

A Study on Nyonya Food Culture from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

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Abstract: Nyonya food culture is a unique blend of Chinese and Malay culinary traditions. Drawing from John Berry's cross-cultural adaptation theory, this paper delves into the formation, development, and dissemination characteristics of Nyonya cuisine. The analysis reveals that the Chinese immigrants in Malacca primarily adopted an integration strategy during their cross-cultural adaptation, which is evident in the localization of food ingredients, cooking techniques, taste preferences, and dining etiquette. As a symbol of food culture, Nyonya cuisine has played a crucial role in helping the Nyonya ethnic group establish their identity in Southeast Asia, where diverse ethnic groups coexist. Furthermore, as a product of cross-cultural exchange, Nyonya food's inherent adaptability and integration have made it an essential medium for fostering intercultural communication and understanding.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adaptation; Nyonya cuisine; Food culture; Cultural integration

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1. Introduction

Nyonya cuisine is a prime example of how food can serve as a bridge between different cultures and contribute to their integration and understanding. The fusion of Chinese and Malay culinary traditions in Nyonya cuisine not only reflects the historical context of migration and cultural exchange but also highlights the adaptability and resilience of food culture in the face of changing circumstances. The process of de-regionalization and re-regionalization that Chinese immigrants underwent in Malacca allowed them to preserve some aspects of their traditional eating habits while also embracing local ingredients and cooking techniques. This dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation has resulted in a unique culinary style that is distinctly Nyonya. This paper will discuss the role of Nyonya cuisine from the perspective of cross-cultural adaptation theory.

2. The development of cross-cultural adaptation theory

Early studies on cross-cultural adaptation believe that cultural adaptation is a simple, linear, and stage-oriented

process. Individuals in acculturation are always located at some point on a continuum from full heritage culture to full dominant culture, and these individuals will eventually arrive at the point of full mainstream culture ^[1]. In other words, immigrants can only adjust themselves according to the mainstream culture of the society in which they live. The cultural-change model divides the process of cross-cultural adaptation into five stages: contact, breakdown, integration, autonomy, and independence. In the process of acculturation, these five stages gradually transition and occur in sequence. However, such single-dimension theoretical models hold that immigrants are completely passive in the face of local mainstream culture, ignoring the impact of individuals and their cultural background on the main culture. This perspective cannot fully reflect and explain the diversity and complexity of cultures in the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

Since the 1970s, numerous scholars have challenged traditional cross-cultural adaptation theories. John Berry, for instance, argues that cross-cultural adaptation is not a linear process. From a theoretical standpoint, he believes that preserving heritage culture and identity constitutes one dimension while developing strategies to interact with the host culture constitutes another dimension ^[2]. Berry emphasizes that acculturation is a two-way process involving different groups and occurs in diverse ethnic settings ^[3]. Acculturation essentially refers to the changes in cultural cognition, behavior, and psychology when individuals come into contact with different cultures. Building on these two dimensions, Berry proposes four common intercultural adaptation strategies: integration strategy, assimilation strategy, separation strategy, and marginalization strategy ^[4]. In his research on young immigrants in Norway, Berry also highlights that societal pressure and community values are crucial factors affecting the strategic preferences of cross-cultural adapters. This suggests that immigrants' acculturation strategies in unfamiliar and complex cultural environments can be intricate and varied.

The Nyonya food culture, characterized as a “mixed race” culture, is the result of the integration strategy adopted by Chinese immigrants in their adaptation to Southeast Asian culture. It represents a distinct third culture, separate from both pure Chinese and pure Malay cultures. Consequently, the cross-cultural communication of Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia involves a complex process of cultural adaptation and cultural creation. In this sense, the Nyonya food culture, as a result of the intermarriage life of the Chinese and Malays, has become an important symbol of the success of the cross-cultural practice of both sides ^[5]. As a result of food-mediated cross-cultural communication, Nyonya cuisine exhibits a fusion characteristic, reflecting the blending of Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures. Its expression is not constrained by boundaries, but rather the outcome of a shared drive towards diversity and integration ^[6]. Consequently, the implementation of cross-cultural adaptation strategies promotes the adaptation and transformation of the original ethnic group's culture, ultimately giving birth to a new culture. The Nyonya food culture not only represents the cross-cultural exchange of Chinese culinary traditions but also serves as a potent testament to the cultural adaptation and creation of Chinese immigrants.

3. The origin of Nyonya food

Food is not only a basic need to sustain life but also an important symbol and medium of civilization and cultural development. On the one hand, the dietary preferences and taboos of a particular ethnic group are closely related to the ecological, geographical, and other natural environment in which the ethnic group lives ^[7]. On the other hand, eating is a social behavior with symbolic significance. It is a set of cultural mechanisms for human beings to adapt to the natural environment ^[8]. The selection, processing, and enjoyment of food are closely related to specific social and cultural backgrounds ^[9]. The emergence of Nyonya cuisine can be attributed to the adaptation of Chinese immigrants to their original cultural memory in the Southeast Asian social environment.

This process was influenced by various factors such as the natural environment, food materials, and cultural interactions with other populations. As a result, the original food culture of the immigrant group underwent constant adjustments, ultimately achieving communication and integration through food as a medium.

3.1. The localization of ingredients

Malaysia is located in the tropics while China is located in the subtropics, and its local crops are different from China due to the influence of climate and environment. Faced with different natural environments, Chinese immigrants often use local food materials. Where conditions permit, the traditional main ingredients are still the first choice of Chinese immigrants, such as chicken and duck, beef, and so on. But in the process of cooking, some food ingredients with Southeast Asian flavors are included, such as coconut milk, citronella, chestnut Asian ginseng, coconut sugar, and so on. The selection of these ingredients makes the flavors of Nyonya dishes richer. Compared to the food culture of native Chinese immigrants, an important characteristic of Nyonya cuisine is its use of curry powder in cooking, which was learned from the Malay ethnic group. The incorporation of curry powder not only alters the color but also enhances the taste of the food. Additionally, Nyonya cuisine features fish heads as a primary ingredient, seasoned with tamarind pulp, sugar, red onion, lemongrass, and other spices. This results in a delicious blend of sour and sweet flavors, and fragrant aromas, which is another manifestation of the Chinese culinary tradition in the region.

3.2. The localization of cooking skills

In contrast to the Chinese culinary tradition of adding sauces to food, Nyonya dishes are usually prepared with various spices before cooking. This represents a significant departure from the food preparation principles of the Nyonya food culture compared with the Chinese food culture. While both Chinese and Nyonya cuisine commonly use spicy spices such as onion and garlic, the Chinese typically fry them directly to flavor the dishes, whereas the Nyonya food first prepares these ingredients into spices and then adds them to the dishes. Given the availability of pre-prepared condiments like chili sauce, it is understandable that Chinese immigrants have adapted their traditional cooking methods for convenience. By selecting, adjusting, and optimizing traditional cooking skills based on factors such as convenience, practicality, and necessity, Chinese immigrants have chosen more cost-effective cooking methods while achieving similar taste effects. This reflects the principles of Chinese immigrants' dietary integration strategy.

3.3. The localization of dishes taste

In the food transformation of Chinese migrants, the phenomenon of taste change or acceptance of new tastes is the most significant, which can be seen from the sauce selection to the degree of localization of Chinese migrant taste. The people of Fujian and Guangdong do not eat spicy food, while the majority of Southeast Asian Chinese whose ancestors came from Fujian and Guangdong do. Nyonya dishes often use soy sauce with fresh shredded chili as a dipping sauce, and some regional Nyonya dishes tend to use fish sauce. In addition, Nyonya cuisine shows its preference for spicy flavors through the use of chili and curry powder, as well as the addition of sambal chili paste and sauces made with many local ingredients when cooking. This change in taste was undoubtedly influenced by the Malays, whose fondness for spicy food changed the food preferences and diet of Chinese immigrants in the Malacca region. As the descendants of local Chinese immigrants, the tastes of the Nyonya are thus distinguished from those of the traditional Hokkien or Cantonese, forming their own unique cultural identity. For example, they must have hot peppers to eat noodles.

3.4. The localization of food etiquette

The food culture of Nyonya not only retains traditional Chinese food etiquette but also integrates local food customs. Chinese immigrants and their descendants make full use of local resources, interact with local residents, and create a unique food culture. The table manners of Nyonya still focus on the role of the host and guest, as well as the order of elders and children. There is usually a period of pleasantries before the formal meal, during which guests usually wait for the host to start eating. In addition, in family meals, the younger generation can only start eating after the elder has eaten. Moreover, the table manners of Nyonya cuisine also incorporate some local eating habits, such as using the right hand to pick up food and the left hand to wipe the mouth. During the dining process, especially at large dinners, Chinese people prefer a lively atmosphere, while the Nyonya try to avoid making loud noises.

4. The significance of Nyonya cuisine

The localization of diet plays an important role in promoting regional social community. With the increasing integration of Chinese immigrants into their new environment, their traditional culture undergoes continuous adjustment and adaptation in the process of cross-cultural communication. The Peranakan, who grew up in a family environment where their father was Chinese and their mother was Malay, lived in Southeast Asian societies. Their self-identity differed from that of their parents and peers of a single ethnic background. Therefore, Bata Nyonya's self-recognition needs to be defined by new and unique ethnic and cultural symbols.

4.1. The memory of Nyonya's history

Food, as a cultural concept, refers to a diet suitable for people's needs, which is not solely dependent on the nutritional function of food but also on its cultural significance ^[10]. Although Nyonya cuisine has successfully incorporated Chinese food culture in the Malacca region through ingredients, memories, and tastes, traditional customs are still evident during special occasions, particularly in traditional Chinese festivals. In ancestral worship ceremonies, both local and traditional Chinese foods are prepared, with tea and chopsticks being the most representative. Tea and chopsticks are essential elements in Baba Nyonya's ancestral rituals. During specific Chinese festivals, certain Chinese foods are also consumed, such as rice cakes for the Chinese Lunar New Year, zongzi for the Dragon Boat Festival, mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival, and tangyuan for the Winter Solstice.

4.2. The reflection of Nyonya values

As a unique cuisine, Nyonya cuisine originates from the natural and cultural environment of the Nyonya ethnic group and reflects the habits and characteristics of their group life. First, Nyonya emphasizes the importance of family meals. Family meals are a very important cultural tradition in Singapore. Nyonya families consistently gather for dinner, regardless of whether it is a holiday or a weekday. Many of the dishes in Nyonya cuisine are suitable for family gatherings, such as nasi lemak, laksa, fried kway teow, and so on. These dishes are not only delicious but also suitable for family members to make together. At the same time, the family tradition of cooking together reflects the emphasis on sharing and helping each other in Nyonya cuisine. In addition, the selection of ingredients in Nyonya cuisine reflects the importance of healthy eating in Nyonya. Although Nyonya cuisine contains more fat and sugar, it also focuses on the selection of ingredients and the healthy cooking style. For example, nasi lemak in Nyonya is often made using brown or black rice, which increases the intake of fiber and other nutrients.

4.3. The consistency of the Nyonya group

It is the internal consistency of the group that is required to maintain the culturally different boundary between one group from the others. Therefore, the identity cluster of each member of the group must be highly patterned so that the interaction between groups can be based on the group identity ^[11]. The taste, preparation, and etiquette of Nyonya cuisine distinguish not only the Nyonya ethnic group from their Chinese and Malay ancestors, or Chinese and pure Malay peers, but also from other Peranakan ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, such as Terengganu Peranakan, Mestizo and so on. For example, Peranakans in Terengganu are used to eating fermented pickled durians, but the taste is not acceptable to people in Baba Nyonya. Additionally, eating is social, involving communication, giving and taking, the search for consistency, the basic needs of the individual, and compromise by taking care of the needs of others ^[12]. In the context of group dynamics, while individual will and free choice can impact the overall temperament of the group, the influence of ethnic culture on an individual's feeding behavior is often more profound. Social interactions within the group provide opportunities for individuals to express their opinions and exert influence. However, this influence may not always align with an individual's personal preferences but rather follow the interests or cultural traditions of the group. This orientation may be provocative and oriented towards conforming to the group's norms, which may not always align with an individual's will and preference.

5. The role of Nyonya cuisine in cross-cultural practice

Food transcends borders. In contrast to media with strong ideological undertones, cross-cultural exchange through food is more conducive to communication. Nyonya cuisine, which evolved from Chinese food culture and underwent local adaptation, plays a significant role in the cross-cultural dialogue between Chinese and Malayan communities. It is not merely a type of food but also a symbolic cultural representation. It embodies the cultural assimilation and integration of Chinese immigrants with Malays. Furthermore, it is a distinctive cultural feature of the Baba Nyonya ethnic group. Additionally, it serves as a medium for cultural inheritance and exchange, enabling people to gain insights into diverse cultures by savoring their respective cuisines, thereby fostering cultural exchange and integration.

5.1. Enhance intercultural understanding and respect

Nyonya cuisine is a fusion of Southeast Asian and Chinese culinary traditions, created by the descendants of Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia. To cope with cultural differences and alleviate acculturation pressures, these immigrants actively sought to understand the local culture, intermarried with Malays, and integrated into their way of life. This mutual understanding and respect between Chinese and Malay cultures led to significant internal changes in both food cultures, resulting in the emergence of Nyonya cuisine as a new culinary tradition. As a product of the localization of Chinese food culture, Nyonya cuisine reflects the cultural exchange between Chinese immigrants and Malay ethnic groups. It showcases its unique charm through its ingredients, cooking techniques, and taste. For instance, the spicy and flavorful characteristics of Nyonya cuisine are a blend of local food culture and the adaptation of Chinese immigrants to local flavors. Today, Nyonya cuisine serves as a window into the historical, cultural, and social background of the Malay Archipelago.

5.2. Promote food cultural exchange and integration

As a product of the intercultural exchange between Chinese and Malay culinary traditions, Nyonya cuisine exhibits distinctive characteristics of diversity and inclusiveness. On one hand, Nyonya cuisine integrates ingredients and cooking techniques from various regions, resulting in unique flavors and styles that enrich

the food culture of the Malacca region. For instance, classic dishes such as nasi lemak, laksa, and kway teow in Nyonya cuisine not only embody the influences of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures but also introduce new vitality into Singapore's food culture. On the other hand, as a representative ethnic cuisine, Nyonya food plays a role in promoting ethnic food culture. With globalization, an increasing number of people are becoming interested in diverse food cultures worldwide. Nyonya cuisine can attract more tourists to experience its flavors, thereby enhancing public awareness and understanding of Nyonya food culture. Simultaneously, the inherent compatibility of Nyonya cuisine facilitates the exchange and integration of its food culture with those of other regions. Today, apart from the Malacca region, Nyonya cuisine has spread to other areas such as Penang, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand.

5.3. Establish conditions for multicultural coexistence

The diversity of Nyonya cuisine reflects the inclusiveness of different cultures. In Nyonya cuisine, elements of Malay, Chinese, and other foreign cultures can be seen. For instance, fried kway teow is a representative dish in Malay cuisine. However, in Nyonya cuisine, fried kway teow has been influenced by Chinese culinary traditions, so eaters can find seafood and vegetables in this dish. This diversity demonstrates mutual respect and tolerance between different cultures and also provides space for the coexistence of diverse cultures. Secondly, the cross-cultural skill exchange promotes the interaction and understanding between different cultures and provides the impetus for the coexistence and development of diverse cultures. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Nyonya cuisine among food enthusiasts and chefs around the world. Many restaurants and food festivals now feature Nyonya dishes on their menus, showcasing the richness and diversity of this culinary tradition. The evolution of Nyonya cuisine not only represents the progress of food culture but also serves as a medium for intercultural exchange. This culinary tradition fosters communication and understanding between individuals from diverse countries and regions, thereby strengthening bonds of friendship and promoting a multicultural context conducive to coexistence and development.

6. Summary

Nyonya cuisine is a prime example of how food transcends its physical function and becomes a vessel for culture, identity, and intercultural exchange. The formation, fusion, and development of Nyonya cuisine highlight the significance of food as a cultural symbol that represents ethnic fusion and reconstruction, as well as an expression of ethnic personality. Through the re-regionalization of ingredients, cooking skills, tastes, and etiquette, Chinese immigrants engaged in cross-cultural communication and established a sense of belonging within their respective communities. In conclusion, Nyonya cuisine serves as a testament to the power of food to unite people across cultures and foster understanding and appreciation for one another's traditions. By embracing the diversity of food cultures, people can build stronger connections between communities and create a more harmonious world.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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