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## Coffee and Sustainability in Tea-Drinking Societies: Cultural Path Dependence in China and Korea

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### Abstract

This study develops a theoretical framework to explain the different tracks of coffee consumption in China and South Korea, both of which are historically characterized by tea-dominant cultures, through the lens of cultural path dependence. Building on theories of institutional path dependence and cultural embeddedness, the paper introduces the Cultural Path Dependence Construct (CPDC), a second-order construct comprising ritual embeddedness, identity centrality, and institutional reinforcement. The CPDC framework captures how historically constituted cultural-institutional pathways act as filters that shape consumer receptivity to sustainability narratives. Through comparative analysis, the study theorizes China's enduring tea dominance as a case of cultural lock-in and South Korea's rapid embrace of coffee as a path breakthrough. The findings suggest that strong CPDCs limit the mainstreaming of sustainable innovations by requiring culturally congruent translation, while more fluid CPDCs allow for direct adoption. Based on this framework, a set of testable propositions is presented, along with a strategic matrix contrasting sustainable marketing approaches in locked-in versus breakthrough markets. The study offers theoretical contributions by linking path dependence with sustainable consumption to provide practical insights for firms aiming to localize sustainability messaging in culturally divergent markets. Meanwhile, the CPDC framework offers a new tool for understanding how cultural paths interact the success of sustainability-oriented market innovations.

Keywords: Path Dependence; Cultural Embeddedness; Sustainable Consumption; Coffee Market; Tea Culture.

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### 1. Introduction

The shift to new markets by the global coffee business is closely connected to the necessity of sustainability (Raynolds, 2009; International Coffee Organization, 2023). Nevertheless, sustainability of marketing strategies does not apply everywhere but is heavily mediated by local cultural-institutional conditions which define the meaning and the practices of consumption. An example of such mediation is a powerful example in East Asia. China and South Korea both belong to the “tea-drinking civilisation”, yet coffee consumption is highly prevalent in South Korea, while tea

remains dominant in China. The contrast of Chinese and South Korean modern beverage consumption patterns has been highly inconsistent, both countries being descendants of the ancient, tea-drinking civilization, naturally serving as an experiment in the cultural-economic evolution.

Statistical data indicates that China's per capita coffee consumption reached 16.74 cups in 2023 (Meneses, 2025), while South Korea's per capita consumption was 405 cups (Vorotnikov, 2024). In the tea market, per capita tea consumption in China reached 10.19kg in 2022, compared to 0.07kg in South Korea (World Population Review, 2026). Interestingly, the number of tea shops significantly outnumbers coffee shops in China, contrasting sharply with the situation in South Korea (Xu Ning, 2025; Lim Yoo-jeong, 2024). Therefore, it can be said that South Korea is a country that has tremendously transformed and has evolved into one of the most prolific coffee cultures in the world, characterized by high per capita consumption, and an omnipresent cafe-system (Palanza, 2018; Na et al., 2022). Even though China is experiencing fast coffee market development, it remains a tea-dominated society with consumption of coffee per capita being substantially lower and culturally marginal (Zhang, 2014; Galvani, 2024). The question of such differences is a critical theoretical one: How can common cultural background result in so different consumption lines? In addition, How does this divergence impact the sustainable development of the coffee market?

Based on the above discussion points, this paper aims to address the following key aspects:

a) **Theoretical Explanation of Cultural Divergence:** To conceptualize the contrasting trajectories of coffee adoption in China and South Korea through the lens of Cultural Path Dependence Construct (CPDC), identifying mechanisms of cultural lock-in and breakthrough.

b) **Framework for Mediating Sustainable Innovation:** To propose a testable set of propositions explaining how CPDC dimensions—ritual embeddedness, identity centrality, and institutional reinforcement—mediate the market reception of sustainability-oriented consumption innovations.

c) **Strategic Implications for Sustainable Marketing:** To develop a strategic matrix guiding how firms can align sustainable marketing practices with culturally embedded consumption paths across distinct Asian markets.

Restructuring the analysis as a hypothetical empirical study to a conceptual contribution of rigor, this paper aims to contribute to the development of theory in the area of the intersection of institutional economics, the cultural sociology, and sustainable marketing.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

The framework propose two theoretical pillars that are complementary namely path dependence which determines the stability and direction of those trajectories and cultural embeddedness which determines the content and meaning of economic practices in those trajectories.

### 2.1 Path Dependence, Lock-In, and Critical Junctures

The path dependence theory explains how historic choices and random events can establish self-reinforcing processes trapping a given technological, institutional or, as we believe, cultural course (Arthur, 1989; David, 1985). Such processes are marked by non-ergodicity where small initial events have significant, permanent effects which cannot be averaged out over time and increasing returns such that the cost of obeying a path decreases and the benefits of obeying a path increases as more people do it (Arthur, 1994; Pierson, 2000).

This logic was important in being applied by Douglass North (1990) to institutions- formal and informal rules of the game. The institutions establish incentive systems that inform the behavior of both organization and individuals in such a way that it produces path-dependent development patterns. When the exit and switching costs of a path or switching to an alternative becomes prohibited because of sunk costs, adaptive expectations and complementary institutions, the path becomes locked in (Martin and Sunley, 2010). Nevertheless, the courses of action are not unchangeable. Significant periods of contingency known as critical junctures can destabilize the existing

equilibria by loosening the structural constraints of the system and putting a system in a new direction (Pierson, 2000). It is this reasoning that we use when considering national consumption cultures where China is seen as strongly locked-in and Korea as having broken through after a crisis.

## 2.2 Cultural Embeddedness and the Social Life of Commodities

Economic behavior, consumption included, is not done by atomized, utility-maximizing actors but rather within existing webs of social relationships, symbolic systems, and the culture (Granovetter, 1985). Consumption is a meaning-filled social activity that is used as a symbol of identity, affiliation to groups, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Warde, 2005).

There are also social lives of commodities (Appadurai, 1986). They cannot be discussed as economic values and cannot be discussed as something not connected with the culture and politics. The definition of money itself is a socially constructed and variegated meaning, but marked out according to its social origin to be used in different ways (Zelizer, 2017). And so do other drinks such as tea and coffee which are not simply functional liquids but highly effective cultural artifacts. They are influenced by ritual embeddedness (e.g. the gongfu cha ceremony), the centrality of identity (e.g., tea as a centre of Chinese national identity) and as a part of the extended self (Belk, 1988). This is further enhanced by sustainable consumption where ethical values need to be incorporated in these pre-existing cultural frames (Ur Rahman et al., 2023).

## 2.3 Synthesis: A Cultural Path Dependence and Embeddedness Framework

Combining these strands to claim that national consumption pathways are path-dependent in an institutional way and cultural in nature. The hard (policies, market structures) and the soft (cultural embeddedness) infrastructure of a consumption regime is created respectively by the institutional framework and cultural embeddedness. They make up a strong socio-technical system that filters new products and stories, including sustainable coffee. It is an integrated viewpoint that is not tied to economic determinism or cultural essentialism but can be described as a dynamic, historically based account on divergent market evolution.

**Table 1.** Theoretical Synthesis for Framework Development.

Theoretical Concept	Core Mechanism	Role in Framework
<b>Path Dependence &amp; Lock-In (Arthur, 1989; North, 1990)</b>	Increasing returns, institutional inertia, high switching costs.	Explains macro-level persistence or change of the national beverage regime (tea vs. coffee dominance).
<b>Critical Junctures (Pierson, 2000)</b>	Contingent events that disrupt institutional equilibria.	Identifies historical moments that triggered Korea's path breakthrough (e.g., 1997 crisis).
<b>Cultural Embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985; Appadurai, 1986)</b>	Economic action shaped by social networks and symbolic meanings.	Specifies the micro-level content of the path: the rituals, identities, and social practices surrounding tea/coffee.
<b>Practice Theory &amp; Distinction (Warde, 2005; Bourdieu, 1984)</b>	Consumption as habitual, socially situated practice signaling cultural capital.	Links individual behavior to the culturally embedded path, explaining habit formation and status dynamics.

## 3. The Cultural Path Dependence Construct (CPDC) and Divergent Pathways

To explain the striking divergence in coffee adoption between two historically tea-dominant societies, we introduce the Cultural Path Dependence Construct (CPDC) as a theoretical lens. CPDC is conceptualized as a second-order construct capturing the enduring influence of culturally embedded consumption pathways on current market choices. In essence, CPDC represents the power and character of a historically constituted consumption trajectory that can either channel new products into compatibility with tradition or resist them outright. It is composed of three interrelated dimensions – ritual embeddedness, identity centrality, and institutional reinforcement – which to-

gether determine the strength of a cultural consumption path and its capacity to filter or accommodate innovations. A high CPDC denotes a deeply entrenched consumption path that raises substantial cultural and institutional barriers to alternative practices, whereas a more malleable or recently formed CPDC may allow novel consumption patterns to take root more easily.

Ritual embeddedness refers to the extent to which consumption behavior is governed by enduring rituals, routines, and scripted practices. When a beverage is woven into the daily rhythms of life and formal ceremonies, it gains a self-reinforcing momentum through habit and tradition. Identity centrality denotes the degree to which the consumption of a particular product is integral to personal, community, or national identity narratives. A product high in identity centrality is not merely consumed for taste or utility; it symbolizes heritage, values, and collective self-image. Institutional reinforcement captures the support provided by formal and informal institutions – including government policies, industry structures, education, and social norms – that actively promote and perpetuate the consumption practice. These dimensions operate in concert: rituals cultivate emotional attachment and habit; identity linkages imbue the product with symbolic significance; and institutions provide material and normative scaffolding that stabilizes the practice. Taken together, a strong alignment of ritual, identity, and institutional forces creates a robust cultural path dependence. Such a path can persist over time, “locking in” certain consumer behaviors and rendering the adoption of new alternatives challenging unless disrupted by powerful external shocks or deliberate interventions.

### *3.1. China: Enduring Tea Pathways and Culturally Patterned Containment of Coffee*

China is frequently characterized as a “land of tea,” but a non-essentialist analysis requires explicit recognition of heterogeneity. Tea practice in China varies regionally (e.g., distinct preparation styles, taste hierarchies, and social uses), and coffee consumption varies sharply by urban tier, cohort, and region. This study therefore treats “China” as a national-level ideal type in which a tea-centered CPDC remains dominant, while acknowledging nested sub-paths and local deviations.

At the national level, tea exhibits strong ritual embeddedness and identity centrality that create powerful cultural switching costs. Contemporary studies of Chinese tea consumption show that tea purchase and use are shaped by relational and cultural motives—renqing (relational obligation), mianzi (face), collectivism, and man–nature unity—that structure what counts as appropriate tea in different occasions and why tea is treated as a cultural product rather than a fast-moving consumer good (Tong et al., 2021). These motives translate into repeated, socially anchored occasions where tea is “the right object” for hospitality, gift-giving, and self-cultivation, reinforcing ritual scripts and identity meanings.

Coffee has grown rapidly in China, but its mainstreaming is uneven and often segmented by urban modernity and consumption space. Official trade analysis indicates that coffee demand is increasingly concentrated in major metropolitan nodes (e.g., Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen) and is rising in selected interior cities (e.g., Chengdu, Hangzhou, Chongqing), consistent with diffusion through urban hierarchies and lifestyle niches (USDA-FAS, 2024). At the firm and retail-infrastructure level, empirical work on China’s “new retail” coffee sector also documents highly uneven spatial concentration, with store density clustering in economically developed urban agglomerations and expanding outward through hierarchical diffusion patterns (Qi et al., 2025). These patterns are consistent with the claim that China contains multiple sub-national CPDC configurations: tea-centered pathways remain culturally dominant in many contexts, while coffee-centered routines take hold in specific urban spaces and cohorts.

Institutional reinforcement around tea further contributes to path persistence, even as coffee infrastructure expands. Tea industries and cultural promotion mechanisms—commercial, educational, and symbolic—provide stable carriers for tea legitimacy. Meanwhile, coffee’s institutional expansion in China has often relied on digitally mediated retail and affordability strategies that

lower barriers to trial and routinization (USDA-FAS, 2024). This type of institutional reinforcement can scale coffee consumption without necessarily producing identity centrality comparable to tea; coffee may function as a modern convenience or cosmopolitan marker in certain segments while remaining secondary in culturally core contexts.

Where coffee becomes culturally meaningful in China, it often does so through identity-oriented positioning. Research in China's coffee shop sector finds that foreign-branded or premium coffee environments can trigger perceptions of quality and self-congruity, particularly among consumers with stronger cosmopolitan orientations, thereby linking coffee consumption to identity projects rather than mere utility (Li et al., 2022). This dynamic supports the CPDC claim that coffee's uptake depends on whether new routines and meanings can be made compatible with—rather than directly antagonistic to—dominant tea-centered scripts.

Finally, China's regional coffee dynamics underscore why CPDC should be treated as potentially multi-level. Ethnographic mapping of Yunnan—the archetypal “tea province” that is also central to China's coffee production and emergent coffee expertise—shows how coffee knowledge, entrepreneurship, and consumer practice can develop as an interconnected web of actors, blurring boundaries between production, presumption, and consumption (Pang & Li, 2018). This implies that localized coffee pathways can form within a nationally tea-dominant regime, but their scaling will still be filtered by national-level ritual and identity institutions that protect tea's cultural legitimacy.

### ***3.2. South Korea: Path Breakthrough and a Recombinant Coffee CPDC***

South Korea's beverage trajectory cannot be explained by claiming that “tea weakened” in a simple linear sense. Korea has historically documented tea-related rituals and Confucian-inflected etiquette, including ancestral and hospitality practices, and contemporary tea culture includes both continuation and reinvention in modern nation-building contexts (Lee & Kwon, 2022). This historical grounding directly responses that the relevant question is not whether tea existed, but why coffee came to dominate everyday, mass-market practice and how a new coffee-centered CPDC was assembled and stabilized.

A key part of the answer lies in the formation of new, scalable rituals and institutions around coffee that aligned with postwar modernization, urban density, and changing social time. Contemporary analyses of Korean coffee culture show that coffee and coffee shops became linked to cosmopolitan aspiration and Western-associated distinction, with café spaces serving as socially valuable venues beyond home and work (Curran & Chesnut, 2022). Importantly, this is not merely a matter of preference; it is an institutionalized pattern whereby café density, franchising, training systems, and media scripts collectively reproduce coffee routines.

The study also explains why the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis supported coffee culture rather than, for example, a revival of traditional teahouse culture. The crisis is better treated as a facilitating condition that increased the supply of small-scale service entrepreneurship and intensified the search for commercially viable “third spaces,” but it does not uniquely determine coffee's rise. Coffee possessed several comparative advantages in this historical conjuncture: it was already associated with postwar U.S. influence and modernity, it could be standardized and franchised quickly, and café formats could be scaled to urban lifestyles and study/work practices more readily than traditional teahouse scripts. In other words, coffee better matched the emergent identity repertoire of “modern, global Korea” and offered a commercially scalable institutional form.

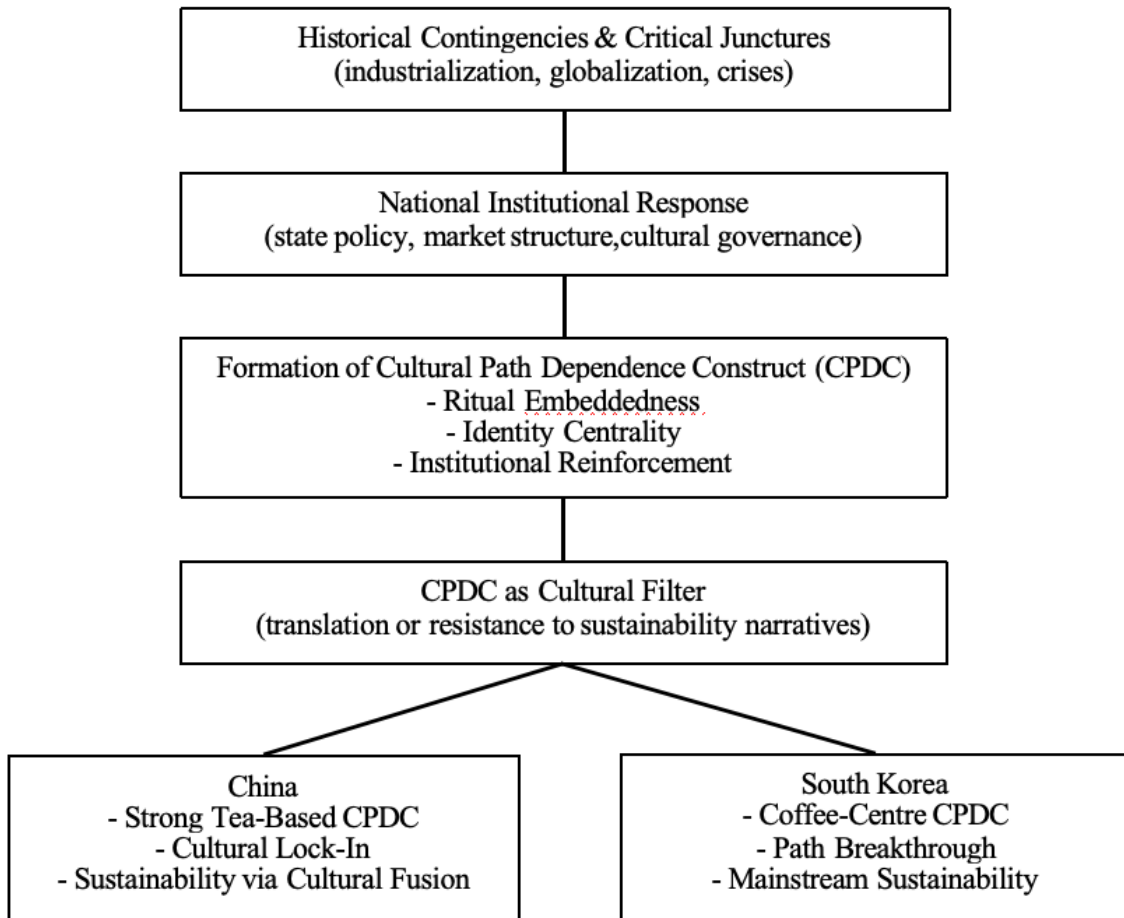
In periods of rapid transformation, cultural elements can be recombined into new “strategies of action,” producing hybrid practices that borrow from global scripts while becoming locally routinized. This is consistent with the view that culture shapes action through repertoires rather than fixed value hierarchies (Swidler, 1986). Korea's coffee CPDC is “recombinant” in this sense: café rituals, taste hierarchies (e.g., specialty coffee), and consumption etiquette draw on global coffee culture while being reassembled into locally meaningful routines (dating, studying, social striving)

supported by commercial institutions, language ideologies, and popular media. The result is a coffee pathway with strong institutional reinforcement and ritual density, even if its historical depth differs from China’s tea-centered pathway.

**3.3. Comparative Insights and Boundary Conditions**

The China–South Korea comparison highlights two ideal-typical configurations of CPDC and two corresponding diffusion logics. In China, strong tea-centered ritual embeddedness and identity centrality impose cultural compatibility constraints on coffee and on sustainability narratives attached to coffee. Coffee can expand rapidly in specific urban segments and regions but remains culturally patterned and uneven, consistent with sub-national variation in CPDC intensity and carrier institutions (USDA-FAS, 2024; Qi et al., 2025; Pang & Li, 2018). In South Korea, coffee consumption has been institutionally densified and ritualized into a mainstream pathway, so sustainability-oriented coffee positioning can build on an already normalized coffee habitus and retail infrastructure, rather than first having to overcome a deeply identity-central incumbent beverage.

Two boundary conditions follow. First, CPDC should be treated as a multi-level construct in empirical operationalization: national CPDC provides an explanatory baseline, but regional and cohort-level CPDC variation can be theorized as nested sub-paths within national regimes (e.g., China’s tier-one cities versus rural counties; Korea’s metropolitan districts versus provincial localities). Second, causal claims linking historical shocks to cultural outcomes should be phrased as historically plausible mechanisms rather than deterministic chains; coffee’s rise in Korea is best understood as the outcome of multiple reinforcing processes—identity repositioning, scalable café institutions, and routinized third-space practices—rather than a single-cause narrative.



**Figure 1.** The Cultural Path-Filtered Sustainability Marketing Framework.

(A process model diagram showing: Historical Contingencies / Critical Junctures → National Institutional Response → Formation of CPDC (Ritual, Identity, Institutions) → CPDC acts as a Filter for Sustainable Marketing Narratives → Differential Consumer Reception & Market Outcomes in China vs. Korea.).

#### 4. Propositions: Mechanisms Linking CPDC to Sustainable Consumption

Drawing upon the conceptual framework outlined above, we articulate a set of theoretically grounded propositions that illuminate the mechanisms by which the Cultural Path Dependence Construct (CPDC) mediates the reception of sustainability discourses in national consumer markets. These propositions serve not only to refine the theoretical architecture but also to lay the groundwork for empirical validation across culturally distinct contexts.

First, we posit that the strength of a society's CPDC plays a decisive role in shaping the receptivity of sustainable consumption narratives. In contexts where deeply rooted consumption traditions persist—such as China's enduring tea culture—a high CPDC necessitates the cultural hybridization of sustainability narratives for them to resonate effectively. Rather than invoking abstract, universalist ethics, such narratives must be reframed to align with indigenous values, such as harmony with nature or holistic well-being. In doing so, sustainability initiatives can gain cultural legitimacy by embedding themselves within existing symbolic and normative frameworks.

Second, the dimension of ritual embeddedness within the CPDC serves as a principal mechanism of consumer habit formation. When a product or practice is deeply entrenched in routine, ceremonial, or social behaviors—as exemplified by the role of tea in Chinese daily and formal life—substituting it with a sustainable alternative poses significant resistance. This resistance is not merely a function of consumer inertia but arises from the disruption of embodied cultural routines. Therefore, sustainability-oriented products or behaviors that attempt to replace or displace well-established rituals (e.g., a morning tea ceremony) are likely to face greater cultural friction than those that target less ritualized moments of consumption.

Third, the nature of institutional reinforcement embedded within the CPDC affects the openness of a market to new sustainability narratives. When a CPDC is historically constructed through state-led cultural preservation—as seen in China's policy support for tea as a national heritage product—it creates structural barriers to the penetration of alternative practices, especially those positioned as foreign or disruptive. By contrast, when a CPDC emerges from recent, commercially-driven developments—as is the case with South Korea's coffee culture—the institutional fabric is more responsive to dynamic branding strategies and corporate narratives around sustainability. In such environments, sustainability stories can be rapidly diffused through mainstream retail channels and consumer touchpoints, often leveraging the credibility of large franchises and certification schemes.

Finally, the differential impact of CPDC on consumer responses is moderated by the heterogeneity of consumer segments. Consumers situated at the cultural margins—such as young, urban, cosmopolitan Chinese individuals with lower identification with traditional tea rituals—are more likely to respond positively to direct sustainability appeals. These boundary consumers, by virtue of their weaker alignment with the prevailing CPDC, act as cultural intermediaries through whom sustainability innovations may first gain traction before diffusing into the broader market.

In short, these propositions highlight that sustainable consumption does not occur in a cultural vacuum. Rather, it unfolds within historically and institutionally mediated consumption trajectories. Recognizing the strength, content, and formation pathway of the CPDC in each context is essential to tailoring effective sustainability strategies—whether through translate, adaptation, or strategic integration.

#### 5. Managerial Implications: A Strategic Matrix for Sustainable Marketing

In particular, the CPDC model highlights a strategic divergence between locked-in markets and breakthrough markets. China's enduring tea-dominant culture (a strong CPDC leading to cultural lock-in) contrasts with South Korea's rapid transformation to a coffee-oriented culture (a CPDC breakthrough), underscoring that each context demands a tailored approach to sustainable coffee marketing. These divergent trajectories necessitate adjustments to core strategic dimensions—such as value translation, narrative framing, and institutional leverage—so that sustainability initiatives align with each market's cultural path. To synthesize these differences, we present a comparative strategic matrix (see Table 2) that juxtaposes the key marketing imperatives for sustainable coffee in China and South Korea. This matrix offers managers a clear, structured overview of how sustainable coffee marketing strategies should be aligned with the unique cultural path dynamics of each market.

In the context of China's strong tea-based CPDC, a nuanced strategy for sustainable coffee marketing must go beyond standard consumer outreach and engage deeply with the cultural terrain. First, promoting the historical and global relevance of Chinese coffee can serve to legitimize the beverage within the national identity narrative. Unearthing and publicizing China's historical involvement in coffee production and trade—particularly in Yunnan province—can foster a sense of indigenous continuity rather than foreign novelty. This approach may help reposition coffee not as an imported contrast to tea, but as a complementary node in China's evolving engagement with global consumption practices. Second, recognizing and respecting the deep-rooted heritage of tea culture allows marketers to avoid antagonistic positioning. Rather than framing coffee as a replacement for tea, innovative product development can explore hybrid beverage formats that combine elements of both traditions—such as tea-infused coffee blends or ceremonial-style coffee consumption experiences. Such initiatives can reinforce a pluralistic consumption ethos, positioning coffee as a rotational lifestyle element rather than a cultural usurper. Third, sustainability-oriented marketing should embrace a demand-driven innovation logic that integrates production and consumption through strong feedback mechanisms. Firms should invest in flexible coffee blend customization informed by consumer data, responding dynamically to regional taste preferences and emerging trends. At the same time, marketing campaigns should promote greater transparency about sourcing practices, origin narratives, and sustainability certifications. This not only supports ethical production but also reconfigures the consumer's role from passive end-user to informed decision-maker, capable of shaping upstream sustainability through purchase choices. Collectively, these approaches reorient sustainable coffee promotion in China toward culturally integrated, historically aware, and adaptively responsive strategies that are more likely to succeed in a consumption environment shaped by deep CPDC dynamics.

In addition to consolidating its competitive advantage in coffee culture, South Korea can pursue a dual-track strategy that positions coffee not only as a dominant commodity but also as a cultural bridge. First, coffee can be leveraged as a complementary cultural medium to stimulate domestic tea development. Specifically, efforts can be directed toward cultivating tea varieties adapted to Korea's agronomic conditions and embedding these into hybrid beverage innovations that carry recognizable Korean cultural markers. This approach—developing distinctive tea blends fused with local identity—enables a differentiated positioning strategy, offering an alternative to the dominant global coffee formats and enriching Korea's beverage portfolio with nationally grounded innovation.

Second, South Korea's strong coffee consumption base should be further leveraged to stimulate upstream sector development. While Korean firms have achieved notable success in retail and franchising, a longer-term sustainability strategy would involve the cultivation of regional production and trade capabilities. Governmental policy could support the formation of globally competitive, transnational Korean coffee enterprises operating across production, processing, and distribution. This would not only secure strategic control over supply chains but also strengthen Korea's regional trade core advantage, particularly in leveraging proximity to coffee-producing nations in

the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, domestic firms should be incentivized to move beyond saturation in retail trading and enter the coffee commodity chain more deeply, including sourcing, certification, and international branding. By shifting some of Korea’s consumption-driven market power toward trade and production leadership, a more balanced and resilient value chain can emerge—one in which consumption feedback actively shapes ethical sourcing, sustainability narratives, and global market influence.

**Table 2.** Comparative Strategic Matrix for Sustainable Coffee Marketing.

Strategic Dimension	China (Strong Tea CPDC / Lock-In Market)	South Korea (Dynamic Coffee CPDC / Break-through Market)
<b>Core Logic Narrative Frame</b>	Cultural Fusion & Localized Value Translation Translate sustainability into indigenous concepts: "harmony with nature" (tian ren he yi), holistic well-being, quality and safety. Link to narratives of modern, responsible Chinese agrarian development (Long & Khan, 2025).	Mainstream Integration & Institutional Leverage Emphasize global citizenship, quality enhancement, and brand alignment with progressive values. Leverage certifications (Fair Trade, Organic) as signals of modernity and sophistication.
<b>Product &amp; Place Strategy</b>	Tea-Coffee Integration: Develop products that bridge categories (e.g., tea-flavored coffee, coffee served in tea ceremony contexts). Focus on high-end, culturally savvy third-wave shops in Tier-1 cities.	Default Option Strategy: Make sustainable coffee the standard or prominently featured option in major franchise outlets. Use store density and convenience to drive trial and habit formation.
<b>Promotion &amp; Communication</b>	Leverage key opinion leaders (KOLs) on digital platforms (Xiaohongshu, Douyin) who can credibly fuse sustainability with cosmopolitan, yet culturally-grounded, lifestyles. Avoid overt, foreign "ethical guilt" appeals.	Partner with major café chains for nationwide campaigns. Utilize celebrity endorsements and integrate sustainability into the core brand messaging of leading players.
<b>Critical Success Factor</b>	Achieving cultural legitimacy by demonstrating respect for and intelligent fusion with the dominant tea culture.	Achieving scale and normalcy by embedding sustainability into the existing, high-volume commercial infrastructure.

## 6. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study developed a theoretical framework that integrates path dependence and cultural embeddedness to explain the contrasting trajectories of coffee consumption in China and South Korea and to anticipate implications for sustainable marketing. The centerpiece of this framework is the Cultural Path Dependence Construct (CPDC), a multidimensional concept capturing how historically entrenched cultural-institutional pathways filter market innovations. Using the CPDC lens, the divergence between China’s enduring tea-centric culture and Korea’s rapid embrace of coffee is interpreted as a result of different path dependencies, offering insight into how culture-bound trajectories can influence sustainable consumption. The framework’s propositions outline specific mechanisms by which these cultural paths affect market receptivity, providing clear avenues for empirical examination.

To validate and extend this framework, a multi-method research agenda is recommended. One approach is to conduct cross-cultural experiments using cultural priming—exposing participants to traditional tea culture cues versus globalized culture cues—to observe how each context influences responses to sustainable coffee marketing messages. Such experiments can establish causal links and directly test key propositions. Another approach is to design a cross-national survey instrument to measure the three dimensions of CPDC in Chinese and Korean populations. Ensuring measurement equivalence across the two countries will enable rigorous comparison, and the survey data can reveal how the strength of CPDC moderates the relationship between sustainability attitudes and behavioral intentions.

In addition, longitudinal and historical analyses of secondary data could illuminate the evolution of these consumption paths. Panel data on variables such as coffee shop density, policy changes,

and consumption trends may help pinpoint when and how South Korea achieved a “path breakthrough” toward coffee adoption. Conversely, regional data within China could be examined to determine whether higher coffee uptake correlates with factors indicative of a weaker traditional tea path dependence (for instance, areas with large migrant communities or greater exposure to international trade). Such historical and comparative analyses would clarify the contextual triggers and barriers associated with shifting cultural consumption patterns.

By continuing these research directions, researchers can test and refine the CPDC framework while deepening understanding of the interplay between culture, history, and sustainable market innovation. The process of sustainable coffee, or any other ethical innovation, is not simply about the quality of the offer, but about the path-concerned topography that the offer must go through.

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