

Cultural Differences between China and the Philippines in Dietary Habits

Wen Deng^{1,*}, Maria Virginia Kitan²

¹ Chengdu Textile College, Sichuan 610000, China

² University of Baguio, Baguio 2600, Philippines

* Corresponding author: Wen Deng (Email: 846283970@qq.com)

Abstract: This study explores the cultural differences between Chinese and Filipino dietary habits, examining the historical, social, and cultural factors influencing their food practices. The objectives are to analyze the origins and evolution of food cultures in both countries, compare their staple foods, cooking methods, and dining practices, and investigate how food fosters social communication and cultural transmission. Using a comparative analysis approach, the study reviews literature and historical sources to understand the cultural significance of dietary habits in China and the Philippines. The findings highlight that Chinese food culture is deeply influenced by Chinese philosophies, with an emphasis on health, balance, and communal dining. In contrast, Filipino food culture, shaped by Western influences, is characterized by simplicity, quick cooking methods, and a focus on individual dining experiences. The staple foods in China are diverse, including rice, wheat-based foods, and an array of regional specialties, while in the Philippines, rice dominates the diet, complemented by seafood and pork. Chinese cuisine features complex cooking methods, while Filipino cooking focuses on boiling, stewing, and grilling. The study concludes that while both cultures share a strong emphasis on food's role in social functions, their dietary practices reflect distinct historical influences, social structures, and philosophies. Understanding these differences fosters cross-cultural understanding and enhances international exchanges, promoting respect and cooperation between China and the Philippines. This research provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and businesses involved in cross-cultural interactions.

Keywords: Cultural Differences; Dietary Habits; Food Culture; Comparative Analysis; Social Communication.

1. Introduction

Dietary culture is an important component of daily life. It is not only a basic human need for survival, but also deeply reflects a country's historical heritage, social structure, and cultural philosophy. Giray, Cerillo & Cruz (2021) stated that food is also a representation of friendliness, social status, and religious implication. According to the UNESCO (2003), cuisine, food, cookery or other related forms are intangible cultural heritages, which is promoted and to be safeguarded to preserve its cultural identity. This indicates that dietary culture, as intangible cultural heritage, is transmitted from generation to generation by people and nations in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Different cultures have varieties of food and ingredients. It is also evident that cooking methods, ingredients, dining cultures, social connotations, festivals, and family ties are all influenced by dietary culture (Sibal, 2018).

As a civilization with a history of over five thousand years, China's food culture has developed into a unique and sophisticated culinary system. The diversity and richness of Chinese food culture are reflected in its wide range of ingredients, exquisite cooking techniques, and emphasis on the nutritional and health benefits of food.

From the *Huangdi Neijing* (Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine) to Taoist principles of "food as medicine," and Buddhist vegetarianism, food is not just a physical need but also a spiritual and cultural element.

On the other hand, the Philippines is an island country in the southwest Pacific, Asia. Despite its different historical

background and geographical environment, it also has a deep-rooted food culture. The Philippines' culinary traditions were significantly influenced by Spanish colonialism in the 16th century, incorporating Western cooking methods and food habits into its native food culture. As a result, Filipino food culture is characterized by simplicity and convenience in cooking techniques, with a strong emphasis on seafood, reflecting the country's maritime culture.

The differences between Chinese and Filipino food cultures are not only due to geographical and climatic factors but also reflect the differences in the countries' histories, philosophies, and religions. While China's food culture emphasizes family gatherings, the Philippines' dining traditions are more influenced by Western-style meals. As Han (2024) notes, dietary culture is a concentrated embodiment of national character, and understanding its connotations helps to better appreciate the diversity of different cultures. In both countries, food culture plays a significant role in social functions, family bonds, and religious symbolism. Understanding these differences lays a solid foundation for various cultural interactions and international relations.

Therefore, by analyzing the dietary cultures of these two countries, we can better understand the cultural implications behind them and enhance mutual understanding through cross-cultural exchange, especially in today's increasingly important cross-cultural exchanges and cooperation.

2. Research Objectives

This study aims to conduct a detailed comparative analysis of the food cultures of China and the Philippines, exploring the cultural roots behind their dietary habits and revealing their profound influence on cooking methods and dining

cultures. The specific research objectives are:

By reviewing the historical backgrounds and the evolution of the food cultures of between China and the Philippines, this study will explore the origins and development of their food cultures, providing historical context to understand the differences in food cultures.

This study will compare Chinese and Filipino food habits in terms of staple foods and cooking methods, exploring the similarities and differences in their food cultures.

This study will investigate how the dining cultures in both countries fosters social communication and cultural transmission in daily life and during festive events.

3. Research Significance

This study on the food culture differences between China and the Philippines aims to foster cross-cultural understanding and reduce misunderstandings in international exchanges. By viewing food as a symbol of cultural identity and social behavior, it encourages mutual respect and cultural integration, strengthening the friendship and cooperation between the two nations. The insights gained from the study benefit educators, international students, and exchange programs, supporting the design of inclusive curricula and promoting cross-cultural skills. Additionally, the study highlights the role of cultural awareness in enhancing economic partnerships, especially in tourism and business, where understanding local food customs can improve localization efforts. As globalization intensifies, this research offers valuable case studies that contribute to comparative cultural research and global cultural coexistence.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Historical Background

China's dietary culture has a long history of several thousand years. Its uniqueness is reflected not only in the selection of ingredients and cooking techniques but also in the deep influence of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the Five Elements philosophy. Chinese dietary culture emphasizes the social functions, medicinal values, and health benefits of food. Confucianism stresses the principle that "food nourishes life," advocating that food should not only meet nutritional needs but also maintain physical health and psychological harmony. Taoism, on the other hand, advocates for the rule of "following nature" and suggests that food should conform to the philosophy of "heaven and man as one," respecting natural laws, minimizing artificial processing, and preserving the natural flavor of ingredients. In the *Five Elements* philosophy, the interaction between ingredients is considered essential to maintaining bodily balance, and food therapy has become an integral part of daily life. Moreover, Buddhism has influenced Chinese vegetarian culture, especially during festive or specific days when vegetarian food symbolizes the purification of the soul and the cultivation of self-discipline. According to Cheung (2012), "Chinese foodways is a complex mix of regional elements including a wide range of ingredients, cooking practices, and culinary skills, and is considered a system of knowledge not only inherited from the past but also determined by socio-political changes in different eras.

In contrast, Filipino dietary culture has been deeply influenced by Western countries. Liwanag (2019) explains that though the Filipino cuisines are influenced principally by Spain, Mexico, Malay, and the United States, the Chinese

contributed to the rich food culture of the Philippines.

Since the Spanish colonization of the Philippines in the 16th century, Western cooking techniques and dining habits have gradually infiltrated Filipino daily life. Filipino cooking tends to be simple, focusing on quick and convenient methods like stir-frying, stewing, and roasting, with an emphasis on highlighting the natural flavors of ingredients. Fried foods and Western-style dining have become increasingly popular in both festive and everyday meals. For example, Filipino Christmas dinners feature roasted turkey, cakes, and desserts, symbolizing the fusion of Filipino culture with Western culinary traditions.

4.2. Staple Foods

Chinese staple foods are diverse. In the north, wheat-based foods like steamed stuffed buns, dumplings, and noodles dominate, while rice is preferred in the south, especially in regions like Jiangnan (south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in China). Chinese dietary culture emphasizes the combination of diverse ingredients such as rice, noodles, beans, vegetables, and meat, creating rich regional specialties and culinary methods. Moreover, Chinese food emphasizes the richness of flavors. For instance, Sichuan cuisine is known for its spiciness, Cantonese cuisine seeks mild and fresh tastes, and Shandong cuisine focuses on savory flavors, all of which are closely linked to the local climate, culture, and customs (Huang, 2018).

In comparison, Filipino dietary culture is relatively simpler, with rice as the staple food, an essential part of nearly every meal. Gascon & Orr (1973) indicated that rice predominates in the Filipino diet. Filipinos eat rice from morning till night, supported by rice cakes, nuts, and sugary snacks in-between. Corn is second in importance as a food crop and is favored over rice in some provinces. According to Li (1982), rice production in the Philippines is high, with two to three harvests annually, making rice the core of Filipino cuisine. Additionally, Filipino food also includes flour-based foods. De Leon (2016) illustrates how *siopao* (pork buns) and *siomai* (dim sum) have become staples within Filipino cuisine. Additionally, ingredients mainly include seafood, pork, and chicken, with seafood being a standout feature, reflecting the country's coastal location. One representative dish in traditional Filipino cuisine, is *adobo*, which features chicken or pork simmered with garlic, soy sauce, and vinegar, creating a simple yet flavorful dish (Zhang, 2020). The *adobo* ingredients shared in *Ethnic American Food Today: A Cultural Legacy* contain soy sauce, garlic, vinegar, peppercorns, and bayleaves/laurel (Long, 2015). The ingredient composition of the "standard" Filipino *adobo* is comprised of five ingredients (soy sauce, vinegar, garlic, peppercorns and bayleaves/laurel). Furthermore, Filipinos are very fond of tomatoes, which are combined with almost any other vegetable in hot dishes and salads, especially with bagoong (Gascon & Orr, 1973).

4.3. Cooking Methods

Chinese culinary techniques are exquisite and varied, with a history spanning thousands of years. Traditional cooking methods such as stir-frying, steaming, boiling, pan-frying, deep-frying, and etc. are full of artistry and history. According to Yin (2013), there are more than 30 different cooking methods in Chinese cuisine, and the versatility of these methods has led to the endless variety of Chinese dishes. For example, chicken, a very common ingredient, can be cooked

into over 100 different dishes with varying flavors. Therefore, Chinese menus are not simply a matter of one plus one equals two; rather, it's one plus one equals three.

Additionally, the balance of seasonings and the layering of flavors reflect the richness of Chinese cuisine. From simple steaming to complex braising and dry pot cooking, each method carries cultural significance. For example, steamed dishes are common on Chinese tables, symbolizing the natural flavor and health benefits of ingredients, while hot pot represents unity and the spirit of sharing.

In contrast, Filipino cooking methods primarily focus on boiling, stewing, roasting, and grilling. Alejandro (2005) stated that the four cooking methods that are the foundation of Filipino cookery. The cooking time is generally short, and the emphasis is on highlighting the original taste of ingredients, especially the freshness of seafood. Many dishes prepared by the Filipinos are thick soups or stews with varying amounts of liquid. One of the most favorite dishes is the *dinengdeng*, a term used for a stew of one or more vegetables seasoned with bagoong, dried shrimps, or fish (Gascon & Orr, 1973).

Traditional Filipino dishes tend to have a sour-sweet flavor profile, with *adobo* being a prime example, where the sourness of vinegar balances the richness of the meat. Additionally, Filipinos have a strong preference for fried foods, with fried chicken and fish being staples on the dining table.

4.4. Dining Practices

Chinese dining practices are closely linked with social interaction, particularly in family gatherings and festive banquets, where table etiquette plays an important role. As a nation known for its customs and etiquette, China has clear rules about seating arrangements at the dining table. The senior or higher-ranking family member occupies the main seat (Li, 2023). Yin (2013) points out that seating arrangements on the Chinese dining table typically reflect social hierarchy, age, and status. In traditional Chinese meals, people gather around a table, engaging in lively conversation, and using chopsticks to share dishes, which embodies the concept of "communal dining" (Yang, 2020). The dining table, as a medium for interaction, fosters a spirit of sharing and togetherness.

In contrast, Filipino dining etiquette reflects a greater degree of freedom and informality, influenced by Western culture. Whether at home or in a restaurant, Filipinos love to eat in an informal social gathering called a *salu-salu* (Alejandro, 2005). During family meals, there is no fixed seating arrangement, and people can choose where to sit according to their preferences. The dining environment is typically quiet and elegant, with food served on individual plates for each person, known as the "separate dining." They usually use a fork in the left hand and a spoon in the right, effortlessly mixing and matching the diverse dishes, pairing them with generous portions of rice and flavorful dipping sauces. When eating and tend not to make loud noises or engage in boisterous conversation, reflecting the influence of Western dining culture. This style of eating also reflects Filipino society's emphasis on individual independence and personal choice.

5. Conclusion

The dietary cultures of China and the Philippines vividly illustrate the profound interplay of history, geography, social

structures, and cultural philosophies in shaping a nation's culinary traditions. The comparison reveals significant differences in staple foods, cooking methods, and dining practices. Chinese cuisine is characterized by its variety and complexity, with techniques that create multi-layered flavors and a focus on shared dining as a symbol of unity and social harmony. Conversely, Filipino cuisine prioritizes straightforward cooking methods that preserve the natural essence of ingredients, and its dining culture emphasizes individual choice and a relaxed, Western-influenced etiquette.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Chinese and Filipino food cultures not only enriches our understanding of these two distinct culinary systems but also underscores the value of food as a powerful tool for cultural exchange and international cooperation. As the world continues to shrink through globalization, embracing such cultural nuances will play a crucial role in building bridges of friendship and collaboration between nations.

6. Recommendations

Firstly, in both education systems, it is recommended to add cross-cultural exchange courses or programs between Chinese and Filipino students centered around food culture, such as cooking traditional dishes together or sharing festive meals, to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding and communication skills. These courses or programs should explore the historical background, social functions, cooking methods, and festive foods of Chinese and Filipino food cultures, helping students understand the values and behavioral patterns of different cultures.

Secondly, educators should adjust their teaching methods based on the cultural differences between the two countries, with a focus on cultivating students' cross-cultural communication skills. When teaching foreign languages, the background knowledge of both countries' food cultures can be integrated as an entry point to explore cultural differences in language, behavior, and etiquette. For instance, teachers can guide students to compare Chinese and Filipino food habits, social etiquette, etc., and help students realize that language learning is not just about grammar and vocabulary, but also about understanding and adapting to different cultural contexts.

Lastly, to promote deeper cooperation and cultural exchange in education, activities such as the China-Philippines Food Culture Festival, cooking competitions, cultural exchange events, or online academic seminars. These events can strengthen the ties between educational institutions in both countries, while also providing students with a practical platform for cross-cultural exchange, helping them adapt to and understand diverse cultures in a globalized world.

References

- [1] Alejandro, G. R. (2005). Food of the Philippines. Periplus Editions, 15-17.
- [2] Cheung, C. H. S. (2012). From foodways to intangible heritage: A case study of Chinese culinary resource, retail and recipe in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19(4), 1-12.
- [3] De Leon, A. (2016). Siopao and power: The place of pork buns in Manilas Chinese history. *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*, 16(2), 45-54.
- [4] Gascon, C. H. & Orr, J. K. (1973). About Filipino foods. *Home Economics Circular*, 347-353.

- [5] Giray, L., Cerillo, L. & Cruz, J. B. (2021). Insights on the insights on the exploration of food culture of two provincial places in the Philippines. *Tribute Journal of Community Services*, 2(1), 6-18.
- [6] Han, S. S. (2024). Using food as a medium: innovative practices and optimization strategies for the overseas communication of Chinese dietary culture. *Charming Hunan*, 5, 112-114.
- [7] Liwanag, M. (2019). Influence of Chinese foodways to the Filipino culinary heritage: preservation of best practices. *7th Asia Euro Conference 2018: Tourism, Hospitality & Gastronomy* 8, 1-14.
- [8] Li, Y. (2023). Comparative analysis of Chinese and Western dietary cultures-review of comparative study of Chinese and Western dietary cultures. *Food Safety and Quality Testing Journal*.
- [9] Li, Y. P. (1982). *Overseas customs*. Guangzhou: Guangdong Tourism Press, 118.
- [10] Long, L. M. (2015). *Ethnic American food today: a cultural encyclopedia*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- [11] Sibal, V. (2018). *Food: identity of culture and religion*, 2-7.
- [12] UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. Paris: UNESCO.
- [13] Yang, M. X. (2020). Differences between Chinese and Western dietary cultures. *Modern Salt and Chemical Industry*, 8(4), 143-144.
- [14] Yin, Y. H. (2013). Comparative analysis of dietary culture differences between the East and the West. *Journal of Jiaozuo University*, 9(3), 9-11.
- [15] Zhang, W. F. (2020). A brief analysis of traditional Filipino cuisine. *Culture Journal*, 5(5), 61-63.