

Unfolding the Process of Transformative Experience through Tea-Culture Tourism: A Qualitative Study in Wuyishan, China

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Abstract: Transformative tourism has received increasing scholarly attention as a form of travel that produces lasting changes in travelers' values and lifestyles. While previous studies have mainly examined transformation in contexts such as religious, volunteer, and nature-based tourism, little empirical research has focused on complex experience structures in which multiple practices are integrated and meaningfully reinterpreted by travelers themselves. This study investigates how travelers undergo transformative experiences through tea-culture tourism in Wuyishan, Fujian Province, China. Focusing on the intersection of cultural rituals, immersion in natural landscapes, and interactions with local residents, it explores how travelers reconstruct their meaning systems through these multidimensional engagements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four travelers who reported transformative experiences. Their narratives were analyzed using the steps for coding and theorization method. The findings suggest that the transformative process can be structured into three stages: (1) entry through extraordinary landscapes, (2) awareness of an ideal self, and (3) rediscovery of everyday life. Rather than occurring by chance, these experiences emerge through active meaning-making by travelers who are psychologically prepared for transformation. Additionally, the perception and reinterpretation of "relational authenticity," facilitated by emotional interactions with others through cultural practices, played a crucial role. By highlighting how transformation is shaped through layered cultural and relational dimensions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the structure of transformative tourism experiences. Theoretically, it extends existing frameworks by introducing the concept of the "prepared self" and by positioning relational authenticity as a co-created resource, thereby enriching debates on authenticity and transformation in tourism. Practically, the study provides insights for destination managers and cultural practitioners seeking to design tourism experiences that foster self-reflection, intercultural connection, and sustainable relationships between travelers and host communities. Future research could further examine cross-cultural cases and employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to capture the dynamic and reciprocal nature of transformative processes.

Keywords: Transformative Tourism, Transformative Experience, Tea Culture Tourism, Self-transformation, Authenticity, Social Relatedness

1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward the phenomenon in which tourism experiences create lasting changes in travelers' self-understanding, values, and even lifestyles. This has led to theoretical development of the concept of transformative tourism (Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai, 2016; Lean, 2012; Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023). Within this framework, profound internal transformations—such as ontological insights and the reconstruction of identity that transcend mere entertainment or learning—are central themes. For instance, experiences such as participation in rituals, a sense of oneness with nature, and engagement with local communities are believed to have the potential to become turning points in travelers' lives (Pung, Gnoth, and Di Chiappa, 2020; Ross, 2005, 2010).

Previous studies have explored transformative experiences in contexts such as religious, volunteer, and nature-based tourism. These types of tourism are often shaped by specific motivations or purposes—faith, service, or healing—and have been regarded as relatively unidirectional in terms of experiential structure (Jiang et al, 2023; Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai, 2016; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017). In contrast, tea-culture tourism, the focus of this study, involves a layering of diverse experiences including sensory awareness in natural environments, interactions with local residents, participation in tea-related rituals, physical labor, and cultural learning. These experiences are interwoven throughout the journey, not functioning in isolation but influencing one another (Cheng et al, 2010; Zhou et al, 2023). In both China and Japan, tea culture has historically developed as a spiritual practice infused with religious and philosophical meanings (Liu, 2019; Lu, 2011), suggesting the potential for travelers to deepen their ways of sensing and meaning-making through such multifaceted engagements.

This study examines how various elements of tea-culture tourism interconnect to generate meaningful changes and insights for travelers. Specifically, it focuses on the relational and emotional dynamics between travelers and local residents mediated by cultural practices, aiming to elucidate how transformative experiences are not accidental but are gradually constructed through travelers' active processes of meaning-making. Thus, the study seeks to advance theoretical understanding within transformative tourism research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Elements and Triggers of Transformative Experiences

Chirico et al. (2022) reviewed conceptualizations of transformative experience across anthropology, philosophy, psychology, neurobiology, and education. They defined it as a brief yet exceptionally distinctive experience that produces lasting and sometimes irreversible effects on one's self-concept, worldview, perception of others, and personal identity. Such experiences are characterized by two core phenomenological features: epistemic expansion, understood as a new form of knowledge concerning the self, others, and the world; and heightened emotional complexity, marked by variability, intensity, and the coexistence of complex emotions. Transformative experiences are typically vividly remembered and contribute to enduring personal change.

Building on this theoretical understanding, scholars in tourism have explored how such deeply affective and cognitively expansive experiences manifest through travel-related contexts. Transformative experiences in tourism are increasingly recognized not merely as forms of entertainment or learning but as profound experiences involving the redefinition of one's identity and way of life. Recent studies have particularly focused on the constituent elements and triggering factors of such experiences. Ross (2005, 2010), for example, identified transformative travelers' typical experiences, including participation in rituals, a sense of unity with nature, self-exploratory practices such as yoga and meditation, interactions with local residents, and volunteer activities. These experiences, he suggested, can be structured as rites of passage or spiritual journeys, serving as opportunities to question one's boundaries and acquire new meaning frameworks.

Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai (2016) conceptualized transformative experiences as a form of existential transformation, arguing that the existential anxiety and desire for authenticity evoked during travel may later manifest as cognitive changes through post-trip reflection. Furthermore, Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai (2017) proposed that spontaneity, aesthetic experiences, and self-development functioned as triggers for transformation, emphasizing that emotional peaks toward the end of a journey might lead to shifts in worldview.

In addition to these internal processes, recent research has highlighted the significance of emotional and relational dynamics involving interactions with others and places. Jiang et al (2023), for instance, quantitatively demonstrated that emotional bonding among tourists in religious tourism could mediate prosocial behavior. Richards (2020) showed that a creative atmosphere could influence place-making and foster self-transformation. Kabra and Singh (2025), using structural equation modeling, found that interactive authenticity, emotional authenticity, and novelty served as key factors in facilitating self-transformation.

Ivanovic (2022) further argued that the core of transformative experiences lay in the perception of authenticity, whereby a sense of alignment between the true self and the experience became transformative when associated with transmodern values such as spirituality, harmony with nature, and interdependence. This perspective suggests that transformative tourism should be understood not only as individual introspection or emotional response but also within broader cultural and philosophical value systems.

Overall, these discussions indicate that transformative experiences are complex processes involving not only cognitive shifts or introspection but also emotional responses, interpersonal relationships, embodied practices, and interactions with spatial environments. Such experiences are shaped by a traveler's state of readiness and motivation, as well as by contextual factors such as cultural background, relational frameworks, and situational conditions during the stay (Teoh et al, 2021). However, many studies have focused on specific tourism types or isolated experiences, lacking a systematic understanding of the conditions, structures, and triggers that give rise to transformation (Zhao and Ageyiwaah, 2023).

To address this gap, this study qualitatively explores how transformative experiences are formed in the context of tea-culture tourism—a setting where cultural, bodily, and relational experiences overlap, and where travelers flexibly ascribe meaning to diverse and layered engagements.

2.2 Tea-culture Tourism as a Multidimensional Tourism Experience

Tea-culture tourism comprises a wide range of overlapping activities, including tea tasting and tea-making experiences in natural environments, interactions with tea masters and local residents, ritual practices, and opportunities for cultural learning. These experiences are not unified by a single purpose or motivation but are instead flexibly interpreted and given meaning by travelers based on their individual interests and modes of engagement.

For example, Liu (2019), based on fieldwork on Chinese tea ceremonies, reported that the staged atmosphere of the tearoom evoked a sense of the extraordinary in participants, functioning as a space for self-reflection and reconstruction. Lu (2011), through a comparative study of Chinese and Japanese tea cultures, showed that both physical pleasure and spiritual cultivation were embedded in these practices, suggesting that the integration of bodily and spiritual dimensions could serve as a trigger for internal transformation. Cheng et al's (2010) empirical research revealed that travelers who were already familiar with tea culture in their daily lives experienced changes in values and lifestyle through tea-related tourism activities. Zhou et al (2023) highlighted the layered nature of tea-culture tourism, noting that it incorporated elements of agritourism and ecotourism while also providing cultural, service-based, and environmental value. Similarly, Bohne (2021) presented a case from East Frisia, Germany, where regional identity and ritualized practices surrounding tea have been leveraged as tourism resources.

In addition to its impact on travelers, tea-culture tourism influences local communities. Su, Wall, and Wang (2019) demonstrated that in Hetu Town, China, tea-mediated tourism encouraged community participation, contributed to the diversification of livelihoods, and improved residents' quality of life.

These studies collectively point to the multifaceted nature of tea-culture tourism and its diverse impacts on both travelers and host communities. However, it remains unclear how these varied experiences are internally connected and interpreted by travelers as meaningful transformations. In particular, a need arises to explore how transformative experiences emerge through cultural practices and interpersonal relationships, as reflected in travelers' narratives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Site: Wuyishan

This study was conducted in Wuyishan, Fujian Province, China. Wuyishan is renowned as the production area for Wuyi rock tea, one of China's top ten famous teas, and represents a unique cultural region where the tea industry, tea culture, and tourism are closely intertwined. Tea-culture tourism is actively practiced in this area, involving a wide range of activities such as tea picking and processing and tea-ceremony experiences. These activities are conducted through interactions with tea farmers, tea artisans, and local guides, offering tourists opportunities for self-reflection and cultural reconnection.

In particular, Wuyishan combines rich natural landscapes (e.g., the Wuyi Mountains and Nine-Bend Stream) with tea culture, providing an environment that strongly evokes both spatial authenticity and embodied/emotional experiences. These conditions correspond closely with the catalytic elements for transformative experiences identified by scholars such as Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai (2016) and Richards (2020). Given this combination of cultural, physical, and relational elements, Wuyishan was deemed a highly suitable field site for this study, which aims to explore the process of transformation through tourism.

3.2 Data Collection

To investigate transformative experiences in tea-culture tourism, this study employed a narrative-oriented qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews as the primary data-collection and analysis method. The appropriateness of qualitative methods in exploring transformative tourism has been supported by prior research (Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai, 2016; Pung and Di Chiappa, 2020; Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023).

Participants were selected from among nine individuals who had taken part in tea-culture tours in Wuyishan. Four were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) having participated in tea-culture tourism in Wuyishan at least once; and (2) having reported a perceived change in their values or worldview as a result of the experience. The fieldwork was conducted from July to September 2025, and participants were recruited through local tea-tourism facilities and social-media platforms (see Table 1).

Participants' "understanding of tea culture" was categorized into four levels, based on a pre-interview questionnaire and interview responses: (1) deep understanding (possessing expert knowledge about tea); (2) general understanding (regular tea consumption with an ability to distinguish flavor differences); (3) limited understanding (drinking tea occasionally when offered by others); and (4) no understanding (disliking or lacking interest in tea). These classifications aimed to assess how prior knowledge and experience might influence the emergence of transformative experiences.

The interviews were conducted either in person or online, lasting approximately 60 minutes per participant.

The main interview questions included the following: “What moments challenged your worldview or values?” “How did your encounter with tea culture affect your self-understanding?” “How do interactions with people and places remain in your memory?” These questions were designed to explore both the triggers and facilitating factors of transformation within tea-culture tourism. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and used for analysis with participants’ consent and confirmation.

Table 1: Participant profiles

Number	Gender and age	Occupation	Understanding of tea culture	Number of visits for tea-culture tourism	Transformation experience (Yes/No)
A	M/32	Office worker	General understanding (drinks tea regularly; can discern taste differences)	2	Yes
B	M/53	Self-employed	Deep understanding (collects tea leaves as a hobby; knowledgeable about tea history)	3	Yes
C	F/44	Freelancer	No understanding (dislikes tea; not interested)	1	Yes
D	F/21	Student	Limited understanding (does not drink tea voluntarily but accepts when offered)	1	Yes

3.3 Data Analysis

This study employed steps for coding and theorization (SCAT), a qualitative data-analysis method developed by Otani (2011). SCAT is particularly effective for extracting theoretical meaning structures from small-scale narrative data. Following its four-step process, the study analyzed the experiences of travelers who had undergone self-transformation.

In Step 1, emotionally charged, repetitive, or striking phrases relevant to transformation were extracted from the narratives. In Step 2, synonyms, antonyms, and supplementary expressions were added to clarify the meanings intended by the speaker. Step 3 involved deriving underlying constructs or themes (e.g., “emergent self-image,” “rediscovered everydayness”) based on recurring patterns across the extracted and rephrased content. In Step 4, temporal and causal relationships among these constructs were identified to build a coherent storyline of the transformative process.

Through this process, three phases of transformation were identified: (1) entry into the extraordinary through natural landscapes, (2) awareness of the ideal self through tea ritual practices, and (3) rediscovery of the everyday self through relationships with local residents. SCAT's theorization process was found to be particularly effective in revealing the temporal and emotional structure embedded in the narratives, thereby enabling the construction of a framework that explained how transformation was not accidental but instead formed through meaning-making by a prepared self. This method has been recognized as effective in transformation tourism research focusing on subjective meaning systems (Ivanovic, 2022; Pung, Gnoth, and Di Chiappa, 2020), and its applicability was reaffirmed in this study.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Hokuriku University Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 2025-21), and fieldwork was conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Before data collection, written documents outlining the research purpose, methodology, voluntary participation, anonymity, and data usage were distributed. Informed consent was obtained in writing after providing a thorough explanation. Participation was voluntary, and withdrawal was permitted at any time. Audio recording and transcription were conducted only with explicit consent. All data were anonymized, de-identified, and securely stored under password protection.

4. Findings

4.1 Landscape Experiences as a Preparation for Transformation: Nature as a Sensory Transition to the Extraordinary

Several participants reported experiencing a sense of detachment from their urban daily lives immediately on arriving in Wuyishan. In particular, the natural scenery—such as mist-covered rocky mountains and expansive tea fields—evoked a strong sense of extraordinariness through visual impact, offering an opportunity to mentally distance themselves from the noise and stress of everyday life. For instance, Participant A (general understanding of tea culture; two-time visitor) remarked, “I felt enveloped by nature here, and it forced me to focus on the experience, whether I liked it or not” (A4), suggesting that the immersive quality of the landscape compelled a heightened attentiveness to the present experience. Similarly, Participant D (limited understanding; first-time visitor) stated, “Just being surrounded by mountains made time feel completely different—no rush, no pressure,” indicating that the natural environment altered their perception of time.

These landscape experiences functioned as what may be termed liminal triggers—transitional stimuli that temporarily suspend one’s urban self while opening up the senses and emotions. In the early stages of transformation, such spatial and sensory detachment played a critical role in facilitating a reflective state, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent meaning-making. In this sense, the experience of nature served not only as a visual backdrop but as a catalytic environment that enabled the internal conditions necessary for transformation to unfold.

4.2 Awareness Through Tea Rituals: Reconstructing the Ideal Self and Personal Values

For several participants, the tea-ceremony experience in Wuyishan involved more than simply engaging in a cultural activity; the precise movements of preparing tea and sequence of ritualized actions prompted reflection on their ideal self and personal values. The nature of this impact varied depending on the participants’ prior understanding of tea culture.

For those with limited or novice-level familiarity, the tea ceremony was perceived as an extraordinary cultural practice, often interpreted through contrast with their everyday lives. For example, Participant C stated, “I did not know that it took so much time just to drink tea. But it was a truly meaningful time—through the rituals, I was given a space to deliberately think and feel. Until now, I was just caught up in a fast-paced life. Perhaps I have always longed for this kind of lifestyle” (C11). This narrative suggests that the embodied “ritual gestures” sharpened the senses and led to a reappraisal of time, creating the conditions for a reflective state. Such realizations functioned as structural elements that deepened the transformation process by prompting introspection, value reconstruction, and even a longing for an ideal way of life.

In contrast, participants with a general or deep understanding of tea culture and multiple prior visits tended to already possess a vision of their ideal self. Their tea-tourism experiences served as opportunities to reaffirm and enact that vision. For instance, Participant B (second visit) stated, “Coming here helped me reorganize what I truly want. Through interactions with tea artisans and locals, I felt validated in the tea knowledge I have gained, and it made me want to learn even more” (B6).

These forms of realization and affirmation through tea rituals went beyond mere acquisition or application of knowledge. They supported a deeper transformation by revalidating the ideal self and its embodied practice. Participants engaged in the physical and relational dimensions of tea practices were internally reorienting their values and moving toward a more desirable version of themselves.

4.3 Rediscovering Everydayness in an Extraordinary Space: Social Connectedness and the Repositioning of the Self

Although participants were immersed in the extraordinary setting created by natural landscapes and tea rituals, several also reported experiencing intimate and ongoing relationships with local tea farmers that transcended conventional tourism boundaries. These interactions—such as tea-picking activities, simple communal meals, and casual greetings or conversations—offered participants a sense of familiarity and belonging. For instance, Participant D (male, 30s, first-time visitor) remarked, “For the four days I was here, everything revolved around tea—it felt like tea had become part of my everyday life,” indicating the experience of a “second everydayness” within a non-ordinary environment. Such experiences suggest that temporary immersion in local life can help

travelers regain their authentic rhythm and provide a chance to reengage with their life trajectory and social roles through relational encounters.

In particular, the structured routines, sense of cooperation, and familial bonds observed in the lives of tea farmers evoked a feeling of belonging and wholeness often lost in urban life. Participant A (female, second-time visitor) reflected, “Talking with people here afforded me a sense of reassurance—it made me reconsider where I truly belong,” demonstrating how these moments led to more than temporary emotional resonance; they prompted deeper transformation involving reevaluation of one’s social identity and sense of affiliation.

In these experiences, participants perceived both relational and experiential authenticity by engaging with the lived world of locals—not as staged performances but as genuine ways of life. Thus, the “rediscovery of everydayness in an extraordinary space” can be understood as a transformative experience in which travelers reconstruct their relationship with the world through interpersonal encounters mediated by authenticity. The connection with local residents was not merely a supplementary element but rather functioned as a relational trigger for self-reconstruction and transformation. In this sense, transformative experiences are redefined not solely as internal processes but as socially co-created through interactive engagement with host communities.

5. Discussion

The transformative process observed in tea-culture tourism, as revealed in this study, unfolds through the layered intersection of nature-based, cultural, and spiritual tourism elements, all centered on the cultural medium of tea. This finding aligns with Ross’s (2010) argument that transformative experiences are often compatible with multiple tourism forms and are particularly likely to occur when nature, spirituality, and culture are interconnected.

First, encounters with natural landscapes served as “introductory triggers” for transformation by enabling a sensory departure from urban routines and altering participants’ perception of time. This supports Lu’s (2011) assertion that the fusion of bodily experience and spiritual reflection acts as a catalyst for transformation.

Second, the ritualistic practice of tea ceremonies heightened participants’ sensory awareness through immersion in a spatially extraordinary environment and focused gestures. This facilitated the reconstruction of their ideal self and personal values. As Liu (2019) argues, the tea room functions as a space for self-reflection and reinterpretation. Furthermore, Cheng et al (2010) suggest that prior familiarity with tea culture can deepen transformative awareness—an observation echoed in the present study.

Third, interactions with local residents fostered a sense of “alternative everydayness” through collaborative life experiences, which supported deeper transformation through the perception of relational authenticity. This finding reinforces the work of Pung and Di Chiappa (2020), Ivanovic (2022), Jiang et al (2023), and Richards (2020), who emphasize that transformative experiences are socially co-constructed through relationships with others.

In addition, this study illuminates the evolving meaning of tea itself within the tourism experience. Tea was reinterpreted not merely as a beverage but as a “tool for human connection” and even a “wisdom for living,” functioning as a mediator across sensory, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions. This process of semantic evolution has often been overlooked in previous research. The observation that prior knowledge of tea influenced the depth of transformation suggests that transformation is not entirely spontaneous but involves the presence of a “prepared self,” carrying significant theoretical implications.

These findings align with the conceptualization proposed by Chirico et al. (2022), who described transformative experience as involving epistemic expansion—a new way of knowing the self, others, and the world—together with heightened emotional complexity. The redefinition of tea observed here exemplifies such epistemic and emotional broadening: through sensory immersion and cultural engagement, participants developed new layers of understanding and emotional resonance within their lived experience.

In summary, transformation in tea-culture tourism is a dynamic process in which authenticity is constructed across bodily, sensory, and relational dimensions. Far from being limited to internal personal change, it emerges as a complex phenomenon shaped through interaction with broader social and cultural contexts.

Despite its strengths, this study has certain limitations. It was based on a single case study in Wuyishan, China, with a small number of participants, and the qualitative design and single fieldwork period limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should examine comparative cases across diverse cultural and religious contexts and consider longitudinal or mixed-method approaches. Moreover, transformative

experiences should be explored as potentially co-constructed processes involving both travelers and local communities, with attention to how relational authenticity emerges through such mutual interactions.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

This study aimed to explore the process through which travelers underwent transformation in the context of tea-culture tourism. Based on qualitative interviews conducted with participants in Wuyishan, China, several key findings emerged.

First, natural landscapes served as a mechanism for sensory detachment and entry into introspection, functioning as a preparatory stage for transformation. Second, ritualized tea experiences facilitated a re-awareness of the ideal self and acted as a deepening mechanism for transformation. Third, interactions with local residents contributed to profound transformation through the reconstruction of a sense of belonging, mediated by the perception of relational authenticity. Moreover, the meaning of “tea” was found to evolve across dimensions of knowledge, sensation, spirituality, and wisdom, revealing its dynamic role as a cultural mediator.

The theoretical contributions of this study can be summarized in three key points. First, it structurally clarified how transformative experiences emerged within a tourism context where sensory, ritual, and relational practices intersected. Second, it introduced the perspective of the “prepared self,” showing that prior knowledge and cultural literacy influenced the depth of transformation, thereby challenging the assumption that such experiences are purely spontaneous. Third, it positioned the concept of relational authenticity as a theoretical unit that could be reconfigured through interaction with ritual practices, offering a complementary perspective to existing authenticity research.

By conceptualizing transformative experience not merely as an internal insight but as a dynamic process constructed through spatial, ritual, and social contexts, this study extends the theoretical scope of transformative tourism research. In particular, the articulation of two core principles—the “prepared self” and “perception of relational authenticity”—provides practical implications for designing meaningful tourism experiences and fostering sustainable relationships between travelers and host communities.

Ethics Declaration

The ethical clearance for this research is described under Subsection **3.4 Ethical considerations**.

AI Declaration

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to refine English expressions. All ideas, analyses, and conclusions are the authors' own.

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