

Survival and Life: A Study on Cultural Adaptation of Ethnic Minority Groups from the Perspective of Dietary Anthropology

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Abstract: In the process of globalization and modernization, the diet culture of minority groups is undergoing profound changes and adjustments. Therefore, through the perspective of food culture, this paper studies the identity of ethnic minorities in cultural adaptation, cross-cultural integration and their resistance to foreign cultures. It is found that diet is not only an important carrier of cultural inheritance of ethnic minorities, but also a core way of cultural self-expression and social interaction. In the process of cultural adaptation, ethnic minorities not only maintain the uniqueness of traditional culture through the inheritance and change of eating habits, but also carry out innovation and integration under the influence of foreign cultures to ensure the continuation of culture and self-identity. At the same time, eating rituals in festivals and religious occasions have also become an important way for ethnic minorities to express their cultural identity. In addition, the commercialization of diet and the development of tourism have enabled the ethnic diet culture to spread widely in the context of globalization and brought economic benefits. Studies have shown that diet plays a key role in ethnic minorities' response to the impact of globalization, maintaining cultural identity and promoting cultural inheritance, and is an important tool and symbol in cultural adaptation.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, food culture, cultural adaptation, cultural identity, cross-cultural integration.

1. Introduction

The relentless acceleration of globalization and modernization has posed unprecedented challenges to the traditional cultures of ethnic minority groups. Amidst the increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchanges, food culture, as a vital component of ethnic minority cultures, is not only influenced by foreign cultures but also serves as an important vehicle for ethnic identity and cultural heritage [1-2]. Existing research has revealed that food plays a central role in the cultural adaptation of ethnic minorities; however, there are still certain limitations in these studies. Most research focuses on the symbolic meanings and cultural preservation of food, lacking a detailed analysis of the specific mechanisms of food in cultural integration and resistance. Furthermore, the impact of urbanization

and globalization during the modernization process on the dietary habits of ethnic minority groups has not been systematically studied. As ethnic minorities gradually integrate into modern society, the intricate relationship between their food choices and identity awaits further exploration [3-4]. Against this backdrop, an in-depth study of the influence of food culture adaptation on the identity of ethnic minority groups is of great significance for understanding the inheritance and development of ethnic minority cultures.

2. Background of Cultural Adaptation among Ethnic Minority Groups

2.1. Interaction between Globalization and Ethnic Minority Cultures

Under the backdrop of globalization, cross-cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, subjecting ethnic minority cultures to multiple influences in this process. Globalization fosters the dissemination and integration of cultures, leading to the pressure of homogenization faced by ethnic minority cultures. For instance, in the development of tourism in Tibet, Tibetan communities have gradually introduced modern dietary patterns and food cultures, interacting with traditional Tibetan foods such as zanba (roasted barley flour) and butter tea. In such a context, food is not merely a necessary means of survival but also an essential symbol for ethnic minorities to express their cultural identity and self-recognition. Through the preservation and adaptation of traditional diets, ethnic minority groups maintain their cultural distinctiveness amidst globalization, resisting comprehensive cultural homogenization. The collision between the commercialized, standardized diets brought about by globalization and the food cultures of ethnic minorities has emerged as a crucial issue in this field.

2.2. Cultural Impacts of the Modernization Process

The modernization process has had a particularly pronounced impact on ethnic minority cultures, particularly during urbanization and industrialization, where traditional lifestyles of ethnic minorities have gradually undergone changes. Amidst the wave of urbanization, traditional food cultures have gradually given way to the infiltration of foreign cultures. For example, as Mongolian herdsman transition from a nomadic to a settled lifestyle, their traditional dietary habits centered on meat and dairy products have been impacted by the influx of industrialized food supplies. Modern logistics and commercialization have facilitated the entry of foreign foods and fast-food cultures into ethnic minority regions, altering people's daily dietary choices. Notably, among urban migrant populations, the divergence between traditional ethnic minority food cultures and urban food cultures becomes evident. Through shifts in eating behaviors, traditional cultures face the risk of gradual dilution.

2.3. National Policies and Cultural Preservation

In addressing the challenges of globalization and modernization, national policies play a pivotal role in the cultural adaptation of ethnic minorities. To safeguard ethnic minority cultures, including intangible cultural heritage such as food culture, the Chinese government has implemented a series of cultural preservation policies [5]. In 2011, the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage" was enacted, encouraging the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage across regions. Guizhou and other places regularly host ethnic minority food culture festivals to promote local food culture exhibitions and dissemination. This policy orientation not only benefits the preservation of ethnic minority cultures but also provides effective support for their cultural adaptation in modern society. Local governments have established ethnic minority cultural preservation areas, providing funds and resources to facilitate the inheritance and innovative development of traditional cultures, thereby strengthening ethnic minorities' cultural confidence and resilience in the face of foreign cultural impacts.

3. Diet as the Core Expression of Cultural Adaptation

3.1. Inheritance and Evolution of Dietary Habits

In the process of cultural adaptation, ethnic minority groups often exhibit their inheritance of traditional cultures and adaptation to modern society through the inheritance and evolution of dietary habits. Diet is not only a vital component of ethnic minority cultures but also an important vehicle for ethnic identity. With societal changes, the dietary structure and habits of ethnic minority groups have gradually undergone adaptive adjustments.

Taking the Dai people in Yunnan as an example, their traditional diet is dominated by glutinous rice, sour foods, and grilled dishes. In recent years, with the development of tourism and the influx of outsiders, the dietary habits of the Dai people have gradually been influenced by other cultures. Nevertheless, the Dai people have retained many traditional dietary customs, particularly during festivals and ceremonies. For instance, during the Water Splashing Festival, the traditional new year celebration of the Dai, glutinous rice and bamboo rice remain the signature dishes on festive tables. The preservation of these traditional diets is not only a continuation of national culture but also a way for the Dai people to express cultural identity and maintain ethnic bonds through food. Concurrently, ethnic minority diets are also evolving through their encounters with foreign cultures. The Mongolian people, for example, have witnessed a gradual shift in their traditional diet, which was heavily centered on meat and dairy products, as urbanization accelerates. The infiltration of modernized foods and foreign dietary cultures has diversified Mongolian eating habits. However, during festivals, ceremonies, and important family gatherings, traditional dishes like boiled mutton, milk tea, and dairy products remain irreplaceable, demonstrating the ethnic minority groups' commitment to tradition and flexible adaptation in the process of cultural adaptation.

3.2. Dietary Symbols and Cultural Identity

Diet, as a cultural symbol, possesses a profound function of cultural identity, through which ethnic minority groups express their cultural identity and belongingness via specific dietary habits and food symbols. In this process, diet transcends mere physiological satisfaction, evolving into a carrier of cultural significance and social values.

The dietary culture of the Tibetan people serves as a quintessential example. Traditional Tibetan foods such as tsampa, buttered tea, and dried meat are not only central to their lifestyle but also emblematic of religious beliefs and cultural identity. As the staple food of Tibetans, tsampa embodies their reverence for nature and harmony with the natural environment. Through daily dietary practices, Tibetans uphold their Buddhist beliefs, while buttered tea plays a pivotal role in religious ceremonies and social gatherings [6]. The long-standing existence of these dietary symbols constitutes a vital component of Tibetan cultural identity, ensuring the group's cultural self-expression amidst the tide of globalization. On the other hand, the dietary culture of the Uyghur people similarly reflects their cultural identity. Predominantly Muslim, the Uyghurs adhere to halal dietary practices as a hallmark of their cultural identity. In their daily diet, the Uyghurs strictly abide by Islamic dietary laws, for instance, abstaining from pork and alcohol. During the traditional Uyghur festival of "Eid al-Adha," slaughtering cattle and sheep and sharing meat is a significant religious and social event. This dietary custom not only signifies adherence to religious beliefs but also reinforces and strengthens the Uyghur cultural identity.

3.3. Festivals and Diet: Ritual Symbolism in Cultural Adaptation

Ethnic minority festivals are often imbued with profound ritualistic significance, wherein diet assumes both symbolic and ceremonial roles. Through specific festive diets, ethnic minorities not

only perpetuate their traditional cultures but also achieve cultural adaptation within the context of modern society. The Miao people's "Eat the New Grain Festival" exemplifies this phenomenon. As a traditional farming and sacrificial ritual, the "Eat the New Grain Festival" primarily aims to pray for a bountiful harvest and express gratitude to ancestors for their gift of food. During the festival, Miao families prepare glutinous rice using newly harvested grain and share it with relatives and friends. This dietary ritual embodies the Miao's reverence for the land and nature while fostering intra-ethnic cohesion through communal dining. In contemporary society, despite changes in the Miao's lifestyle and dietary structure, the dietary customs of the "Eat the New Grain Festival" persist, serving as an essential symbol of the Miao community's cultural identity. Furthermore, the Korean ethnic group's "Chuseok Festival" offers another notable example of festive dining. Analogous to the Han Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, Chuseok is a time when Korean families prepare traditional rice cakes, known as Songpyeon, which symbolize harvest and reunion. The dietary customs of Chuseok encapsulate the Korean agricultural heritage and family values, while also conveying emotional bonds among the ethnic group through shared meals. Amidst modernization, where Korean dietary habits are influenced by foreign cultures, traditional foods remain a vital mode of cultural expression during significant festivals like Chuseok. As a central element in festivities, diet not only symbolizes ethnic minorities' respect for and perpetuation of traditional cultures but also serves as a crucial avenue for them to navigate external cultural impacts and maintain cultural self-expression.

3.4. Social Functions and Economic Values of Food Culture

Food culture possesses not only cultural and social significance but also substantial economic value. Amidst globalization and tourism development, ethnic minority food cultures have gradually emerged as integral parts of the cultural industry. Through the commercialization of food presentation, ethnic minority cultures are widely disseminated and generate economic returns.

Taking the Miao people in Guizhou Province as an illustration, with the advancement of eco-tourism, traditional Miao dishes such as sour soup fish and Miao-style cured meat have become significant attractions in the tourism industry. Leveraging cultural festivals and tourist dining, the Miao food culture has been extensively promoted, not only generating economic benefits for local communities but also enhancing ethnic minority groups' sense of identity and pride in their traditional cultures. In this process, by showcasing and disseminating their food culture, ethnic minority groups not only achieve cultural preservation and inheritance but also foster economic growth, creating a positive cycle within cultural adaptation. In summary, food, as a core expression of cultural adaptation, serves as both a means for ethnic minorities to address external cultural impacts and a vital tool for maintaining their cultural identity. Through the inheritance and evolution of dietary habits, the utilization of food symbols, the ritualistic nature of festive dining, and the commercialization of food presentation, ethnic minority groups continually adjust and innovate their cultural expressions within the context of modernization and globalization, thereby ensuring the continuity and development of their cultures.

4. Cross-Cultural Integration and Resistance in Food Culture Adaptation

4.1. The Influence of Foreign Food Cultures

In the Xinjiang region, the process of globalization has ushered in the entry of Western fast-food brands, with McDonald's, KFC, and other brands gradually expanding into Uighur communities. Nevertheless, Uighurs strictly adhere to the halal dietary practices of Islam, prompting fast-food brands to make adaptive adjustments upon entering the local market to ensure all ingredients meet halal standards. This phenomenon underscores that ethnic minorities do not uncritically embrace foreign cultures but instead maintain their cultural identities through selective integration [7].

Additionally, the food culture of the Miao ethnic group in Guizhou Province has also been influenced by external cultures. With the acceleration of urbanization, the traditional sour soup cuisine of the Miao people has fused with the hotpot culture of the Han ethnic group, resulting in innovative dishes such as sour soup hotpot. This integration exemplifies the openness and adaptability of ethnic minority food cultures.

4.2. Cultural Resistance and Adaptation Strategies

Despite the pervasive influence of foreign food cultures, ethnic minorities often exhibit strong cultural resistance during cultural adaptation. Taking Tibet as an example, the Tibetan dietary taboo against fish stems from religious beliefs, wherein fish are considered embodiments of sacred animals. In modern culinary cultures, fish, as a vital ingredient, is widely utilized globally. However, Tibetans steadfastly uphold this traditional dietary restriction. This cultural resistance is not merely a rejection of foreign cultures but also a steadfast commitment to their cultural identity and religious beliefs. Similar instances of cultural resistance can be observed in the food culture of the Dai ethnic group in Yunnan Province. Although deeply influenced by Southeast Asian food cultures, the Dai people maintain a distance from certain foreign ingredients and culinary practices, particularly during significant religious festivals and family rituals, where traditional dietary habits are strictly observed.

4.3. Innovation and Re-creation in Cross-Cultural Integration

During the process of cross-cultural integration, ethnic minorities do not merely accept foreign cultures passively but engage in innovation and re-creation, thereby forging a food culture imbued with national characteristics. Traditionally, Mongolian cuisine revolves primarily around meat and dairy products. However, with the influence of Han Chinese food culture, Mongolians have gradually embraced Han cooking techniques such as steaming, boiling, and stir-frying. Through this cross-cultural fusion, Mongolian cuisine has integrated Han cultural elements while preserving its traditions, resulting in a unique blend of culinary styles. For instance, the combination of Mongolian "hand-sliced mutton" with Han hotpot culture has given birth to innovative dishes like "instant-boiled mutton." This innovation not only enriches the dietary structure of Mongolian cuisine but also provides new avenues for its continuation in modern society.

5. The Influence of Food Culture Adaptation on Ethnic Minority Identity

5.1. The Reshaping of Ethnic Minority Cultural Identity through Food

Dietary habits hold symbolic significance in the cultural identity of ethnic minorities. Under the impact of foreign cultures, ethnic minorities reshape their national identity by preserving or transforming traditional dietary practices. For instance, the Uyghur ethnic group upholds the halal food culture, ensuring harmony between their religious beliefs and lifestyle. During festivals such as the Eid al-Adha, traditional dietary customs like slaughtering animals and preparing grand feasts of mutton become symbols of ethnic identity. Furthermore, the Tibetan community's adherence to tsampa and butter tea is not only a vital part of their daily lives but also an expression of traditional religious and cultural identity, demonstrating their steadfast commitment to their identity amidst cross-cultural interactions.

5.2. Dietary Choices and Identity Formation among Urbanized Ethnic Minority Groups

With the acceleration of urbanization, ethnic minorities migrating to cities encounter new dietary environments, where their traditional eating habits are influenced by urban food cultures. For instance, many Miao ethnic groups residing in cities, amidst the faster pace of work and life, have gradually

reduced the preparation of traditional sour soup and increasingly opted for fast food or takeaways. Nevertheless, they still preserve traditional dietary practices during family celebrations and festivals. Through this reshaping of dietary choices, ethnic minority groups in urban settings, confronted with new environments, explore new cultural balances and identity formations by partially preserving and modifying their traditions.

5.3. Food Culture and the Transmission of Ethnic Minority Heritage

The daily dietary practices within families and communities play a pivotal role in the transmission of ethnic minority heritage. Taking the Dong ethnic group in Guizhou as an example, during festivals such as the "Eating New Rice Festival," the Dong people uphold their cultural identity through dietary customs passed down from generation to generation. Traditional Dong dietary habits, including oil tea and glutinous rice, are typically imparted from elders to younger generations within families, not only transmitting culinary skills but also cultural values. Through these dietary educations within families and communities, ethnic minorities are assisted in continuing to transmit their unique cultural symbols and identities within new environments.

6. Conclusion

The processes of globalization and modernization have accelerated the transformation of ethnic minority food cultures, yet this transformation is not a mere process of assimilation or resistance. Rather, through continuous fusion, innovation, and adaptation, ethnic minorities have maintained their cultural identities amidst cultural interactions. As a crucial vehicle of ethnic identity, food not only carries traditional cultural symbols but also serves as an essential tool in confronting the impact of foreign cultures. Through the ritualized expression of festive cuisines, the transmission of familial dietary habits, and the commercial display of food cultures, ethnic minorities have gradually achieved cultural self-adjustment and continuity amidst the forces of globalization. The adaptation of food cultures not only demonstrates the resilience of ethnic minorities in cultural heritage but also promotes their economic development and cultural dissemination through their economic and social functions. Through the adaptation of food, ethnic minorities in multicultural environments have not only preserved their cultural identities but also opened up new pathways and possibilities for cultural heritage and innovation.

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