

Exploring Social Geocultural Migration and Ethnic Spiritual Values From the Circulation of Diverse Wheaten Foods

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This paper is intended to probe into the essence of the names of ancient Chinese wheaten food and the transmission route of modern Chinese wheaten food in detail. The emphasis is laid on southern province (Yangtze River Delta), such as Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, to highlight the discrepancy of wheaten food culture among different provinces, even in different areas in the same province. This paper is question-oriented, and aims to demonstrate the direct correlation between regional divergence, population mobility, and wheaten food transmission; hence the emotions and wisdom of Chinese people are reflected.

Keywords: wheaten food culture, regional divergence, population mobility, process of wheaten food transmission, spiritual value

The Correlation Between the Transmission Path of Wheaten Food and Geo-culture in Modern China

The Breakthrough Innovation of Wheaten Food Culture in the South—Taking Shanghai as an Example

In the earliest times, there were only two categories of regional cuisines in China, namely, southern cuisine and northern cuisine, and the staple foods were also generally divided into two major systems: northern noodles and southern rice. But when subdivided, the food culture between the north and the south will show more different characteristics. For example, the northerners and the southerners have diverse seasoning methods: In general, the northerners prefer salty, while the southerners prefer sweet; besides, from the perspective of cuisines, there are more independent cuisines in the south, which are more sophisticated than the rough and wild cuisines in the north. Therefore, the development of wheaten food culture in the south should have been greatly hindered: The natural geographical and climatic conditions in the south determined the low yield of wheat, and the elaborate cooking methods in the south seemed to conflict with the straightforward wheaten food in the traditional impression of Chinese people.

To promote the spread of wheat-based cuisine in the southern region, it is essential to enhance the variety and complexity of cooking techniques and flavors. This will facilitate the integration of flour as an ingredient into the daily lives of southerners.

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Unchanged Form, Diversified Processing, and Different Flavor

The popular wheaten foods throughout the south, such as “Small steamed buns”, “Pan-fried buns”, and “Pot stickers”, are actually transformed from the north’s most basic traditional wheaten food “steamed bread” and “dumplings”. In the south, people can rarely find a large plate of dumplings on their breakfast table. In the streets of Shanghai, Nanjing, and other southern cities, what might wake up your stomach is the smell of pan-fried buns and pot stickers. Statistics showed that pot stickers are more popular than dumplings (including fried dumplings) in Yangtze River Delta cities, and have even become the most ideal breakfast and lunch choice for many citizens, while dumplings are more widely accepted than pot stickers in cities around the Bohai economic circle. Whether pan-fried buns or pot stickers have greatly improved in their taste and cooking methods after spreading to the south, and its existence significance have gone beyond its prototype—the “fried dumpling” in the north. Their main difference lies in the cooking method: The southern pot stickers are directly fried raw dumplings, while the northern fried dumplings must be boiled in advance. What’s more, the southern pot stickers are juicy and sweet, while the northern pot stickers are juice-less and salty. It can be seen that the more elaborate cooking methods and the richer taste are more likely to attract the southerners.

The Population Mobility, the Roots of Schools, and the Appearance of Ingenuity

Taking Shanghai pan-fried buns as an example, schools of Shanghai pan-fried buns are represented by “Big pot spring” with thick crust and “Xiao Yang Sheng Jian”, which has thin crust and juicy filling.

It is acknowledged that the pan-fried buns were first introduced to Shanghai in the 1920s, when the influx of rural migrants from the provinces around Shanghai was at its peak, and some even with their whole families. Up to now, the total number of Shanghai residents who were moved from Anhui, Jiangsu, and Henan Provinces has reached 50.86%, which shows highly geographical concentration. Taking a closer look at these provinces, we find a considerable influx of wheaten food-loving population into Shanghai. While some of them came from northern cities such as northern Anhui Province, most areas of Henan Province except Xinyang City, there were still immigrants from southern provinces such as Jiangsu Province. Even though most of its prefecture-level cities belong to South China, at the north of the Yangtze River, the central and northern part of Jiangsu still have a high yield of wheat, and the local people have a fondness for wheaten food. For example, the rural laboring people in Taizhou, Jiangsu have a well knowledge about leavening dough, and its special local product Huangqiao Shaobing is famous throughout the country. Compared with other provinces, Jiangsu has the greatest impact on the development of wheaten food in Shanghai. In the last century, the outflow of people from northern Jiangsu became more and more frequent, mainly immigrating to southern Jiangsu and Shanghai, and this situation has continued to this day. At the same time, the process of their integration with these five cities at south of the Yangtze River in Jiangsu has also promoted the development of wheaten food in southern Jiangsu. It was the influx of labouring people from northern Jiangsu and commerce from southern Jiangsu to Shanghai that contributed to the development of wheaten food in Shanghai. The founder of “Big pot spring” is Tang Miaoquan from Danyang, Jiangsu Province, who learned his skill from his uncle, the founder of Luochun Court. Before that, his beef pan-fried buns had already become popular in Danyang, which was derived from the beef pan-fried buns of Nanjing and the dough-leavening techniques of Northern Jiangsu. Pan-fried buns first won the migrants’ praise in Shanghai, and then attracted local attention, making itself a hit in Shanghai.

Similar to Tang Miaoquan, Ms. Yang Lipeng, the founder of “Xiao Yang Sheng Jian”, is also from Jiangsu Province. She came from Yancheng, a city in northern Jiangsu, to Shanghai with a dream of catering. Through

long-term exploration and observation, she found that Shanghai local people were fond of sweet and juicy taste. She loved pan-fried buns and was good at wheaten food recipes, and then improved the taste and cooking methods on the basis of the original pan-fried buns, so as to cater to the dietary habit of more Shanghai people. Her excellence and dedication have won “Xiao Yang Sheng Jian” a good reputation. After decades of efforts, the school of wheaten food represented by “Xiao Yang Sheng Jian” has been widely accepted throughout Shanghai, and this brand has also become a chain restaurant throughout the major cities of the Yangtze River Delta.

Manifestation of Regional Cultural Diversity in the Circulation of Wheaten Food Culture in the South

The population mobility could promote the circulation of food, and the transformation of cooking and seasoning methods could also make food take root in another area as soon as possible. However, if we focus on different regions within the same province, and then look at the differences in wheaten food culture between them, the degree of regional cultural diversity in different provinces determines the degree of differences in the appearance of wheaten food culture. In this regard, we must first distinguish the regional cultural diversity of different provinces.

Differences of Wheaten Food in Provinces With Large Regional Cultural Diversity—Take Jiangsu as an Example

Jiangsu Province has witnessed the evolution of political districts, the changes of geopolitics, and the infiltration of the capital culture. These factors have entitled Jiangsu with a profound and diversified food culture. “Profound” means that the food culture has a strong historical accumulation, while “Diversified” implies the complexity and independence of its food distribution. For example, Xuzhou, the most northwest city of Jiangsu Province and the center city of Huaihai Economic Zone, absolutely has great differences in food culture from Suzhou, the most southwest city of Jiangsu Province, which is also an economic power. Xuzhou culture has three characteristics: northern charm, fusion beauty, and grandeur attraction. Since most of Xuzhou area used to under the jurisdiction of Shandong province, and is close to the Central Plains, its wheaten food culture has a strong historical accumulation. As early as the early Han Dynasty, or the end of the Qin Dynasty, or even earlier, wheaten food had become an important part of the food culture in Xuzhou, which had a great demonstration role in leading the wheaten food culture in the north, especially in the border areas of Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, and Anhui. However, the culture of Suzhou is characterized by sensitivity, elegance, delicacy, and gentleness. Suzhou is not a traditional wheat producing area, and its wheaten food culture has been greatly changed according to local taste characteristics since its introduction, with blended cultural characteristics with neighboring Shanghai, Wuxi, and other places.

Among Xuzhou’s wheaten food, the most famous is “Baked Bun”, with the characteristics of “as thin as paper, as light as smoke”. Xuzhou people’s love for wheaten food is also reflected in a dish named “Ground Pot Chicken”. In the pot is boiled chicken, and attached along its side is a circle of dough. The Xuzhou people, who love spiciness and saltiness, also prefer strong flavors in wheaten food. Huaiyang area is located at the north-south junction, with both the salty and spicy taste of Xuzhou in the north and the sweet and delicate taste of Suzhou in the south. Therefore, Huaiyang wheaten food is not too sweet or too salty, but characterized with peaceful taste. What’s more, the size of its wheaten food also reflects its characteristics of north-south integration. For example, the size of its steamed dumplings and soup dumplings is obviously larger than that of Suzhou-Wuxi-Changzhou, but smaller than that of Xuzhou. Yangzhou wheaten food is no less exquisite than Suzhou.

Yangzhou and Taizhou used to be one, the high quality of its local flour, the great leavening skills of its local people, and their pursuit of food taste has worked together to establish the outstanding position of Huaiyang wheaten food, which shows the delicateness of fusion of south and north. In addition to the delicate craft, Suzhou wheaten foods also go into every detail you can think of. Taking Suzhou noodles as an example, its biggest feature is particularity! From the soup, topping, width, and hardness of the noodles, we can see the delicateness of its wheaten food culture. Suzhou noodles is mostly characterized by its soup, which should be clear and light. But to a Xuzhou native, the soup may seem to be a little superfluous, and it is more difficult for his taste to change from salty to sweet.

Enlightenment From the Circulation Path of Wheat Food in Ancient and Modern China

Although the naming of “Bing” and “Noodles” was simple and rough, they showed the characteristics of domestic-foreign and large-scale domestic social population mobility in our history, reflecting the deep origin and strong plasticity and creativity of Chinese culture.

In modern times, the scale of population mobility inside and outside the province is increasing gradually, but still shows high relevance and directionality. The initial uprooting was forced by helplessness and was based on the industrious nature of the nation. The development of wheaten food schools in alien regions was rooted in cooking methods and the creativity of the founders. The rise of wheaten food culture stemmed from the ingenuity of a generation and a group of people, and the harmonization and adaptation of local people’s tastes. This is the never fading, timeless spiritual value of the nation, and is the mystery and inspiration of “people” behind food.

The regional cultural diversity within the province has influence on the circulation of wheaten food to some extent. It is necessary to understand the spiritual connotation of “Seeking harmony in differences”, not to pursue absolute consistency, but to try to be inclusive and affirm the existence of differences, and to discover the internal aesthetics of different food cultures.

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