The Impact of Takeaway Food on Personal Identity, Familial Norms, and Cultural Frameworks

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Abstract. The three-meals-a-day dietary preference has become more prevalent among many young people, contrasting with conventional family meal practices and often causing disputes within families. These disputes have an essential role in transforming the cultural framework that comprises personal, familial, and societal domains. This paper aims to explore the intricate relationship between personal identity and social culture resulting from the intersection of takeaway food and family dining. Additionally, this study will examine the mechanisms behind the consolidation and differentiation of identities in the sphere of familial frameworks.

Keywords: Takeaway Food, Communal Dining, Personal Identity, Family Norms, Cultural Frameworks

1   Introduction

In China, the proliferation of takeout dining options has enabled individuals to savour a diverse array of culinary offerings from the comfort of their abodes. Nevertheless, the universal acceptance of takeaway cuisine across all demographic segments remains a topic of ongoing debate, warranting further examination. For individuals born after 1990, colloquially referred to as the post-90s generation, the surge in popularity of takeaway food coincided with a period of newfound independence, marked by their pursuit of higher education and entry into the workforce. Consequently, this demographic exhibits a notably heightened proclivity for embracing takeout options and exhibits greater frequency in engaging with food delivery platforms.

Tracing back through China's cultural history, the concept of takeaway food finds its roots in the Han Dynasty. However, during this period, takeaway services were a luxury reserved exclusively for the upper echelons of society. It was not until the Tang Dynasty takeaway began to democratize, gradually becoming accessible to the common people. The emergence of a formal takeaway industry can be attributed to the Song Dynasty, marked by restaurants employing dedicated delivery personnel and the introduction of specialized tableware for takeaway dishes.

In contemporary, the acquisition of takeaway food has undergone a dramatic transformation, shifting to online platforms. Today, one can effortlessly access various specialized online takeaway ordering systems, relishing the convenience of doorstep delivery. Takeaway services have expanded into a comprehensive industry within Chinese society, transcending the culinary sphere to encompass an array of daily essentials, from meals to medications and everyday commodities. The community of individuals who routinely employ takeaway platforms for their daily needs has grown significantly.

In this paper, the author describes the attitudes of different family members towards takeaway food from the perspective of young people, hoping to understand the dietary structures of different cultural groups through the different attitudes and choices of family members towards takeaway food and to explore and analyse the correlation between these dietary structures and social cultures.

2   Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The interviewees, five young individuals aged between twenty and twenty-five, were carefully selected based on their educational background, residence in first- or second-tier cities in mainland China, their experience of independent living, and a penchant for ordering takeaway meals while residing with their elder family members. The elder family members in this study encompass both parents and grandparents, with parents belonging to the post-1960s generation, and grandparents hailing from the early 1920s and 1930s era.

The outline of the questions is as follows:

1. How many times a month do you buy takeaway food at home? When do you do it? What do you buy?

2. Do your family members eat takeaway food with you?

3. How do your family members feel about takeaway food? What is your attitude towards such an opinion?

4. Have you ever quarrelled with your family over takeaway food?

5. What are the main food items in the family for three meals a day? Which family member prepares the family meals?

6. Why do you think the elders in your family support/oppose you to buy takeaway food?

7. What do you think the meaning of takeaway food is to you? Do you have to order takeaway food?

It is pertinent to note that the diverse family structures and individual life circumstances of the five interviewees resulted in differences in how applicable each query was to them. Of the interviewees, three had completed higher education and resided away from home for extended periods, returning only during holidays. One interviewee entered the workforce after graduating from high school, leading an independent life and visiting their parents on occasion. The fifth interviewee followed a vocational education after finishing high school and began working in a technical field at the age of eighteen, rarely sharing meals with his parents.

3   Analysis of Conflicts Based on Takeaway Foods

In this chapter, based on the content provided by the interviewees, we explore the choice of personal eating habits starting from food health, and further analyses on this basis the conflicts that different dietary structures stimulate in the family, and place the family structure in a socio-cultural context for detailed analysis.

3.1   Eating Habits and Family Norms

Expanding upon the discourse regarding the impact of takeaway food on health, it becomes evident that it exerts pressure on family structures and the cultivation of harmonious familial relationships. The first thing that is being challenged is the identity of mothers in the family.

"Buying takeaway food signifies that I don't always consume the meals my mom prepares, which can make her feel undervalued."

" During my days off, I typically slumber in, partake in brunch, indulge in a 3 p.m. snack and have a late-night snack if I stay up. This differs from my elders' conventional practice of three meals a day, which they perceive as impractical and deleterious. To circumvent perpetual dietary conflicts within my family, I decided to live independently when I commenced working."

In the traditional Chinese context, the act of dining together as a family at a communal table symbolizes family happiness and harmony. Mothers are traditionally expected to be the architects and custodians of this symbol, with women being assigned the role of being 'proficient in both the dining hall and the kitchen.' In essence, culinary mastery is regarded as an inherent female responsibility. Consequently, the introduction of takeaway food into the family table signifies a disruption of the mother's established role and status within the family. The procurement of takeaway meals poses a challenge to the fruits of her labour, and the absence of joy and harmony within the household can be perceived as a dereliction of motherhood.

The presence of take-away food on the family dining table also poses a challenge to the tradition of gathering around this shared space, which allows family members to select a variety of foods at their own pace, under one roof. However, the significance of food extends beyond providing physical and psychological gratification. It also serves as a conduit for social interaction and deepening of familial bonds [1]. This social function plays a pivotal role in sustaining the interconnectedness among family members.

Simultaneously, the choice of family meals serves as a response to parental affection, fulfilling a fundamental need for parents. Consequently, regular shared meals serve as a crucial means of fostering familial connections [5]. In Hong Kong, tea gatherings create opportunities for individuals from various regions to unite, strengthening familial bonds [3]. Dining around the dinner table assumes a vital role in upholding healthy familial relationships for certain individuals. However, shifting dietary patterns and the advent of take-out food have diminished the tradition of shared meals in families. This decline in communal dining opportunities has amplified family discord, prompting

younger generations to pursue independent living, thus rupturing the continuity of family relationships [4].

Furthermore, the entire process of meal preparation, cooking, and congregating as a family after a day of work or study can be perceived as a culinary ritual. Food rituals are recognized as an integral aspect of eating habits that foster a sense of belonging by promoting identification with an internal group [6]. Meal preparation also mirrors the division of labour within the household, with family members participating in cooking and setting the table. However, the emergence of takeout meals has substantially streamlined these food rituals, obviating the need to handle ingredients before the meal and simplifying cleanup afterwards. Ordering takeout via mobile apps allows diners to receive prepared food within an hour, in stark contrast to the fixed nature of home-cooked meals. In practice, a clear demarcation exists between home and external food. Home-cooked meals tend to be more traditional and conservative, adhering to safety, health, traditional dietary principles, and ceremonial customs [3]. As a result, the introduction of takeout food into the family setting is regarded as a challenge to the very structure of the family.

3.2   Dietary habits and identity

Dietary habits hold a dual significance, influencing both physical health and identity. Individuals' food choices and responses are shaped by personal and social experiences. These variations in eating behaviours can socially distinguish distinct groups, thereby establishing a form of cultural capital [2]. Consequently, our daily eating practices transcend mere cognitive processes, encompassing bodily memory. The arrangement and regulations governing food's presence at the table serve as an organization of this memory order, transmitted through diverse sensory encounters [5]. The memories and significance associated with food directly shape an individual's identity, which can be personal, collective, or societal.

"My elders believe that ordering takeaway suggests limited choices and concerns that others may assume we are neglected when they discover that we have takeaway at home."

"I understand why my parents feel this way. They have an affinity for Hakka cuisine and find it difficult to adjust to other types of food. When they go on trips, they seek out Hakka restaurants, and when travelling overseas, they bring salted fish to sate their taste preferences amid unfamiliar cuisine."

Superficially, the act of purchasing takeaway food underscores the separation of individual identity from the collective, with critiques from elders labelling such choices as indicators of isolation or social detachment [5]. Yet, at a deeper level, the tension between takeout and home-cooked meals instigates a process in which group identities, fostered through culinary practices, are subjected to questioning and challenge. For societies and social groups, food's role has transcended basic survival needs. It now symbolizes national identity and culture, offering a conceptual framework for the exploration and comprehension of national culture. It acts as a symbolic emblem, capable of eliciting recognition and expression of national identity [9].

For instance, in Hong Kong, where locals strongly regard food as a marker of their social standing, the appearance of herbal tea shops is perceived as a nostalgic tribute to Hong Kong, aiding in the construction and preservation of Hong Kong's identity [3]. Particular flavours and dishes carry profound significance for specific groups, playing a pivotal role in defining their identity to the broader world. In one instance, Hakka cuisine and salted fish serve as embodiments of ethnic identity for certain interviewees. Even when far from home, these individuals remain tethered to the cuisine of their hometown, as it holds a unique connotation in a specific place [7].

In Australia, a food item like Vegemite plays a comparable role in maintaining group identity and nurturing a sense of belonging. Athletes competing abroad often find that Vegemite helps them feel at home and is instrumental in achieving success in competitions [6]. Similarly, the importance of ethnic food for ethnic identity and nostalgia among the Teochew people residing in Hong Kong is evident in the dietary framework of this community [9]. In essence, what, when, and how we consume food shapes our identity. Through these practices, we delineate our societal and cultural affiliations, defining them both for ourselves and for others.

3.3   Replacement of Identity

From an alternate perspective, the proliferation and accessibility of food have blurred the delineation of personal and ethnic identity, manifesting as a diminishing significance of traditional identity and the growing uniformity of identity. Historian Steven contends that as seasons and geographical factors no longer restrict our daily food choices, our eating habits are conspicuously globalized, signifying a cosmopolitan character to our food culture, wherein our once-distinct dietary practices have become second nature [8].

Anthropologist Counihan characterizes this cosmopolitan dietary trend as an expression of 'modernity,' specifically emblematic of the socio-economic transformations stemming from the intricacies of capitalism, technology, information, and bureaucracy. This transition marks a shift from localized self-sufficiency to a market-driven economy, transforming the majority from subsistence living to full participation in a visibly consumer-oriented, labour-based economy [5]. Examining these shifts through the lens of food illuminates the transformations in social dynamics and the construction of meaning.

"Takeout food is usually in disposable packaging, but some places offer eco-friendly options like reusable casseroles and soup cups. However, these premium containers tend to be pricier, which isn't ideal for budget-conscious workers like me."

"During the period of increased work intensity, I had little time or energy to cook. Takeout became our primary way of eating, especially when I ate alone."

"I'm not skilled at cooking, and it's not essential for many young people like me. We're used to being fed and don't have the same values our elders had regarding hard work to prepare a meal. Ordering affordable, diverse foods allows us to treat ourselves. We reward ourselves during work with a cup of milk tea or coffee and enjoy hassle-free gourmet meals after work.

The aforementioned interview sheds light on another underlying motivation for the younger generation's preference for takeaway food. Takeout meals are not merely a consequence of economic progress; they are also a social and cultural choice. While financial constraints and the demands of their occupations render cooking at home impractical, the upbringing of these young individuals has fostered an inclination toward convenience when dining alone. The high-pressure nature of their jobs further steers them towards food that demands minimal effort. This shift also underscores the generational divergence in values. Elders exhibit a more hands-on approach to food preparation, deriving spiritual satisfaction from the act of labour. In contrast, the younger generation is more willing to exchange money for the convenience of having others do the work, marking it as a form of labour exchange. These dietary habits are then subtly transmitted to the next generation. Simultaneously, the richness and diversity of takeaway food provide psychological comfort for young individuals working away from home, offering a sense of satisfaction to their mental well-being [6].

The rise of takeaway food has accentuated and revealed disparities between social classes. Differences in the price and packaging of takeout meals indirectly express distinctions between social strata, with personal status influencing individuals' choices regarding the same items. Thus, there are marked class-based variations in the presentation and consumption of food [6]. These social class differences surface in the preferences and attitudes of younger groups toward takeaway food, where convenience is coupled with affordability. Altered eating habits impact the types and selection of food based on individual status, yet they do not alter that status. Personal tastes continually evolve within the framework of the prevailing consumer society, but identity and status remain intrinsically linked to an individual's social class. This highlights that the interplay between food and identity has implications at both personal and social levels. As material symbols, dietary choices play a pivotal role in the mechanisms of social inequality, further reinforcing hierarchies related to nationality, region, class, and gender [6].

4   Conclusion

In modern times, dining has become a tailored experience, with an abundance of food choices accessible, which allows people to have the liberty to decide what, when, and where they wish to eat. Electing to have takeaway food is a decision related to individual dietary preferences. Nevertheless, when this option intrudes on family meals, it establishes a multifaceted interaction involving the individual, the family unit, and society. Takeaway food provides contentment to individuals residing away from home who possess specific dietary needs. However, it inadvertently leads to strained familial relationships. Incongruities amongst eating habits cause misunderstandings between personal choices and established familial norms resulting in multiple discussions. This food-based element reveals the complex connection between a swiftly advancing economy and the dynamics present in individual and familial contexts. Individuals independently form their dietary habits, reshaping their social identity, rather than inheriting familial traditions. At the same time, families experience a significant and immediate

impact, causing disturbance to internal relational dynamics and structures, and challenging customary familial practices. Within broader society, the family acts as a key social unit that responds to internal familial conflicts and divisions, driven by socio-cultural influences.

Food provides a holistic approach to exploring the links between the individual, society and the community, which are constantly transforming as a result of social and cultural changes. The food we consume is not only determined by its nutritional content but also by its symbolic meaning. Traditionally, eating habits in earlier societies were shaped by local surroundings and a well-established cultural structure. Only individuals who frequently traversed various environments possessed the opportunity and capability to transcend fixed socio-cultural boundaries as they adapted to diverse culinary settings [8].

As food boundaries continue to blur, one may question whether our perspectives on food and its effects will become more uniform. Will culinary traditions lose their distinctive boundaries? Although these queries remain unanswered, an indisputable fact is the importance of communal dining, which is inherent in food and essential to individuals, families, and societies. For families, communal dining strengthens the bond between individuals and their families, providing a space for socialization and skill development, as well as shaping their identity and status.

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