

Exploring the components of cultural tourism experiences based on 24 solar terms: A case of spring commences

Eliver Lin Cheuk Ki (Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong, Hong Kong)
Candace Fu (Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong)
Colin Law (Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hong Kong)

INTRODUCTION

This study began with a question during a breakfast gathering among a few researchers: Are there any concepts, theories, or frameworks for cultural tourism experiences or products based on the 24 solar terms? The presumed answer was 'yes'. However, after a comprehensive literature search, only four articles related to the 24 solar terms and tourism, including Yang (2018), Yang and Li (2019), Orhun and Kutsi Akilli (2020), and Quan et al. (2024), were found. This gap is significant because, in the context of contemporary travel, the 24 solar terms are not merely agricultural indicators; they are temporal cultural products that facilitate a unique form of "seasonal tourism." While practices and activities for different solar terms are well-documented as customs, they have not been analyzed as cultural experiential components that create value for modern travellers. This study serves as a preliminary effort to bridge this gap, using Spring Commences as a case study, which is one of the most famous solar terms and festivals among tourists. There are many different practices and rituals related to spring commences across the whole Chinese community. To make this study manageable, the scope is limited to the southern part of China.

The 24 solar terms are an integral part of the Chinese calendar. It is a calendar built upon longitudinal observation of the movement pattern of the sun and the corresponding seasons. The full set of 24 solar terms was first found in Teachings on Astronomy in Huainanzi, an ancient book written in 139BC (McGeary, 2022; Ulrich, 2025). The 24 solar terms comprise 12 major solar terms and 12 minor solar terms. The 12 major solar terms include vernal equinox, corn rain, corn forms, summer solstice, great heat, end of heat, autumnal equinox, frost, light snow, winter solstice, severe cold, and spring showers. The 12 minor solar terms include bright and clear, summer commences, corn on ear, moderate heat, autumn commences, white dew, cold dew, winter commences, heavy snow, moderate cold, spring commences, and insects waken. The major solar terms and minor solar terms alternate with each other throughout the year. Each of the 24 solar terms falls on one particular date each year. For instance, the spring commences of 2026 fell on 4th February.

Traditionally, the 24 solar terms remind people about agricultural activities according to the weather and also affect Chinese people's cultures, customs, and practices, such as having family gatherings during the Spring Festival. In 2016, the 24 solar terms were listed as UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage (Shun, 2017). The 24 solar terms reflect the seasonal weather and timing of the year, which have significant impacts on various aspects of cultural tourism experiences, such as landscape and scenery, gastronomy, cultural and ritual activities, etc. A keyword search with the combinations of '24 solar terms' or '24 jieqi' and 'cultural tourism' in EBSCO Hospitality and Tourism Complete, Emerald Insight, ProQuest, and ScienceDirect, found four articles, including Yang (2018), Yang and Li (2019), Orhun and Kutsi Akilli (2020), and Quan et al. (2024), concerning the 24 solar terms and cultural tourism experiences. None of them attempted to explore the components of cultural tourism experiences based on the 24 solar terms. This paper attempts to fill this research gap.

METHOD

With the limited existing studies, this research initiative attempts to explore an indigenous group of components for 24 solar terms-themed cultural tourism experiences by using spring commences as the case study. The thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) has been adopted. The unit of analysis of this study is the spring commences. The data collected included field notes and literature (中國養生文化研究中心, 2021; 白虹, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2018; 馬以工作, 2022; 宋英杰, 2025) about the spring commences, its seasonal weather meanings and extended meanings. Since most of the

literature about the 24 solar terms is in Chinese, some literature studied for this paper is in Chinese. The six steps of the thematic analysis, including familiarisation, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up, are strictly followed in this study.

FINDINGS

In addition to the seasonal weather meanings, extended meanings of each of the 24 solar terms were formed historically. After data analysis, 42 initial codes about the seasonal weather meaning, extended meaning, cultures, customs, and practices related to spring commences were identified. They are rooted in Chinese culture and history. When conducting initial coding and generating themes, the research team analysed the raw data through the lens of cultural tourism experience. Whether and how spring commences related to and can be transformed into cultural tourism experiences was always the focal question in the data analysis process. The 42 initial codes were grouped into seven themes, which include the rhythm of the weather, the liminal time of a year, seasonal landscape and phenology, spring festival and cultural rituals, spring agricultural practices and rituals, self-nourishment in seasonal rhythm, and reading of cosmic signs. Figure 1 illustrates the components of spring commences-based cultural tourism experiences. It identifies two foundational components: the rhythm of the weather and the liminal time of a year. The other five themes are categorised as the derived components, which can be further classified into two main groups: the seasonal landscape and phenology, and the human interpretations and activities. The meanings of each theme will be explained in the following sessions.

Foundational Components

The rhythm of the weather was built upon three initial codes, including turning from freezing to thaw, winter lingering, and blowing warm east wind. This theme refers to the annual cycle of seasonal weather characteristics, which gradually turns from freezing cold to milder conditions with the arrival of spring commences.

The liminal time of a year consists of four initial codes, including threshold of ending and beginning, annual recurring date, marking the start of spring, and marking the start of a year. This theme refers to the transitional period between an old and a new year.

The rhythm of the weather and the liminal time of a year are considered the foundational components since the constituents of the other five themes are based on the weather characteristics and the timing of spring commences. Weather characteristics consistently play a fundamental role in shaping tourism experiences. In conjunction with the transitional period between the old and new year, unique cultural tourism experiences are offered during spring commences.

Derived Components

Seasonal landscape and phenology are composed of three initial codes, including thawing land, melting ice in rivers, and awakening nature from hibernation. This theme refers to the unique landscape and phenology due to the seasonal weather characteristics of spring commences. Tourists can witness the seasonal scenery that is only available for a short period each year, which represents a temporal aesthetic value to tourists.

The other four themes are related to human interpretations of, and activities during spring commences. Spring agricultural practices and rituals include seven initial codes: ploughing, sowing, planning the farm work prudently, following the cosmic order for farm work planning, thundering brings inauspiciousness to harvest, holding the welcoming Gou Mang ritual for good harvests, and holding the spring ox whipping ritual for good harvests. This theme refers to both farm work activities and ritual ceremonies for a good harvest in the year by having a good start of spring commences. These rituals and practices represent educational and immersive cultural experiences for tourists by participating in ancient rituals that symbolise a collective hope for the future.

Spring Festival and cultural rituals include 11 initial codes, which are decorating home, practising the ancestral worship ritual, holding the welcoming the God of Wealth ritual, practising spring cleaning, keeping vigil in the old year, having a family dinner, eating Spring festive foods, setting off firecrackers, celebrating with lion dance and dragon dance, giving red packets, and exchanging new year blessings.

This theme refers to the celebration of the Spring Festival. Tourists can participate in the preparations, celebrations, and rituals for dispelling evil spirits, invoking protection, good luck and prosperity, and strengthening family bonding, which represent social and emotional experiences for them.

Self-nourishment in seasonal rhythm includes 11 initial codes, which are aligning the body with spring's elemental energy, spring and liver system corresponding with the wood element, nourishing and protecting the liver, soothing the liver fire, balancing the rising yang and lingering yin energies, prone to wind pathogens (flu), eating light diets to match spring's energy, eating pungent vegetables and alliums to dispel cold, eating foods that nourish yang energy, avoiding excessive oily and spicy hot foods, and tasting spring through seasonal fresh vegetables and foods. Tourists can follow the self-nourishing practices, which are rooted in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and the Five Elements theory, and learn to attuning self-rhythm to the seasonal rhythm of spring commences. This theme offers educational, functional and transformative experiences to tourists.

Reading cosmic signs includes five initial codes, which are the eight characters of the year for predicting the luck levels of that year, thundering brings inauspiciousness to harvest, following the cosmic order for farm work planning, the Tai Hexagram in I Ching that represents nature renewal, peace and harmony, and the east and wood element in the Five Elements theory. This theme refers to the interpretation of cosmic signs during spring commences by combining the I Ching and Five Elements theory. This theme offers metaphysical experiences to tourists through the lens of the I Ching and Five Elements theory.

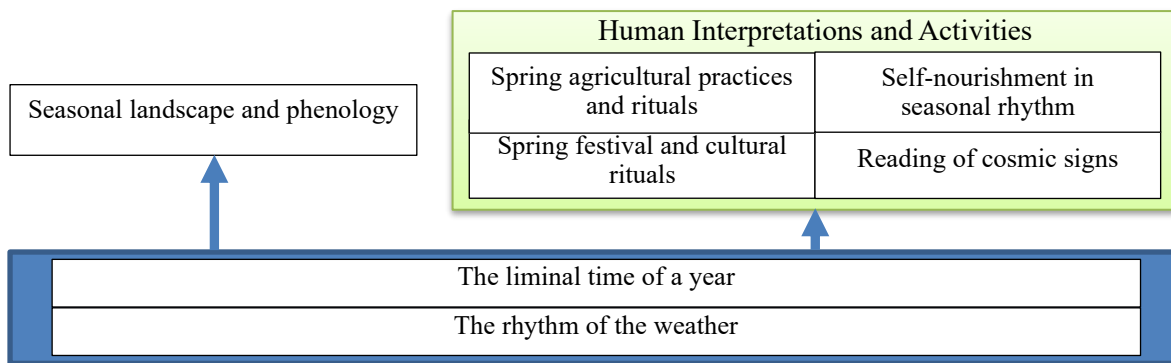


Figure 1. Components of spring commences-based cultural tourism experiences

IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that the rich historical and cultural substance of spring commences is well-suited as a base for cultural tourism experience design. The initial codes and the themes indicated that various aspects of spring commences are readily transformable into different kinds of cultural tourism experiences, such as landscape and scenery seeing activities during spring commences, cultural and ritual activities during the spring festival, gastronomy tourism of self-nourishing and festive foods, TCM tourism based on the seasonal rhythm, and metaphysical tourism for harmonizing the mind and soul with the cosmic energy, etc. These tourism experience products are multidimensional, which include sensory, cognitive, and spiritual. This study aims to initiate a move from a calendar of cultural events to a landscape of cultural tourism experiences. A holistic and systematic analysis of all 24 solar terms is needed to create a framework for multidimensional 24 solar terms cultural tourism experiences.

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