



# Food as a Medium: Ethnic Interactions and Integration Across Yunnan's Dining Tables

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**Abstract.** Yunnan's diverse ethnic groups have created a multi-ethnic food and cultural paradise suited to their ecological, social and human environment through exchange and interaction. The development of the food economy has facilitated exchanges, food as a gift is a bond of friendship, shared dietary customs bring communities closer together. Cultural exchange and fusion among the various ethnic groups, across ethnic boundaries, allows for cultural sharing and promotes inter-ethnic integration, forming a unique food culture community in Yunnan.

**Keywords:** Yunnan · ethnic interaction · food and cultural community · cultural sharing

## 1 Introduction

As a representation of people's daily life, food culture is of great importance in the exchange and integration of different groups of people. Chinese food system has a melting effect, and the cultural connotations of food can be seen through the interactions and cultural perceptions. Yunnan has been a multi-ethnic province since ancient times, and ethnic exchanges and integration are mainstream, with ethnic groups living, learning, working and enjoying together, forming a multi-ethnic cultural community. The different food habits are intertwined to form a pluralistic food culture in Yunnan. Specifically, 'pluralism' means that Yunnan's multi-ethnic food culture coexists, and 'unity' means that the groups are closely interdependent of each other. In this process, the different food cultures of Yunnan's ethnic groups and regions have interacted and intermingled to build a social ecology of harmony and coexistence.

## 2 Multi-ethnic Interaction in the Context of Food Economy Rotation

Human demand for food is gradually evolving from an unplanned, low-desire state to a more pluralistic food, more diverse needs and a more varied range, driven by the market. [1] The food products of the ethnic groups broke geographical boundaries and were

marketed throughout the province. In this economic chain, the cooperation and interconnectedness of different ethnic groups can be seen. The different ethnic groups in the Diqing and Nanhua regions, such as the Tibetan, Lisu, Naxi, Pumi, Yi and Han, work together in an orderly division of labour and close cooperation, promoting exchanges and integration. In the transit and circulation of foodstuffs, merchants acted as intermediaries bridging the trade. According to a survey of the social history of Yunnan's ethnic minorities in the early years of the People's Republic of China, there had long been close relations between the Han Chinese and the peoples of the border areas, with economic and cultural interchanges. In the Yiwu area of Xishuangbanna, Han merchants brought in oil, iron pots, tripods, hoes, axes, felts, salt, walnuts, brine, bean sauce, tempeh, sauerkraut and other daily-use items. Agricultural tools and foodstuffs were produced for sale to the local people. These supplies are extremely scarce in the Dai, Hani, Yao and Yi areas. The merchants also acquired various local products such as rice, pigs, cattle, rape seeds, peanuts, tea leaves, ivory, antler, deer fetus, deer skin, tiger bones, tiger skin and tiger gum from the region and transported them to Kunming. Through the traders' commerce, the relationship between the minorities and the Han Chinese was brought closer. In addition, the three major merchant gangs and their subordinate firms in western Yunnan ensured the circulation of goods, forming a merchandise trade market centred on present-day Xiaguan, Dali, where merchants trans-shipped foodstuffs while closely trading between the ethnic groups. Tea from Shunning (Fengqing) and Mianning (Lincang). Sugar from Jingdong, Yunzhou (Yunxian) and Shunning, ham, wine and paper from Heqing, cotton and spicy seeds from Binzhou, walnuts from liangbi and medicinal herbs from Lijiang were all transported to Xiaguan for resale. In the Yunnan-Tibet trade, Tibet imported saffron, dried fruits, deer antler, cordyceps into Dali, while Dali's exports to Tibet were mainly tea, brown sugar, wine, vermicelli, paper, ink and horses. In Zhongdian and Weixi, herbs such as Huanglian and Bayberry, raw animals, leather and ghee are imported into Xiaguan. [2] The main commercial routes for import and export were Xiaguan, Yongchang (Baoshan) and Tengyue (Tengchong), which shipped paper, wine, ham, medicinal herbs and large quantities of yellow silk, amounting to about 1,000 to 2,000 packs (120 kg per pack), or 200,000 to 300,000 kg per year. [3] Heqing ham was exported to Myanmar. In the trading of the above-mentioned places, goods consisted mostly local products, and the merchant gangs passed through Xiaguan, Heqing, Lijiang, Yongsheng, Shigu, Weixi, Zhongdian, Deqin, Baoshan, Tengchong and other places in Yunnan. All these places were multi-ethnic, with Tibetans, Yi, Naxi, Pumi, Lisu and Han Chinese, and the major merchant gangs also had trading houses in important towns, creating a multi-ethnic trading network centred on Xiaguan and radiating to Tibet, Sichuan and Tengchong. It is clear that the interchangeable economic interaction of food between different ethnic groups has contributed to the development of production and the prosperity of the groups, strengthening national unity and creating close economic ties that cannot be shared.

### 3 Ethnic Relations in the Exchange of Gifts

Food is often used as a medium of exchange, food builds connections, and as gifts they are inextricably linked to human relationships. Not only does the exchange of things

manifest itself in the economic sphere, the complexities of labour, production, value and profit generated by exchange, but in the field of anthropological research, the exchange and communication of ‘gifts’ is no less important as a ‘medium’ for observing and analyzing society ‘ to meet the function of use in life, to highlight prestige and authority, and to emphasize the order of social groups in exchange - kinship, hierarchy, gender, the maintenance of marital relations, etc. [1] The people of Yunnan often give their unique foods as gifts to friends and relatives, thus continuing their emotions and maintaining social relationships.

If something is of value, it still has an emotional value in addition to its sales value. [4] The people of Yunnan are hospitable and often give or return locally produced food as gifts to friends and guests. During the Ming dynasty, the residents of Ami Prefecture (the present-day Kaiyun area) would cook white japonica rice as soft rice, pestle it into cakes, fold and twist it like a half-moon, and serve it on a tiled plate as a gift to their relatives and friends. [5] The custom of presenting Erkuai (rice pastry) to friends and relatives as a gift to the Yi, Han and Hani peoples living together in the Amoy region has promoted friendship between the different ethnic groups. In Yunnan today, Erkuai is still an important gift for people visiting friends and relatives during the Spring Festival. The Bulang tribe in Menghai County enjoys sour tea (called “Mian” in Bulang) and the women make it for themselves and as a gift. [6] The pig arm of the Pumi in the Ninglang is both a great treat for guests and a great gift. [7] The Pumi give it as a gift to their Naxi, Yi, Han and Tibetan relatives. Yunnan ham is often sold in the most exclusive grocery shops and is also an important gift because of its preciousness and practicality. [8] Around Dayao in Chuxiong, ham is often given or returned as a valuable gift to relatives and friends. The Yi and Han people also give gifts when they attend the weddings with ham, wine, rice, commemorative plaques and gift money given together as a big gift to relatives and friends on good terms, with a special person keeping the books and having to return the gift.

In the process of ethnic interaction, food is given the power to build friendly relations. Different ethnic groups give their food as gifts to friends and relatives, who in turn give back gifts of equal value after receiving them, and this interaction between the giving and giving back of gifts is an emotional exchange. By sharing food, they perpetuate emotions, strengthen their social groups and close communication. “Humanity gives meaning to the daily contact, and gifts become a symbol or medium for communicating based on the social foundation of relationships. The ‘gift’ nature of food breaks down ethnic boundaries and becomes an important medium of friendship, as people exchange gifts to perpetuate emotions and thus strengthen social relationships.

#### **4 Eating Together: The Expression of a Multi-ethnic Food Culture Community**

Social networks built up through food form a group with common interest, and communal eating as a behaviour with universal values exists and manifests itself in societies. Communal eating traditions, events and practices can even be an entry point to observe and gain insight into the construction and functioning of a particular society. [1] The ethnic groups in Yunnan live together in mixed communities and have influenced each

other in terms of food culture. Through the food and drink that are essential to their daily lives, they have built up a multi-ethnic food and cultural community. The interactions and intermingling between groups are also evident in the 'communal drinking and eating'.

Any surviving culture is seen as an integrated unity or system. Within this unity or system, each element has a definite function. A more common process is the interaction and influence on each other. Through this process, a culture accepts some elements from its neighbours and rejects others; the acceptance or rejection is determined by the system of that culture itself. The elements adopted or 'borrowed' from neighbouring areas are subject to reworking and refinement in the process of adaptation. [9] Yunnan's food culture is the result of exchanges and interactions between various ethnic groups. By learning production techniques and food customs from each other, groups have penetrated and influenced in aspects of production, life and food habits, promoting friendly communication. Menghai area, the Han and Dai share the kneading tea technology, promoting the development of the tea industry. The Pumi, Yi and Tibetan peoples living in western Yunnan have influenced each other in their food customs. The Pumi are accustomed to drinking ghee tea, which is usually made from the milk of yellow cows and yaks, and is processed in the same way as the Tibetans. The Pumi in the area of Ninglang and Lanping also like to eat ghee and tsampa, while the Zhongdian Yi also like to eat oatmeal tsampa and ghee tea. The Dulong people like to drink tea, and drink ghee tea with breakfast, drinking ghee is learned from the Tibetans, and all practices are the same as those of the Tibetans. [10].

The ethnic groups in Yunnan have long been dependent on each other in their interactions, and have been able to communicate, making no distinction between each other or ethnic groups in terms of culture and living customs. The food customs of one group are also borrowed by other groups. For example, the Han Chinese in the Diqing and Lijiang areas also have the habit of drinking ghee tea, and the Yi, Tibetan, Naxi and Pumi all eat hot pot. In addition, as a result of the long history of intermingling and intermarriage, the food culture in Yunnan has become more 'regional' than 'ethnic'. When people talk about food, they seldom talk about the food of a particular ethnic group, but more about the food of a particular place, such as Lijiang pork ribs, Zhaotong chicken with ham, Mengzi rice noodles, Tengchong shredded rice and so on. The food customs of the ethnic groups in Yunnan have influenced each other over a long period of time, and the sharing of food preparation techniques and flavours has not only enriched the lives of the ethnic groups, but has also greatly improved relations between them, making Yunnan's food culture rich and varied due to its multi-ethnic mix.

In the process of people's social interaction, communal meals are undoubtedly an important way of fostering relationships. The Yi and Naxi ethnic groups around central and western Yunnan have the annual custom of killing the New Year pig. On the day of the pig kill, the whole village people are invited to share it. In the Hani long street feast, every household makes Hani-style specialties and snacks such as yellow glutinous rice and three-coloured eggs, and then goes to a designated street centre to set out home-made meals, which people from different villages can enter and taste, and everyone sits around the table, eating and catching up as they share the food. In the area around Baka Nanhekai in Menghai County, on the eve of the New Year, the Lahu invite friends and relatives of Dai, Hani and Bulang ethnic groups to join them in a joyful gathering and drinking,

and give each other glutinous rice biscuits and pork molecules. [11] This shows that the ethnic groups share food and strengthen each other's social networks through feasting together. The sharing of food symbolises the coming together of particular groups of people. Individuals of different ethnic identities and in the same specific group promote understanding and knowledge of each other's food and other cultures through shared meals. In this process, ethnic groups understand and tolerate each other, respect each other, help each other, come together often and play together, and strengthen inter-ethnic communication and solidarity.

As a cultural symbol, food has been extended and developed within a specific region, crossing ethnic and geographical boundaries and becoming one of the key symbols of communication and interaction. In the process of exchange and interaction, the ethnic groups in Yunnan have promoted mutual understanding and group culture through communal eating. In a pluralistic ethnic society, each group has adapted to its own food culture boundaries, the food culture differences have gradually faded, and the food culture boundaries have been transcended, forming a multi-ethnic social ecology of harmony and coexistence. In this social ecology, food is used as a medium for groups to eat and share together, crossing ethnic boundaries and promoting the fusion of their food cultures, forming a multi-ethnic food culture community that is intermingled and complementary.

## 5 Conclusion

With a long history and diverse content, Yunnan's food culture is a true reflection of its multi-ethnic culture. The occurrence and development of each food culture form is a dynamic historical process 'no change in change, change in change' is the basic feature of the rule of evolution. The formation of Yunnan's food culture is a process of multi-ethnic interaction, exchange and intermingling. The food culture of different ethnic groups has continued to spread along with the migration and economic exchanges, penetrating, absorbing, integrating and changing each other, forming an open, inclusive, harmonious and pluralistic pattern. The movement of people and the circulation of food have strengthened exchanges between regions and peoples. Food as a gift crosses ethnic boundaries and becomes an important medium. The shared eating and drinking behaviour fosters friendship in the interaction of food customs, tastes and food preparation techniques. In the process of inter-ethnic exchange, different groups respect each other, each giving up some of their food and cultural practices, blending the five tastes in their diet, and 'harmonising but differing', forming an open and inclusive food and cultural community.

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