs and addressing capital shortages.

Tea enterprises and farmers should closely monitor market demand changes and promptly adjust industrial and product structures. With growing consumer demand for healthy beverages, organic tea and functional tea drinks have broad market prospects. Enterprises and farmers should increase the cultivation and production of organic tea and develop functional tea products with benefits such as lipid-lowering and antioxidant properties to meet market needs. Strengthening research and analysis of the tea market to understand consumer preferences and purchasing behavior enables the formulation of targeted marketing strategies to improve market share [7].

4.2. Focus on Product Quality To Enhance Production Efficiency

Variety improvement is key to enhancing tea quality. Strengthening tea plant breeding efforts to cultivate superior varieties adapted to different regions and market demands is essential. Increasing the promotion of new varieties and encouraging farmers to replace aging plants with superior ones is crucial. For example, Fujian Province has improved tea aroma and taste and increased farmers' income by promoting new varieties like Jin Guanyin and Huang Guanyin.

Standardized production is a vital means to ensure stable tea quality. Establishing comprehensive tea production standards and norms covering planting, picking, and processing is necessary. In planting, standardizing operations like fertilization and pest control to reduce pesticide and fertilizer use ensures ecological safety. In picking, defining clear picking standards ensures the tenderness and uniformity of leaves. In processing, standardizing techniques guarantee product quality and taste. Strengthening supervision over the production process and establishing a quality traceability system ensures that tea quality is traceable.

Quality supervision is a crucial safeguard. Enhancing supervision over production, processing, and sales, establishing a sound quality inspection system, and increasing inspection efforts are vital. Combating counterfeit and substandard tea products protects market order. For example, Zhejiang Province has implemented a tea quality and safety traceability platform, enabling full-channel traceability from planting to sales, safeguarding consumer rights.

4.3. Strengthen Brand Awareness To Enhance Brand Benefits

Brand building is crucial for the development of the tea industry. Tea enterprises should establish brand awareness and increase investment in brand building. Deeply exploring the cultural connotations of tea and integrating local history, culture, and natural landscapes can create tea brands with unique cultural appeal [8]. For instance, West Lake Longjing has become a renowned Chinese tea brand due to its long history and unique cultural heritage. Focusing on shaping brand image through packaging design, advertising, and other means enhances brand recognition and reputation.

Enhancing brand influence requires multifaceted efforts. Actively participating in domestic and international tea exhibitions, cultural activities, etc., showcases brand characteristics and advantages, improving awareness. Strengthening cooperation with e-commerce platforms and social media expands brand communication channels and increases exposure. For example, Bama Tea achieved integrated online-offline development through cooperation with e-commerce platforms, enhancing its brand influence. Emphasizing brand reputation building by providing high-quality products and services wins consumer trust and positive reviews, forming a favorable brand reputation.

4.4. Bolster Industrial Entities To Enhance The Leading Enterprise Effect

Cultivating strong leading enterprises is key to strengthening the main actors in the tea industry. The government should introduce relevant policies to increase support for leading enterprises. Financially, providing loan interest subsidies, project subsidies, etc., helps address funding issues. Technologically, encouraging leading enterprises to collaborate with research institutions for R&D and innovation improves technical capabilities. Regarding talent, supporting the introduction and training of professionals for leading enterprises enhances management and innovation levels.

Leading enterprises play a significant driving role in industrial development. Through models like “enterprise + base + farmer,” they can motivate farmers to develop production and achieve scale operation [9]. For example, Hunan’s Junshan Yinzhen Tea Co., Ltd. established stable raw material supply bases by signing cooperation agreements with farmers, increasing local farmers’ incomes. Leading enterprises can also guide industrial development direction and improve overall competitiveness through technological innovation and brand building.

4.5. Strengthen Industrial Driving Capacity and Enhance Integrated Value

Promoting the integrated development of the tea industry with tourism, culture, and other sectors is an important way to expand its development space and enhance industrial chain value [9]. Fully utilizing the natural scenery of tea gardens and tea cultural resources to develop tea-tourism integration projects is beneficial. Constructing tea-themed parks, tea culture museums, tea garden homestays, etc., allows tourists to appreciate scenic views while learning about tea culture and experiencing picking and processing, increasing engagement and experience [10]. For example, Liyang County in Jiangsu Province attracted many tourists and boosted the local economy by developing tea-tourism integration projects.

Integrating the tea industry with the cultural industry can enrich tea’s cultural connotations and enhance its value. Holding tea culture festivals, tea art performances, tea tasting events, etc., promotes tea culture and increases awareness and reputation. Developing cultural and creative products related to tea, such as packaging designs, books, and artworks, adds cultural and economic value [12].

The integrated development of the tea industry with other sectors can also drive related industries, promoting diversified rural economic development. The growth of the tea industry can stimulate tea processing, packaging, transportation, and other sectors, creating jobs and increasing farmers' incomes. Simultaneously, integrating tea with tourism and culture can drive the development of catering, accommodation, entertainment, and other service industries, fostering rural economic prosperity.

5. CONCLUSION

In the era of rural revitalization, the tea industry, as a vital pillar of the rural economy, holds significant importance for achieving rural revitalization goals. Analyzing its current state reveals positive factors like expanding scale, evolving market demand, and strong policy support. However, challenges such as singular and aging varieties, low standardization, insufficient brand benefits, and a lack of leading enterprises persist.

In response, this paper proposes a series of practical development strategies: seizing contemporary opportunities presented by rural revitalization and consumption upgrading to integrate resources and promote high-quality development; focusing on product quality through improved garden management, promoting green control technologies and standardized production, and establishing traceability systems; strengthening brand awareness with clear positioning and diversified marketing; bolstering industrial entities by cultivating leading enterprises and fostering close cooperation; and enhancing integrated value by deepening convergence with tourism, culture, and other industries, developing circular agriculture, and increasing added value.

Looking ahead, with the effective implementation of these strategies, the tea industry is poised for transformation and upgrading, playing a greater role in rural revitalization. Tea plant varieties will become more diverse and superior, standardized production will become the norm, high-quality brands will emerge, leading enterprises will guide development, and industrial integration will create more opportunities. The tea industry will not only increase farmers' incomes but also drive rural economic prosperity, promote the inheritance and development of rural culture, contribute to achieving the grand goals of rural revitalization, and play a significant role in building beautiful, prosperous, and civilized villages.

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