

# Ritual, Cultural Memory, and Identity: The Cultural Significance of Gongcheng Yao Oil Tea as Intangible Heritage

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## Abstract

Gongcheng Yao oil tea, a traditional dietary practice rooted in the Yao ethnic community of Guangxi, China, represents a distinctive form of intangible cultural heritage that integrates ritual practice, cultural memory, and identity construction. While existing studies have primarily focused on its historical origins, functional value, and tourism development, limited attention has been paid to its symbolic and cultural significance. This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining literature analysis, field observation, and semi-structured interviews, to reinterpret oil tea culture as a culturally embedded practice within everyday life and ritual contexts. The findings indicate that oil tea has evolved from a subsistence food into a ritualized cultural system, functioning as an embodied medium through which collective memory is preserved and transmitted. It also serves as a key marker of ethnic identity, reinforcing social cohesion and a sense of belonging through shared practices. At the same time, the integration of oil tea into cultural tourism has reshaped its modes of representation, creating tensions between cultural preservation and commodification. This study contributes to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage by highlighting the importance of cultural interpretation and symbolic meaning, and by proposing a framework for understanding how traditional practices can be sustained and reinterpreted in contemporary contexts.

**Keywords:** Intangible cultural heritage, Ritual practice, Cultural memory, Ethnic identity, Tea culture

## Introduction

“Beating oil tea” (Da You Cha) is a traditional tea-drinking practice of the Yao ethnic group in Gongcheng, Guangxi, China. Originating from the ancient “porridge tea” method, which is widely regarded as one of the earliest forms of tea consumption in China, this practice initially developed as a subsistence adaptation to the local humid and cold environment. While such early tea traditions have gradually disappeared in many regions with social and economic change, Gongcheng has preserved this practice in a relatively intact form, where oil tea remains deeply embedded in everyday life and social interaction.

Over time, Gongcheng Yao oil tea has evolved beyond its material function as food and developed into a complex cultural system integrating ritual practices, social relations, and symbolic meanings. As Yu and Yu (2017) point out, oil tea has transformed from a

subsistence food into a symbolic system embedded in Yao ritual practices and social etiquette. The preparation and consumption of oil tea are closely linked to hospitality, kinship interaction, and communal life, reflecting broader cultural structures within the Yao community. In this sense, oil tea functions not only as a daily necessity but also as a medium through which cultural values and social norms are expressed and transmitted.

As an element of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), Gongcheng Yao oil tea culture embodies both material and immaterial dimensions. It encompasses a comprehensive cultural system that includes raw materials, production techniques, utensils, drinking practices, historical narratives, and ritual customs. Its inscription in 2022 on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

highlights its cultural significance as a representative form of minority dietary culture in China. More importantly, oil tea culture carries rich symbolic meanings, serving as a repository of collective memory and a marker of ethnic identity within the Yao community.

From this perspective, the preparation and consumption of oil tea can be understood as a form of cultural practice through which collective memory is embodied and transmitted. The repetitive and structured processes involved in making oil tea, including the use of traditional tools and techniques, function as a means of preserving and reproducing cultural knowledge across generations. At the same time, these practices contribute to the construction of ethnic identity by reinforcing a sense of continuity and belonging among community members. Oil tea thus operates as both a cultural symbol and a social practice that connects individuals to their cultural heritage.

However, in the context of rapid socio-economic transformation and the increasing integration of culture and tourism, the meanings and functions of Gongcheng Yao oil tea culture are undergoing significant changes. As an ICH element, oil tea culture has been increasingly incorporated into cultural tourism activities, such as festivals, performances, and experiential events organized by local governments and enterprises. While these initiatives have enhanced the visibility and economic value of oil tea culture, they have also led to certain challenges, including the simplification and commodification of cultural meaning.

Existing development practices tend to prioritize economic benefits, while the deeper cultural connotations of oil tea remain insufficiently explored. The role of culture in shaping tourism has not been fully realized, and tourism practices have not effectively conveyed the cultural value of oil tea. In addition, the dissemination of oil tea culture remains limited, as meaningful cultural experiences are largely confined to on-site participation in Gongcheng. The limited involvement of heritage bearers in tourism activities further contributes to a gap between cultural representation and authentic cultural experience.

Furthermore, the cultural industry related to Gongcheng Yao oil tea faces structural constraints, including homogeneous product forms, limited innovation in cultural and creative products, and

reliance on manual production methods, which restrict large-scale dissemination. These challenges highlight the need to reconsider the ways in which oil tea culture is represented, communicated, and sustained in contemporary contexts.

Despite its cultural significance, existing research on Gongcheng Yao oil tea remains relatively limited and largely descriptive. Previous studies have focused on its historical origins, customary practices, and development strategies, but have paid insufficient attention to its symbolic meanings and cultural significance. There is also a lack of research incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives and the voices of local communities and cultural practitioners.

Against this background, this study seeks to reinterpret Gongcheng Yao oil tea culture as a cultural practice situated at the intersection of ritual, cultural memory, and identity. Rather than approaching oil tea primarily as a tourism resource or economic commodity, this research emphasizes its role as a symbolic system and a living form of intangible cultural heritage. By examining its ritual practices, cultural meanings, and processes of transformation, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how oil tea culture functions in both traditional and contemporary contexts, contributing to broader discussions on the preservation and reinterpretation of intangible cultural heritage.

## Literature review

Chinese food culture, as an essential component of national cultural heritage, reflects the long-term interaction between human society and the natural environment. It embodies regional diversity, ecological adaptation, and cultural continuity (Wang, 2011; Zhao, 2003). Dietary practices are not merely material necessities but also carriers of cultural memory and social values, often manifested in rituals, festivals, and everyday customs. Within this broader framework, tea culture occupies a central position in Chinese food culture, functioning as both a daily practice and a symbolic medium of social interaction and moral cultivation (Chen, 2010).

Chinese tea culture has developed over thousands of years, evolving from medicinal use to a sophisticated cultural system integrating philosophy, aesthetics, and social etiquette. Historical records indicate that tea drinking became widespread during the Han Dynasty

and gradually formed a cultural tradition emphasizing harmony, respect, and social bonding (Zhao, 2003). The inscription of “Traditional Chinese Tea-Making Techniques and Related Practices” on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights the global recognition of tea culture as a significant cultural resource (UNESCO, 2022). Tea-related practices, including preparation, sharing, and ritualized consumption, serve as important means of cultural transmission and social communication (Yu, 2014).

Within this context, Gongcheng Yao oil tea represents a distinctive regional expression of Chinese tea culture. With a history of over one thousand years, it is a unique dietary and cultural practice formed through long-term interaction between the Yao people and their mountainous environment (Qin, 2012). Unlike conventional tea consumption, oil tea integrates multiple ingredients such as tea leaves, ginger, peanuts, and garlic, reflecting both ecological adaptation and local knowledge systems. More importantly, oil tea is deeply embedded in ritual life, social customs, and interpersonal communication, functioning as a symbol of hospitality, social cohesion, and ethnic identity (Yu & Yu, 2017).

As an element of intangible cultural heritage, Gongcheng Yao oil tea culture encompasses both material practices and symbolic meanings. It is not only a dietary habit but also a cultural system involving ritual practices, life-cycle ceremonies, and community interactions. Previous studies have emphasized its historical origins, health value, and cultural characteristics (Qin, 2012; Huang, 2016), while others have explored its role in local social life and ethnic traditions (Wang et al., 2021). However, most of these studies remain descriptive and lack theoretical depth in interpreting its cultural significance.

In recent years, the integration of tea culture and tourism has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Tea tourism is generally understood as the combination of tea resources, ecological landscapes, and cultural experiences, aiming to promote cultural dissemination and economic development (Zhang & Xiao, 2014). Studies have shown that tea culture tourism can enhance cultural experience, support rural revitalization, and facilitate the transmission of traditional culture (Liu, 2015). In China, various models of tea tourism—such

as tea culture villages, tea estates, and cultural exhibition bases—have been developed to integrate cultural heritage with tourism practices.

However, existing research also highlights several limitations in the development of tea culture tourism. Scholars note that many projects focus primarily on economic benefits and ecological landscapes while neglecting the deeper cultural connotations of tea culture (He & Wang, 2020). The lack of cultural interpretation, innovative expression, and systematic planning often results in homogeneous products and superficial cultural experiences. These issues are also evident in the development of Gongcheng Yao oil tea cultural tourism, where the emphasis on industrialization and commercialization may undermine its cultural authenticity and symbolic value.

Overall, current literature provides valuable insights into Chinese food culture, tea culture, and tea tourism, as well as the historical and cultural characteristics of Gongcheng Yao oil tea. Nevertheless, there remains a significant gap in understanding oil tea culture from the perspective of ritual practice, cultural memory, and identity construction. Existing studies rarely adopt interdisciplinary approaches to explore how oil tea functions as a symbolic system within social and cultural contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by reinterpreting Gongcheng Yao oil tea culture through a cultural analytical framework, emphasizing its role as an intangible cultural heritage that embodies ritual, memory, and identity.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore Gongcheng Yao oil tea as an intangible cultural heritage practice, with a focus on its roles in ritualization, cultural memory, and identity construction. A case study approach was employed to provide an in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of oil tea culture within its socio-cultural setting.

The research was conducted over a 23-month period from March 2024 to January 2026, comprising four stages: literature review, fieldwork, data analysis, and writing. The primary research site was Gongcheng Yao Autonomous County in Guangxi, China, a representative cultural center where oil tea practices remain embedded in both everyday life and ritual contexts.

Data collection involved multiple qualitative methods. First, participant and non- participant observation were conducted in diverse settings, including household kitchens, oil tea restaurants, cultural tourism sites, and festival events such as the Panwang Festival. Field notes, photographs, and video recordings were used to document preparation techniques, social interactions, and ritual practices.

Second, semi- structured interviews were conducted with 52 participants selected through purposive sampling. These included 14 key informants (heritage inheritors, scholars, cultural officials, and designers), 20 local practitioners and residents, and 18 tourists and visitors. Interviews focused on participants’ perceptions of oil tea’s cultural meaning, transmission practices, and challenges in contemporary contexts.

Third, focus group discussions were organized with stakeholders to explore collective perspectives on cultural representation and tourism development. Participatory methods were also applied, involving collaboration with local practitioners in evaluating cultural symbols and aesthetic expressions.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed a three-stage coding process. First, open coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts from interview transcripts and field notes. Second, axial coding was used to group these concepts into broader thematic categories, including ritual practice, cultural memory, identity construction, and cultural transformation. Third, selective coding was applied to refine core themes and establish relationships between them.

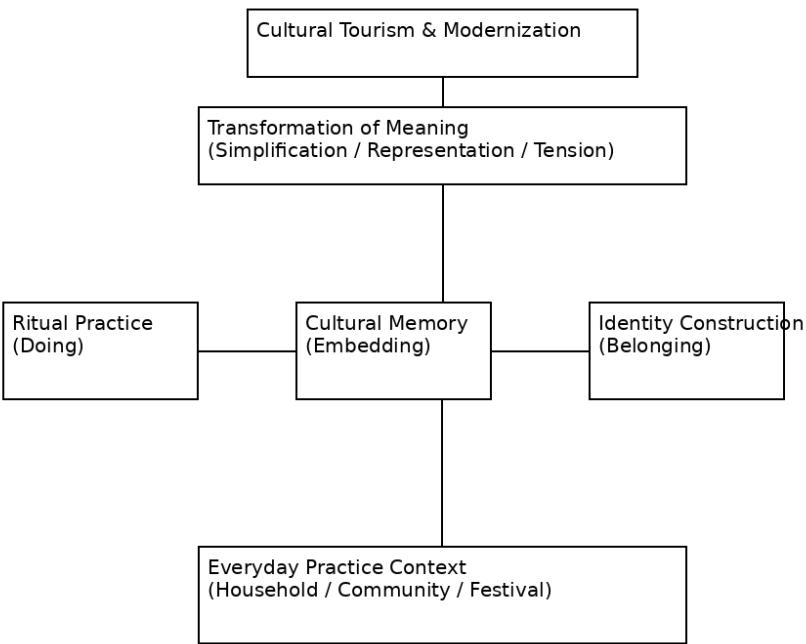


**Figure 1** Analytical framework of oil tea cultural practice.  
**Source:** Made by Wu (2025).

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical framework guiding this study, which conceptualizes oil tea culture as a process linking ritual practice, cultural memory, and identity construction. This framework also highlights the influence of tourism and modernization in reshaping cultural meaning within contemporary contexts.

Through iterative comparison and triangulation across multiple data sources, the study ensured the credibility and consistency of findings. All participants

provided informed consent prior to data collection, and ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the research process.

**Results**

**Ritualization of everyday practice: From subsistence food to structured cultural performance**

The findings suggest that Gongcheng Yao oil tea has gradually transformed from a subsistence dietary

practice into a structured and ritualized form of cultural performance embedded in both everyday life and ceremonial contexts. While historical accounts indicate that oil tea originated from the “tea porridge” tradition as a functional adaptation to the humid and resource-limited mountainous environment, field data show that its contemporary practice is characterized by a high degree of standardization and symbolic meaning.

Observations conducted in household kitchens and community settings reveal that the preparation of oil tea

follows a relatively fixed sequence, including ingredient selection, pounding, boiling, and mixing (Figure 2). Among these steps, the act of “beating” tea is particularly emphasized by local practitioners. As one informant explained, “the process of beating tea is essential—it is not only about taste, but also about showing care and respect to others” (Interview, 2025). This suggests that the technique is not merely functional but carries social and symbolic significance.



**Figure 2** Ingredients for making oil tea.

**Source:** Photographed by Wu (2025).

Ritualization is further reflected in social etiquette and spatial organization. Field observations indicate that the practice of serving oil tea to guests follows established norms, such as offering multiple bowls and maintaining specific interaction sequences. For example, during a household visit, guests were repeatedly encouraged to drink more tea before leaving, which was interpreted as a sign of hospitality and social acceptance. These practices form a codified system of interpersonal interaction, reinforcing social hierarchy, respect, and communal values.

In addition, oil tea preparation often takes place around the household fire pit, which serves as a central social space. This setting facilitates communication and collective participation, allowing cultural knowledge to be transmitted through observation and engagement rather than formal instruction.

In ceremonial contexts, such as the Panwang Festival, oil tea assumes a more explicit ritual function. It is used as an offering to ancestors and consumed collectively after ritual activities. According to a local heritage bearer, “oil tea is part of the ritual—we prepare it for the ancestors, and then we share it together” (Interview, 2025). This practice reinforces the connection between individuals, community, and ancestral tradition.

Overall, these findings indicate that oil tea is not simply consumed as food but enacted as a form of cultural practice. Its ritualized nature, expressed through structured processes, social norms, and ceremonial functions, plays a significant role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity within the Yao community.

### **Cultural memory in practice: Oil tea as an embodied archive of environmental adaptation**

The findings indicate that Gongcheng Yao oil tea functions as an embodied form of cultural memory, through which knowledge related to environmental adaptation, subsistence strategies, and community life is preserved and transmitted. Rather than being recorded in written form, this knowledge is embedded in everyday practices and material processes.

Field observations show that the ingredients used in oil tea—such as tea leaves, ginger, and mixed grains—are closely linked to the ecological conditions of the mountainous environment. In several household settings, local residents emphasized the importance of using locally sourced materials. As one elderly practitioner noted, “we use what grows in the mountains—tea leaves, ginger, and grains—this is how our ancestors lived” (Interview, 2025). This reflects a long-term adaptation to the natural environment, where dietary practices are shaped by resource availability and climatic conditions.

Participants also highlighted the functional value of these ingredients. Ginger, for example, was frequently mentioned for its warming properties, particularly in the cold and humid climate. During fieldwork, one informant explained that “drinking oil tea helps the body stay warm and prevents illness, especially in winter” (Interview, 2025). Such explanations indicate that ecological knowledge is not abstract but embedded in practical experience and daily life.

Importantly, the transmission of this knowledge occurs primarily through participation rather than formal instruction. Observations in household kitchens reveal that younger generations learn by watching and assisting elders in preparing oil tea. As one inheritor stated, “we don’t teach it in a formal way—children learn by helping and observing” (Interview, 2025). This mode of transmission allows cultural knowledge to be reproduced continuously while remaining flexible and adaptive.

In addition to practical knowledge, oral narratives and local stories further reinforce cultural memory. Several participants referred to historical figures and legends associated with oil tea, including its use in maintaining health and resisting disease. These narratives provide interpretive frameworks that connect

everyday practices to broader historical and moral meanings, linking individual experience with collective memory.

Taken together, these findings suggest that oil tea operates as a “living archive,” where cultural memory is continuously reproduced through embodied practice, material culture, and narrative tradition. This process enables historical knowledge to remain relevant within contemporary life, ensuring both continuity and adaptability in the transmission of cultural heritage.

### **Identity construction through practice: Oil tea as a marker of ethnic belonging**

The findings indicate that Gongcheng Yao oil tea plays a central role in the construction and reinforcement of ethnic identity, not as an abstract symbol, but as a practice through which belonging is enacted and recognized in everyday life. The ability to prepare and consume oil tea according to customary methods is widely regarded by local residents as an important marker of being “Yao.”

Field observations and interviews suggest that this sense of identity is closely tied to specific material and technical practices. The use of locally sourced ingredients, such as ginger and mixed grains, together with distinctive preparation techniques like pounding, differentiates Yao oil tea from other forms of tea culture. As one participant explained, “when you see how the tea is made and what is added, you can tell it is ours—it is different from others” (Interview, 2025). These elements function as recognizable cultural markers that distinguish “insiders” from “outsiders” (Figure 3).

Identity is further reinforced through the social context of oil tea consumption. Observations in family gatherings and community settings show that oil tea is rarely consumed individually but shared collectively. During a household visit, guests were encouraged to drink several bowls of tea, and refusal was gently discouraged. One local resident noted that “if you drink oil tea together, it means you are part of the group” (Interview, 2025). Such practices transform everyday consumption into a social mechanism for inclusion and belonging.

Ritual contexts provide an even more explicit framework for identity construction. During the Panwang Festival, oil tea is prepared as an offering to ancestors and consumed collectively after ritual

activities. Participants emphasized that this practice connects them to previous generations. As one heritage bearer stated, “we prepare oil tea for the ancestors, and then we share it—it reminds us who we are and where we come from” (Interview, 2025). In this context, identity is not only expressed but experienced as a form of continuity between past and present.

In addition, intergenerational transmission plays a key role in sustaining identity. Observations indicate that younger members of the community learn oil tea practices by participating in daily preparation and festival activities. Through this process, they acquire not

only technical skills but also the associated values and meanings. As one informant described, “children learn by doing, and through this they understand our traditions” (Interview, 2025).

Overall, these findings suggest that oil tea functions as a lived practice through which ethnic identity is continuously produced and reproduced. Its significance lies not only in its material form but in its role as a shared activity that connects individuals to their community, reinforces social boundaries, and sustains a sense of cultural belonging over time.



**Figure 3** Gongcheng Yao people drink oil tea after ritual activities.

**Source:** Photographed by Wu (2025).

### **Transformation and tension: Cultural meaning under tourism and modernization**

The findings indicate that Gongcheng Yao oil tea culture is undergoing significant transformation in the context of cultural tourism and modernization, generating both new opportunities and emerging tensions. Field observations and interviews suggest that while tourism has enhanced the visibility and economic value of oil tea culture, it has also reshaped the ways in which its cultural meanings are represented and experienced.

On the one hand, the integration of oil tea into tourism has expanded its scope of dissemination. Observations at the Gongcheng Yao Oil Tea Cultural Festival show that activities such as long-table banquets, staged performances, and interactive demonstrations

attract large numbers of visitors and create new spaces for cultural display (Figure 4). Local practitioners noted that these events provide economic benefits and increase public awareness. As one participant stated, “more people now know about oil tea because of tourism, and it brings income to the community” (Interview, 2025).

On the other hand, field data also reveal that the representation of oil tea in tourism contexts tends to emphasize visual performance and sensory experience, often at the expense of cultural depth. During several observed performances, the preparation process was shortened and standardized to fit time constraints, and explanations focused mainly on ingredients and taste rather than cultural meaning. One heritage inheritor expressed concern that “what tourists see is only part of

it—they see the performance, but not the real meaning behind it” (Interview, 2025).

In addition, structural challenges within the cultural industry further affect how oil tea culture is presented and transmitted. Interviews with practitioners and local stakeholders indicate that many products and tourism experiences are highly similar, with limited variation or innovation. At the same time, the reliance on manual production techniques restricts large-scale development, while the involvement of heritage bearers in tourism activities remains uneven. As one practitioner noted, “sometimes the people who perform for tourists are not the ones who truly inherit the tradition” (Interview, 2025).

These observations suggest that tourism introduces a shift in the context of oil tea practice—from

everyday and community-based settings to staged and externally oriented representations. In this process, certain elements, such as visual performance and consumption experience, are amplified, while others, including ritual meaning and social relations, may become less visible.

Overall, the findings highlight a tension between accessibility and authenticity. While tourism provides a platform for cultural dissemination and economic development, it also transforms the conditions under which cultural meaning is produced and understood. This tension underscores the need for approaches that can maintain the cultural integrity of oil tea practices while adapting to contemporary contexts.



**Figure 4** The long-table banquet at Gongcheng Yao oil tea cultural festival.

**Source:** Reprinted from Chinanews.com (2025).

## Discussion

### From cultural object to cultural process: Reinterpreting oil tea

This study reframes Gongcheng Yao oil tea not as a static cultural object, but as a dynamic cultural process through which meaning is continuously produced, enacted, and negotiated. While previous research has primarily examined oil tea in terms of its historical origins, dietary characteristics, or tourism value (Mao,

2015; Jiang, 2023), such approaches tend to isolate cultural elements from the practices that sustain them.

By contrast, the findings of this study highlight that the significance of oil tea lies in its performative and processual nature. Its meaning does not reside solely in material components or symbolic representation, but emerges through repeated practices, embodied participation, and social interaction. This perspective resonates with practice-based approaches in cultural studies, which emphasize that culture is constituted

through action rather than merely represented as text or symbol.

In this sense, oil tea functions as a medium of cultural communication. The preparation, sharing, and consumption of oil tea constitute a communicative process through which social norms, cultural values, and collective meanings are expressed and reproduced. This shifts the analytical focus from “what oil tea is” to “what oil tea does” within the social and cultural context.

Furthermore, this process-oriented perspective also provides a critical lens for understanding the limits of cultural tourism. Existing studies often assume that increased exposure leads to greater cultural understanding (Zhang & Xiao, 2014; Liu, 2015). However, the findings suggest that when cultural practices are detached from their original contexts and reduced to performative displays, their meanings may become fragmented. This challenges linear models of cultural dissemination and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how meaning is mediated in tourism contexts.

### **Ritual, memory, and identity: Toward an integrated analytical framework**

This study contributes to existing literature by integrating the perspectives of ritual practice, cultural memory, and identity construction into a coherent analytical framework. Rather than treating these dimensions separately, the findings demonstrate that they are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

First, oil tea can be understood as a form of ritual practice embedded in everyday life. Unlike conventional definitions that restrict ritual to formal ceremonies, the findings reveal that ritualization occurs through repeated, structured actions such as preparation techniques, hospitality norms, and communal consumption. This aligns with broader anthropological perspectives that view ritual as a patterned mode of social action that organizes experience and reinforces shared meanings.

Second, the concept of cultural memory provides a useful lens for understanding how oil tea sustains historical continuity. Following theories of collective memory, cultural knowledge is not only preserved in texts or archives but also embodied in practice. The repeated enactment of oil tea preparation and

consumption functions as a mechanism for transmitting ecological knowledge, social values, and historical experience across generations. In this sense, oil tea operates as a “living archive,” where memory is actively reproduced rather than passively stored.

Third, the findings offer a dynamic perspective on identity construction. While previous studies have often treated oil tea as a symbolic marker of Yao identity, this research demonstrates that identity is not merely represented but actively produced through participation in cultural practice. Identity emerges through doing rather than simply belonging, highlighting the importance of lived experience in the reproduction of cultural identity.

Taken together, these three dimensions—ritual, memory, and identity—form an integrated framework for understanding intangible cultural heritage as a processual and relational phenomenon. This framework moves beyond descriptive accounts and provides a more theoretically grounded interpretation of how cultural practices function within social life.

### **Cultural tourism and the transformation of meaning**

The findings also provide critical insights into the transformation of cultural meaning under the influence of tourism and modernization. While existing studies have emphasized the economic and developmental benefits of cultural tourism (Jiang, 2024; Chen et al., 2023), this research highlights its complex and ambivalent effects on cultural practices.

On the one hand, tourism increases the visibility and accessibility of oil tea culture, creating new opportunities for cultural dissemination and economic development. On the other hand, the process of cultural representation in tourism often involves simplification, standardization, and aestheticization. As a result, the deeper cultural dimensions of ritual, memory, and identity may be reduced to surface-level experiences.

This phenomenon can be understood as a shift from “internal meaning” to “external representation.” Within the community, oil tea is embedded in everyday life and social relations, carrying rich cultural meanings. In tourism contexts, however, it is often recontextualized as a consumable cultural product, where visual performance and sensory experience are prioritized over cultural depth.

Importantly, this study does not interpret such transformation as purely negative. Instead, it suggests that the impact of tourism depends on how cultural elements are mediated and reinterpreted. When cultural practices are translated into appropriate forms—such as narrative interpretation, participatory experiences, or creative cultural products—they can maintain their symbolic richness while becoming more accessible to broader audiences.

Therefore, the challenge lies not in resisting tourism, but in developing culturally sensitive strategies that balance accessibility with authenticity. This requires greater involvement of heritage bearers, more nuanced forms of cultural interpretation, and a shift from product-oriented to meaning-oriented approaches in cultural tourism development.

## Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes Gongcheng Yao oil tea as a dynamic cultural system situated at the intersection of ritual practice, cultural memory, and identity construction. Rather than treating oil tea as a static cultural object, the findings demonstrate that it operates as a process through which meaning is continuously produced and negotiated in everyday and ceremonial contexts.

The study makes three main contributions. First, it extends existing research on intangible cultural heritage by highlighting the role of embodied practice in the transmission of cultural memory, emphasizing that knowledge is preserved through participation rather than textual documentation. Second, it contributes to identity studies by showing that ethnic identity is not merely symbolized but actively constructed through ritualized practice. Third, it provides a critical perspective on cultural tourism, demonstrating that increased visibility does not necessarily lead to deeper cultural understanding, and may instead result in the simplification of cultural meaning.

However, this study is limited to a single regional case, and the findings may not be directly generalizable to other cultural contexts. Future research could adopt comparative approaches to examine similar practices across different ethnic communities, or explore how digital media influences the transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

Overall, this study provides a framework for understanding how traditional cultural practices can be sustained and reinterpreted in contemporary contexts, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for heritage preservation and cultural policy.

## Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

Generative AI tools were used only to improve the readability and language of this manuscript. All outputs were reviewed and validated by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content. No AI tools were involved in the research design, data analysis, or interpretation, and no AI is listed as an author.

## CRedit author statement

**Mei Wu:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft, Revision. **Sastra Laoakka:** Supervision, Writing - Review & Editing.

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