

A new benchmark in Chinese food culture studies: a re-evaluation of a history of Chinese food culture

Lin Zhixia^{1, a}, Zhang Haoyu^{1, b}, Chen Yuhang^{1, c, *},

¹Zengshifang Food R&D Co., Ltd, Room 302, Building 17, Bishuichuncheng, No.599 South Liujiachong Road, Tianxin District, Changsha City, Hunan Province 410004, China

a.zhixia_lin_012@163.com, b.zhanghaoyu_459586@foxmail.com, c.yuhang_cyh_2024@outlook.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: The publication of A History of Chinese Food Culture (Ten Volumes) represents a significant milestone in the field of Chinese food culture studies. Employing the theoretical framework of food culture circles, the work divides China into eleven distinct food culture circles: Northeast China, North-Central China, Northwest China, Beijing-Tianjin, the Lower Yellow River region, the Middle Yellow River region, the Lower Yangtze River region, the Middle Yangtze River region, Southwest China, Southeast China, and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. It conducts detailed and comprehensive research on each food culture circle in chronological order, strengthening the study of natural environments and geographical conditions in food culture, and emphasizing that food culture is a continuously evolving dynamic process. A History of Chinese Food Culture (Ten Volumes) stands as a new achievement and a new benchmark in Chinese food culture studies.

Keywords: food culture circle, food culture geography, continuous development

1. Introduction

Certain cultural phenomena, certain social lives, and certain ideologies are all closely related to the natural environments and geographical conditions in which they are rooted. Since the emergence of humanity, struggling against nature for survival and development has been one of humankind's pursuits, and the foundation of human survival and development is food. In the long course of China's five-thousand-year civilization, the vast and boundless territory has not only provided diverse ingredients for people living on this passionate land, but also created conditions for humans in different regions to form distinctive food cultures. In different regions and different eras, people's dietary lives have staged cultural feasts that are markedly different and uniquely characteristic. Chinese food culture possesses both commonalities and differences. Chinese food culture research has entered a stage of gradual maturity, and studies on the food culture of various dynasties in historical periods have reached a state of completeness. However, with the establishment and refinement of the concept of food culture circles, a new paradigm for studying the food culture of various regions in China under the guidance of this food culture theory has also matured.

2. The application of food culture circle theory

2.1. The paradigm innovation in Chinese food culture studies

People often delight in discussing the four major cuisines or the eight major cuisines, thereby demonstrating the public's awareness of and attention to daily food. The four major cuisines refer to Shandong cuisine (Lu cuisine) in the Lower Yellow River region, Sichuan cuisine (Chuan cuisine) in the Middle Yangtze River region, Huai yang cuisine in the Lower Yangtze River region, and Cantonese cuisine (Yue cuisine) in the Pearl River region. The eight major cuisines add to the four major cuisines: Hunan cuisine (Xiang cuisine) and Anhui cuisine (Hui cuisine) in the Middle Yangtze River region, Zhejiang cuisine (Zhe cuisine) in the Lower Yangtze River region, and Fujian cuisine (Min cuisine) in the Min River region. The primary criterion for classifying these cuisines is taste. This viewpoint has long dominated academic research on food culture.

However, the theory of the four major cuisines or the eight major cuisines cannot adequately explain the intrinsic motivations of Chinese food culture, nor can it encompass the diverse styles of food culture in all regions within China. The "circle theory" in food culture research can effectively interpret the connotations and motivations of regional food culture characteristics throughout China; this new paradigm of food culture circles represents a transcendence and revolution over the old paradigm of cuisine classification. Nevertheless, although the "circle theory" has long been a well-known theoretical system in the international food culture academic community, it has not received equal treatment in the domestic food culture academic community. A History of Chinese Food Culture (Ten Volumes) (hereinafter referred to as the "Ten Volumes") is the latest achievement that applies this international food culture theory to Chinese food culture research, representing a large-scale systematic study and investigation of Chinese food culture by region.

2.2. The foundation and mechanism of food culture circle formation

2.2.1. The material foundation of food culture circle formation

Food culture circle theory posits that the natural environment and geographical conditions constitute the material stage upon which human dietary life depends; the formation and shaping of human food culture are the products of natural environments and geographical conditions. The eleven food culture regions that have historically formed in China—Northeast China, North-Central China, Northwest China, Beijing-Tianjin, the Lower Yellow River region, the Middle Yellow River region, the Lower Yangtze River region, the Middle Yangtze River region, Southwest China, Southeast China, and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau—are all closely related to the natural environments and geographical conditions of their respective regions. Mr. Ge Jian Xiong once pointed out that "typical regional cultures are mainly manifested in festivals, food, wedding and funeral customs, dialects, religion, and folk beliefs. Specifically, food mainly refers to folk daily diet rather than official cuisine, because the latter can be detached from local product conditions." [1] Thus, the distinct natural environments and geographical conditions of various regions provide significantly different dietary ingredients for different areas; the resulting production methods and levels of productive force development also differ, thereby leading to differences in dietary utensils and culinary techniques, which in turn lead to differences in lifestyles among different regions, ultimately affecting dietary patterns and food customs. Therefore, the distinct natural environments and geographical conditions of various regions influence the exchange between a given region and the outside world, causing the food cultures of different regions to present different exchange phenomena—exportation, importation, or isolation. The differences in regional culture constitute the foundation for the formation of food culture circles.

2.2.2. The dynamic interaction among food culture circles

Certainly, the delineation and formation of the eleven food culture circles do not indicate that these circles are completely isolated and devoid of connection. In the formation process of each food culture circle, exchange, rejection, or integration with other food culture circles are all indispensable factors. Such exchanges, rejections, or integrations among food culture circles are often intensified by activities such as warfare, migration, famine-induced relocation, and commerce. The exchanges, rejections, or integrations among various food culture circles do not necessarily follow the principle of geographical adjacency; sometimes, there even exist cross-circle exchanges, rejections, or integrations. If the natural environment and geographical conditions shape the differences among food culture circles, then the exchanges, rejections, or integrations among these circles create similarities among different food culture circles.

2.3. The practical application of the food culture circle paradigm

The volumes of the "Ten Volumes" (with the exception of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau) are organized according to the theory of food culture circles. The series is divided into volumes on Northeast China, North-Central China, Northwest China, Beijing-Tianjin, the Lower Yellow River region, the Middle Yellow River region, the Lower Yangtze River region, the Middle Yangtze River region, Southwest China, and Southeast China. The research focus of each volume centers on the food culture of its respective region, with partial attention given to the historical exchanges of food culture between the region and the outside world. It can be said that this series represents the conscious application and concentrated embodiment of food

culture circle theory, and stands as the latest achievement in the theoretical innovation of Chinese food culture studies.

3. A representative work in food culture geography studies

3.1. The foundation of food culture differences

3.1.1. *The natural foundation of food culture differences*

Although the cliché of geographical determinism has long been abandoned by the academic community, the influence of natural environments and geographical conditions on the lives, behaviors, and concepts of people in certain regions continues to be valued by scholars. The food cultures of various regions within China are not entirely identical; in fact, most of them exhibit differences. The reason for this diversity in food culture lies in the fact that China's vast territory has resulted in different natural environments and geographical conditions across its regions. Food cultures built upon these different natural environments and geographical conditions are inevitably distinct from one another. In the process of food production and dietary life, humans always strive to utilize their knowledge of climate, soil, terrain, water systems, and other factors within their survival regions to cultivate food that meets human needs in accordance with local conditions, thereby forming food cultures with distinctive characteristics.

3.1.2. *The return of geographical environment in food culture studies*

The opening of each volume in the "Ten Volumes" discusses the changes in the natural geographical environment (climate, vegetation, water systems, soil, etc.) of the region under study, clearly elevating the role of natural environment and geographical conditions in the formation of food culture to an important position. The "North-Central China Volume" specifically includes a section entitled "Dietary Concepts Under the Ecological Environment of North-Central China," discussing the dietary concepts of semi-arid grassland regions. The "Southeast China Volume" also specifically includes a section entitled "The Geographical Environment of Southeast China Determines the Rich Connotations of Its Food Culture," discussing the food culture of coastal subtropical monsoon climate zones. A comparative study of the two would further highlight the geographical distribution characteristics of Chinese food culture.

3.1.3. *Nature, farming, and diet: a dynamic interplay*

In the five-thousand-year civilization of China, the diet of the Chinese people has been closely related to agricultural production, which has been the material foundation sustaining the vast majority of Chinese people throughout these five millennia. Agricultural production activities are heavily constrained by natural environments and geographical conditions. Therefore, natural environment and geographical conditions—agricultural production—dietary activities exist along the same ecological chain, and are sometimes even mutually causative. The "Ten Volumes" systematically analyzes issues at three levels: natural environment, agriculture, and diet, clarifying the academic boundaries among geographical environment history, agricultural history, and dietary life history. It focuses on examining how geographical environmental changes caused by human behavior in historical periods have affected diet and agriculture, particularly the distribution and dissemination of food materials. In addition to agricultural production, nomadic economy also occupied a certain proportion in Chinese history. Nomadic economy mainly occurred in semi-arid grassland regions with relatively scarce precipitation, mostly located north of the 200mm annual precipitation line, encompassing the North-Central and Northwest food culture circles. Due to differences in production methods, the food cultures of the peoples in these two regions also differed from those in the agricultural areas south of the Great Wall. Historically, the southward raids by nomadic peoples were often triggered by food shortages caused by disasters.

3.2. The systematic composition of food culture circles

3.2.1. *The regional characteristics of Chinese food culture circles*

The natural environment and geographical conditions are the foundation for shaping food culture circles. This can be intuitively perceived from the volumes of this series. Through the discussion in each volume, the geographical distribution characteristics of Chinese food culture are clearly evident. For instance, as

early as the primitive society period, the Yellow River basin food culture region primarily used millet, wheat, and legumes as food ingredients, the Yangtze River basin food culture region primarily used rice as its main food ingredient, and the North-Central grassland food culture region primarily used meat and dairy products as its main food ingredients. In the era when Sima Qian wrote *The Grand Scribe's Records*, the *Biographies of Money-makers* described the distinctly different food cultures of regions such as Jiangnan, Guanzhong, Bashu, Shanxi, and Shandong. Jia Sixie of the Northern Wei Dynasty authored *Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*, which mainly documented agricultural activities in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River region, also reflecting the food ingredients, dietary utensils, culinary techniques, and the exchange process between Hu and Han diets in the Yellow River basin during that period. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, a dietary phenomenon emerged in the north where wheat and rice became the main staples, replacing millet which retreated to third place, while panicum millet nearly exited the ranks of staple foods; the commercialization of food gradually took shape. By the Song dynasties, due to increasingly frequent exchanges among various ethnic groups, terms such as "Southern cooking," "Northern food," and "Barbarian food" that reflected regional food culture characteristics gradually increased. The *Fan-Han Timely Pearl in the Palm*, a work for interpreting the Western Xia language, contains sections that also provide glimpses into the dietary activities of the North-Central grassland region around the 11th century. As a frontier region at relatively high latitudes in China, the Northeast region was geographically distant from the ruling center before the Han and Tang dynasties. The perennially cold climate rendered this region sparsely populated with abundant food supplies, and particularly with the rise of the Jurchen people, a distinctive Manchu food culture was formed. The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau region, due to its high altitude, has limited varieties of flora and fauna suitable for growth, forming a food culture circle with highland barley as its main food ingredient. The Guangdong and Guangxi regions, bordering the ocean, also developed a unique marine-characteristic food culture style over the long course of history. Even to this day, the southeastern coastal region's pursuit of unconventional food ingredients stands out uniquely among Chinese food culture circles.

3.2.2. The hierarchical differentiation and internal differences of food culture circles

In fact, if we consider the Chinese food culture circle as an overall parent system, then the eleven food culture circles we have delineated are subsystems of the Chinese food culture circle. Within these eleven food culture circle subsystems, further distinctions at the next hierarchical level of food culture subsystems can also arise due to differences in natural environments and geographical conditions. The Southwest food culture circle can be further subdivided internally into three secondary food culture circle subsystems: the Bashu region, the Yunnan-Guizhou-Guangxi region, and the Tibet region. The Southeast food culture circle can be further subdivided by region into two secondary food culture circle subsystems: the Fujian region and the Guangdong region; it can also be subdivided by ethnic settlement into secondary food culture circle subsystems such as the Cantonese (Yue) system, the Hokkien (Min nan) system, the Hakka system, the Teochew (Chaozhou) system, and the Zhuang system, while the ethnic settlements also exhibit characteristics of geographical distribution. The Middle Yangtze River food culture circle can be further subdivided by region into secondary food culture circle subsystems such as the Hubei region, the Hunan region, and the Jiangxi region. Among these, Hubei cuisine is characterized by its emphasis on freshness and its eclectic inclusiveness; Hunan cuisine is characterized by its sour and spicy soul and its masculine dominance; Jiangxi cuisine is characterized by its fragrant and spicy spirit and its combination of hardness and softness. Due to the prosperity of town and market economies during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Middle and Lower Yangtze River food culture circle experienced a relatively high degree of dietary commercialization in its various towns and markets within the trends of global and national economic integration, even forming food culture regions with individual towns and markets as units; the food cultures of Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Yangzhou, and other places each possess distinctive characteristics. The Lower Yellow River food culture circle can be further subdivided by region into secondary food culture circle subsystems such as the southwestern Shandong region, the canal coastal region, and the eastern Shandong coastal region.

3.3. The interactive integration of food culture circles

3.3.1. *The exchange and integration of food culture driven by natural environment*

The natural environment and geographical conditions are also important factors promoting the exchange and integration among various food culture circles. The natural environment and geographical conditions do not always hinder the exchange among food culture circles, do not always limit the outward expansion of food culture circles, and do not always exclude external influences on a particular food culture circle. On the contrary, throughout the long course of Chinese historical development, various food culture circles have frequently engaged in exchange and integration by leveraging the advantages of their natural environments and geographical conditions. After Zhang Qian's opening of the Western Regions during the Han Dynasty, the Middle Yellow River food culture circle and the Northwest food culture circle established relatively close ties. Vegetables and fruits such as grapes, pomegranates, carrots, walnuts, broad beans, and sesame, as well as production techniques including tree planting, melon cultivation, and slaughtering, were introduced into the Middle Yellow River food culture circle and subsequently transmitted to other food culture circles. The Grand Canal excavated during the Sui Dynasty traversed the Beijing-Tianjin food culture circle, the Lower Yellow River food culture circle, and the Lower Yangtze River food culture circle, providing convenient conditions for exchange among these three major food culture circles. The sea route for grain transport to the north opened during the Yuan Dynasty promoted direct exchange between the Lower Yangtze River food culture circle and the Beijing-Tianjin food culture circle. During the Ming and Qing transition, when the Manchus entered the Central Plains, exchange between the Northeast food culture circle and other food culture circles was strengthened, with the most outstanding achievement being the Manchu-Han Full Banquet. During the Qing Dynasty, the footprints of Yangzhou salt merchants spread across more than half of China; they utilized the Yangtze River water system and the canal water system to travel to various regions for salt trading, expanding the breadth and depth of exchange among several food culture circles. In other words, the exchange among various food culture circles may be constrained by the natural environment and geographical conditions, but may also benefit from the advantages of the natural environment and geographical conditions.

3.3.2. *The return of geographical environment perspective and theoretical paradigm innovation*

The "Ten Volumes" presents to the academic community and the general public a concentrated demonstration of the role of natural environment and geographical conditions in the formation of Chinese food culture circles. Incorporating natural environment and geographical conditions into Chinese food culture research represents both a remedial supplement to the previously weak links in Chinese food culture studies and a new achievement that continues the theoretical paradigm of international and domestic ecological environment studies.

4. The continuous development of food culture

4.1. The foundation of the continuous development of Chinese food culture

4.1.1. *The core of the continuous development of Chinese food culture*

The eleven Chinese food culture regions we have delineated today have been formed on the basis of the regional characteristics of food culture in historical periods, reflecting the continuous development of food culture within certain regions. Diet, it can be said, is the source of human survival. Human activities of conquering nature are often regarded as the beginning of human civilization, and the earliest of such activities was obtaining food and maintaining survival. In China, "food is the paramount necessity of the people" is probably one of the most well-known proverbs among the general public to date. On the one hand, it illustrates the Chinese people's relentless pursuit of food; on the other hand, it indicates that the most fundamental function of diet is to sustain survival. Therefore, it can be said that the core of Chinese food culture is how to satisfy the needs of human survival. This is an eternal truth and also a manifestation of the continuous development of Chinese food culture.

4.1.2. *The foundation of the continuous development of Chinese food culture*

First, the foundation of the continuous development of Chinese food culture lies in China's natural environment and geographical conditions. Research in historical geography indicates that over the past five thousand years, climate change in China has been quite pronounced, with frequent alternations between warm and cold periods. Significant changes have occurred in the northern boundaries of rice cultivation, the northern boundaries of sugarcane growth, the distribution areas of bamboo, and the activity ranges of certain animals, all of which have affected food production. Spanning from north to south across tropical, subtropical, and temperate zones, China exhibits considerable differences in precipitation, sunshine hours, annual accumulated temperature, and daily temperature range. These factors constrain food production and dietary life in various regions, forming the basis for the distinct food culture circles along the north-south axis. From east to west, China's terrain features significant elevation changes with a clear three-tiered step distribution, transitioning sequentially from humid regions to semi-humid, semi-arid, and arid regions. This also exerts varying degrees of influence on grain production and dietary life in different regions. For instance, spicy flavor constitutes an important criterion distinguishing the food cultures of Sichuan and Hunan from other regions across the nation. Lan Yong's article "The Geographical Distribution and Causes of Spicy Flavors in Chinese Diet" points out that, taking spicy flavor as a factor for dividing dietary regions, modern China can be divided into the heavily spicy region in the upper and middle Yangtze River area, the mildly spicy region in the north, and the bland-flavor region along the southeast coast. The reason for the formation of the heavily spicy region in the upper and middle Yangtze River area (including Sichuan, Chongqing, Hunan, Hubei, Guizhou, and southern Shaanxi, among others) lies in the region's low winter sunshine hours, humidity, and coldness. Furthermore, research in disaster history also indicates that natural disasters pose a highly challenging event for administrators in traditional patriarchal societies with limited adaptability, as well as for impoverished masses struggling long-term at the subsistence level. Natural disasters can cause food shortages among certain populations and may also lead to neglect of food processing among some groups, forming a common food culture phenomenon during famine years. The study of Chinese food culture, particularly the dietary culture of ordinary people in Chinese history, should incorporate the issue of famine into its research scope. When discussing the livelihood and food conditions in the Lower Yellow River region during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties period, government measures for restoring agricultural production during the Ming Dynasty, the characteristics of people's food during the Republican era, and dietary life conditions after the Reform and Opening Up, the "Lower Yellow River Region Volume" pays attention to the role of famine in shaping a region's food culture.

4.2. The mechanism of the continuous development of Chinese food culture

4.2.1. *The intrinsic motivation of the continuous development of Chinese food culture*

Second, the intrinsic motivation for the continuous development of Chinese food culture lies in the constant improvement of social productive forces, which has promoted the increase in food output and variety, innovated food processing techniques, created more refined dining utensils, and transformed people's dietary customs. With detailed historical materials and thorough research, this series points out that the continuous development of Chinese food culture is essentially consistent with the progressive pace of traditional patriarchal society, following a trend from small to large, from simple to complex, and from monotonous to diverse. The research in this series is organized along a chronological framework, generally proceeding in dynastic order, demonstrating the historical process of the gradual growth of Chinese food culture. The "Middle Yangtze River Region Volume," for instance, divides the developmental stages of food culture in the Middle Yangtze River region into the germination period, the pioneering period, the accumulation period, the growth period, the maturation period, the prosperity period, and the transformation period, respectively examining the characteristics of each developmental stage. Although from an overall perspective, the continuous development of Chinese food culture exhibits a positive correlation with the level of social productive forces, in reality, this continuous development is not solely determined by the level of social productive forces; rather, it presents a varied landscape due to the different levels of productive force development across various regions.

4.2.2. *The extrinsic impetus for the continuous development of Chinese food culture*

Third, the extrinsic impetus for the continuous development of Chinese food culture lies in the exchange among food culture circles. The exchange among China's eleven food culture circles does not necessarily depend on geographical adjacency; exchanges between food culture circles spanning vast regions also exist. Such exchanges are often carried through population mobility, and the movement of people with specific dietary customs and culinary techniques frequently leads to small-scale food culture exchanges in the destination areas. If these particular groups constitute the ruling class within China's traditional patriarchal society, their food culture may influence the entire society's dietary landscape through top-down emulation or forceful imposition. However, it is noteworthy that throughout this formative process, such exchanges are not entirely closed; they often assume an open pattern due to population mobility (migration, famine-induced relocation, commerce, etc.), which also promotes the continuous development of Chinese food culture.

4.2.3. The multiple pathways of regional food culture formation

However, it should be noted that the developmental processes of food culture in various regions are not entirely synchronized. According to existing archaeological evidence, the origins of Chinese civilization were primarily concentrated in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River and the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. Influenced by factors such as climate and environment, these two regions had already formed distinctly different dietary patterns as early as the primitive society period. However, the formation of some food culture circles was driven by later political and economic factors. For instance, the rapid growth of the Southeast food culture circle is clearly related to the southward shift of China's economic center since the Five Dynasties and Sui-Tang periods; the swift rise of the Beijing-Tianjin food culture circle is evidently connected to Beijing becoming the ruling center of traditional patriarchal society after the Jin and Yuan dynasties; and the prosperity of the Lower Yangtze River food culture circle is also associated with the Southern Song Dynasty establishing its capital in Hangzhou, as well as the growth of commodity economy in the Jiangnan region during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

4.3. The structural characteristics of the Chinese food culture system

Clearly, the Chinese food culture system is not a closed structure; on the contrary, it is an open, fluid, continuously changing, and ever-developing structure. Its developmental process does not proceed in a straight line, but rather spirals upward. The formation and continuous development of Chinese food culture must, on the one hand, be rooted in the natural environment and geographical conditions of the region it occupies, and on the other hand, be built upon an already accumulated food culture. The continuous development of Chinese food culture has both its source and its living water. The so-called source refers to the natural environment, geographical conditions, and the already accumulated food culture. The so-called living water refers to the constantly evolving dietary ideas, culinary techniques, dining utensils, food production, food varieties, and the extensive exchanges conducted among various food culture circles or within individual food culture circles—a continuously changing, flowing tableau.

5. Conclusion

5.1. The research significance of the "Ten Volumes"

The publication of the "Ten Volumes" is a grand event in the field of Chinese food culture studies in the 21st century. As the preface writers, Mr. Lu Liang Shu and Mr. Li Xueqin, pointed out: this is a monumental work that carries forward the past and opens up the future, and also a magnum opus that fills an academic void. The publication of this series has advanced Chinese food culture research by a significant step. Building upon and absorbing previous research achievements in Chinese food culture, it has made new contributions and provided new ideas and new theories for future Chinese food culture studies. Employing the eleven food culture circles as its theoretical framework and chronological order as its organizing thread, this series has conducted a detailed, comprehensive study of Chinese food culture over the past five thousand years, remedying the long-standing deficiency of a lack of systematic history in Chinese food culture research and providing a treasury of knowledge for future reference.

5.2. The academic commitment of the "Ten Volumes"

The original title of the "Ten Volumes" was A Series on the Regional History of Chinese Food Culture (planned as 12 volumes, 6 million characters). It was conceived by Editor-in-Chief Zhao Rongguang as a corresponding complement to another series in his food studies theoretical system, A Series on the Thematic History of Chinese Food Culture (Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2012). From the initial negotiation with the publisher 24 years ago to its final publication, the editor-in-chief's arduous perseverance and painstaking dedication are truly moving, and most of those involved in the project have also traversed an indescribable journey. Against the backdrop of an era in which academic publications are increasingly subjected to the trials of the market economy, the fact that it has ultimately been published is itself a great fortune. Moreover, as it represents a new benchmark in Chinese food culture studies, how can it not be considered a blessing for the academic community and for society at large!

6. References

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