

Article

# Cultural Memory and Food Narrative in Yao Chicken

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**Abstract:** Rooted in the migratory history of the Hakka people, traditional snacks in American Hakka families embody narratives of displacement, adaptation, and resilience, therefore becoming dynamic vessels of cultural memory, reflecting historical context during the periods of migration. This study takes a case study on Yao Chicken (salt-baked chicken), investigating it as a culinary symbol from the perspective of semiotics. It aims to explore how food functions as a signifier of local culture and how it contributes to the construction and dissemination of national cultural narratives. What's more, it explores the anthropological and semiotic significance of Hakka cuisine, by imagining them as cultural memory and food narrative of Hakka people. In the end, it argues that Yao Chicken not only nourishes their biological organism, but also constructs their social and cultural identity. It marks the group that an eater belongs to and defines the otherness of a different group. Therefore, it becomes a tactile archive, preserving not only flavors but also the sociohistorical conditions that have shaped Hakka identity.

**Keywords:** food narratives; Hakka culture; cultural identity; Yao Chicken

## 1. Introduction: Food Narrative and Food Writing

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature seeking to analyze food practices from a sociological and cultural perspective. For example, the role of food media in various processes involved in food consumption, such as the shaping of body image and the formation of taste. Meanwhile, an anthropological focus on the customs and traditions surrounding food, rather than examining how these conventions are mediated, reproduced, or redirected through written texts. The relationship between cookbooks, food, and identity in British culture has been extensively explored, with Stephen Mennell providing the most detailed discussion of food writing in his book. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* [1]. In contrast to these perspectives, the gastronomic literary text can be understood in terms of four key concerns: first, to establish certain rules of etiquette or “correct” practices [1]; second, to offer a dietetic perspective; third, to present a brew of history, myth, and history serving as myth and fourth [2], to nostalgically evoke “memorable meals” [3]. The intricate connection between food and identity has been increasingly explored across various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, ethnography, geography, philosophy, and gender studies [4,5]. While relatively little attention has been devoted to food as a distinct genre of narratives within a certain group of cultural heritage. Mary Douglas argues that food could work as narrative semiotics and a signifier and therefore, supporting all possibility to transform certain message of identity, culture and history [6]. In this way, this study focuses on Yao Chicken as a representative Hakka snack to explore cultural memory, identification and food imagination embedded within. This paper first defines and traces the origins of cultural symbols before examining the roles of food culture symbols in the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, the fusion of East and West, and

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the decentralization and transformation of local culture. Additionally, it explores the functions of these culinary symbols in representing Hakka cultural identity, emphasizing their integrative, communicative, and mediating roles.

## **2. Fengshun Identity, Hakka Immigrant Culture and Food Narrative**

Fengshun, a southern borderland Cantonese County, is well-known for its rich culinary diversity as the hometown county for overseas Chinese people, which contributes to its cultural landscape as a convergence point for both Chaozhou-Shantou emigrant culture and Lingnan Hakka culture. In this area, various cultures are fused, which brings a unique Hakka food culture identity, especially for local Hakka cuisine. It draws from both traditional Chinese culinary practices and integrates elements from Eastern and Southern Asia. Among them, "Yao Chicken" is especially for its key role as the cultural symbols for Hakka heritage.

The connection between food and identity is perhaps best encapsulated by the saying, "you are what you eat". In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed that dietary preferences reflect national character, associating Italians with vegetables, the Swiss with dairy, the British with meat, and the French with wine [7]. Similar associations persisted across history: in the 19th century, the English labeled the Irish as "potato people" while in the 16th century, Northern Italians called Sicilians "macaroni eaters". These examples illustrate how food has long functioned as a cultural marker. In this light, Yao Chicken represents Hakka cuisine and emigrant culture, symbolizing hybridity and the negotiation of Eastern and Western influences.

Across the social sciences, identity has been a widely studied concept, with food deeply intertwined with its construction. This relationship goes beyond mere categorization and consumption, encompassing preparation, social organization, dietary restrictions, communal traditions, spatial and temporal contexts, sensory experiences, language, symbolism, representation, and the cultural expression of eating and drinking.

## **3. Culinary Cultural Symbols as Cultural Identity**

Identity contributes to how individuals and groups perceive and construct society, how they give meaning, and how they (re)act, think, vote, socialize, buy, rejoice, perceive, work, eat, judge or relax. While culture encompasses the totality of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material characteristics unique to a particular society or group. It manifests in various forms, including artistic and literary expressions, lifestyles, customs, beliefs, and value systems. Within this multifaceted network of social practices, symbols serve to represent meanings that extend beyond the immediate sensory experiences associated with an object.

Identification extends beyond merely sharing the common characteristics of a group or an ideal; it is an ongoing process of construction, or even a "fantasy of incorporation" [8]. From this perspective, identification functions through language and practice — or more precisely, through the interplay between language and practice — manifesting in discourse (Foucault) and narratives, in the sense of how individuals conceptualize, articulate, and document their lives. Through language, individuals internalize the attitudes and values of a group, shaping their sense of belonging and identity. They also shape and interpret experiences, memories, and expectations [9].

In most cases, the connection between food and identity is subtle yet deeply embedded. The Russian semiotic school, represented by scholars such as Lotman, views culture as a unique system of symbols and signs. According to this framework, the progression follows a logical sequence: "sign — text — culture — sign domain". Signs serve as the most basic elements, with clear directionality. These signs form sign texts, which construct culture, and in turn, culture shapes the symbolic domain. In this structure, cultural symbols act as material carriers of cultural content. For example, a ring symbolizes engagement or marriage, while elements like silk, kung fu, and the Great Wall serve as symbolic

carriers of deep Chinese cultural significance, representing the nation's heritage. Within the relationship between symbols and meanings, the symbol represents form and the meaning represents content, with the "text" serving as a bridge between the two. The "text" in this context extends beyond written words to encompass cultural practices such as dietary habits, daily behaviors, urban spatial arrangements, and even significant historical events and figures. The cultural symbols of a community are not randomly accumulated; instead, they form a structured system grounded in conventions, traditions, and customs, facilitating multi-level interactions that create a distinctive symbolic domain.

Within this multifaceted network of social practices, symbols serve to represent meanings that extend beyond the immediate sensory experiences associated with an object. A symbol typically consists of two elements: form and content, which are arbitrarily linked rather than purely conventional. Cultural symbols, emerging from the foundation of culture, inherently connect culture itself with its symbolic representations and meanings. The concept of culture is, at its core, semiotic, with cultural meaning referring to the significance conveyed through symbols passed down across generations. A "mode" is the system of concepts expressed through these symbolic systems, which individuals use to communicate and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life.

In this system, the Hakka dish like "Yao Chicken" from Fengshun County, Meizhou, emerges as key cultural symbol. They play an integral role in disseminating Hakka culture. The "text" here refers to the shared cultural recognition within families and clans, which surrounds the traditions of Yao Chicken, as well as the collective participation in food preparation during festivals. Through the dynamic interplay of cultural symbols, texts, and meanings, a strong sense of identity is fostered within the Hakka community, leading to the formation of a Hakka symbolic domain that centers on cultural identity.

#### **4. The Culinary Imagination and Craftsmanship of "Yao Chicken" Culture**

Yao Chicken holds a central place in Hakka culture, traditionally crafted during ancestor worship and offerings to deities. Despite the rapid advancements in modern technology, the people of Chaozhou-Shantou continue to honor and revere their ancestors and deities with great respect. What role does food play in shaping identity, and how has this connection been analyzed? During the 1960s and 1970s, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas explored food's function as a symbol, a categorizing tool, and a key element of identity construction. They contended that food not only shapes perceptions of the world but also defines social structures by organizing individuals and events [10,11]. These dynamics unfold through routine activities, with eating and drinking serving as fundamental components [1]. Ancestral rituals and offerings, particularly during annual festivals, are of paramount importance in the region. As a long-standing and essential ritual offering, Yao Chicken ranks just below the "three sacrificial animals" in significance. During these festive occasions, families prepare various types of Yao Chicken, as prayers for the protection of their ancestors and deities. The making of Yao Chicken and the tradition of ancestor worship symbolize the continuation of family lineage, preserving ancestral heritage while also acting as a unifying force within the family. As a culinary symbol, Yao Chicken carries the collective consciousness of the Hakka people, passed down through generations.

Anthropological studies of food have traditionally examined its role within social groups, particularly its associations with the sacred and the divine. Although this research has deepened understandings of social differentiation through food, the notion of "identity" remained a secondary focus. In general, food studies during the 1970s prioritized topics such as famine, poverty, food production and consumption, health effects, social stratification, and detailed accounts of feasting rituals [2]. The culture surrounding "Yao Chicken" in the Meizhou region has a history spanning over a century and remains widely practiced today. During festivals or family reunions, families gather under the guidance

of experienced elders to handcraft clay bricks, constructing a kiln-like structure approximately the height of a person. The marinated whole chicken is then placed inside, and the heat from the earth mound and charcoal embers slowly cooks the chicken. While the dish itself is significant, the true cultural value of Yao Chicken lies in the ritual of constructing the "Yao Chicken". The experience, rooted in family cooperation, far outweighs the culinary enjoyment [7]. Building the kiln requires the collective effort of the entire family, shaping the clay and determining the points of force, symbolizing familial unity. Each piece of clay used in the construction embodies the strength and solidarity of the family, making the ritual an expression of communal bonds.

### **5. The Cultural Symbolic Identity in the Signifier Texts of "Yao Chicken"**

Cultural semiotics suggests that the interpretation of cultural symbols is dependent on the specific cultural context in which they are situated. There is no inherent or natural relationship between a symbol and its meaning; rather, meaning is shaped through the conventions and practices established by the cultural community to which the symbol belongs. The recognition and transmission of cultural symbols are pivotal in determining their function and significance. When the bonds of recognition within a cultural group are severed, the connection between the symbol and its meaning dissolves, and the symbol loses its intended cultural significance. This undermines the cultural identity of the community and threatens the survival of its traditions.

Cultural identity within an ethnic group is constructed through the recognition and acceptance of cultural symbols. These symbols serve as tools for cognition, connection, and memory, helping individuals and groups define their sense of belonging. Cultural identity encompasses both the personal recognition of selfhood and the collective sense of belonging to a larger community [12]. For the Hakka people, this identity is rooted in cultural symbols such as food, which are central to how they define themselves and relate to their heritage. Hakka cuisine, deeply embedded in history, is a vital expression of this cultural identity.

As significant visual and gustatory symbols within the Hakka cultural system, "Yao Chicken" carries the memories and traditions of Hakka cultural practices. Whether through the preparation or consumption of these dishes, they serve as both carriers and expressions of cultural values, symbolizing the spiritual home and emotional ties of the Hakka people. In the broader context of Hakka culture, these dishes represent specific cultural content, engage with their cultural meanings, and highlight the characteristics of Hakka identity. Through these culinary symbols, the essence of Hakka culture is passed down to future generations, enriching their cultural memory and deepening their sense of identity. This process not only strengthens recognition of Hakka culture but also facilitates its ongoing transmission, ensuring the continuity of Hakka heritage.

It is crucial to first explore the interconnectedness of collective identity, food, and collective protest. As a fundamental aspect of civilization, food carries complex and multilayered meanings. Its role in shaping identity extends across various social categories, including family, community, ethnicity, class, religion, and region, embedding itself deeply in both individual and collective consciousness [13]. Whether in the form of minimally processed staples like wheat and cooking oil, mass-produced goods such as Coca-Cola or Gerber baby food, or handmade specialties like tamales and holiday cookies, food holds profound symbolic and emotional significance. This meaning persists regardless of one's direct involvement in food production — whether as a farmer, processor, or solely as a consumer, as seen in tea-drinking traditions in Europe and North America.

The process by which certain foods gain distinctive cultural significance varies considerably. Elements such as preparation techniques, enduring traditions, characteristic flavor profiles, notions of purity, religious or political symbolism, and associations with wealth or status all shape these meanings. When access to these culturally meaningful

foods is restricted — whether due to government policies or market forces — such limitations can trigger collective resistance. This dynamic occurs not only within relatively insular communities but also across the increasingly interconnected global landscape of the twenty-first century.

As the cultural geographers Bell and Valentine explain: Other groups in motion — migrants, refugees, guest workers, and exiles — also contribute to reshaping the global cultural landscape, including culinary culture [14]. Similarly, other transnational cultural flows — such as technology, media, finance, and ideologies — intersect in complex and disjunctive ways, creating the “uncertain landscapes” or “imagined worlds” characteristic of contemporary globalization. Commodities, including food, play a powerful role in these imagined worlds: as carriers of globalization’s many symbols, they are routinely used to articulate both place and movement — and through them, identity and belonging [13].

## **6. The Communicative Function of Cultural Symbols on the Dining Table**

Communication involves the exchange of information, emotional expression, and coordination of opinions among individuals. Cultural symbols play a crucial role in facilitating this communication by helping people understand the intrinsic meanings of a particular ethnicity or group. They serve as tools for interaction, cooperation, and the expression of shared cultural values. In the Hakka community, the communicative function of cultural symbols is central to building social cohesion. Effective communication relies on symbols that resonate with the group, such as regional identity markers, dialects, eating habits, and social etiquette.

As traditional Hakka dishes, “Yao Chicken” is key components of the Hakka dining experience. The saying “food is the heaven of the people” underscores the significance of food in social interactions. Throughout history, many social dealings and interpersonal exchanges have been closely tied to dining and drinking rituals. Shared culinary customs, with their distinct cultural markers, foster emotional connections, reduce communication barriers, and promote mutual understanding within the group. These culinary practices enable individuals to find common ground while respecting differences, leading to consensus on behaviors and values.

Culinary cultural symbols, such as those embodied in “Yao Chicken” play an essential mediating role in communication and social interaction. The customs of the Hakka people reflect their strong sense of community, characterized by hospitality, warmth, and optimism [15]. Hakka communities are known for their close interpersonal ties, mutual assistance, and cooperative spirit. Compared to other ethnic groups, the Hakka have a pronounced sense of ethnic identity, marked by strong internal cohesion and harmonious relationships. While united and tolerant within their group, they remain open to communication and cooperation with others, striving for common ground while embracing diversity.

Mei County, located in the heart of the Hakka diaspora in Guangdong, exemplifies the blending of traditional Hakka culture with modern influences. The region’s strong economic foundation, fueled by its large population of overseas Chinese, reflects this cultural fusion. Although the area may lack industrial might, the high number of returnees fosters a dynamic interchange between Eastern and Western cultural elements. The return of the diaspora not only preserves traditional Hakka cultural values but also integrates them with modern Western ideologies, creating an open and inclusive social atmosphere that encourages cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration.

The traditional customs and spiritual cultural symbols of the Hakka people serve as a profound “family bond” that unites the community [15]. This bond is crucial for the preservation and promotion of both Chinese and Hakka cultural values, providing the spiritual foundation for the prosperity and development of the Hakka region. It is rooted in ethical principles and emotional connections, deeply warmth, and optimism ingrained

in Hakka moral values. This "family bond" anchors key moral standards such as integrity, filial piety, gratitude, and kindness, all of which are nurtured through emotional relationships grounded in kinship and familial ties.

In a tribal community, adherence to shared cultural symbols helps integrate diverse forces, enhancing group cohesion and solidifying the psychological and familial foundations of the community. For the Hakka people, who place great value on "human warmth" this warmth permeates all aspects of life. A profound sense of familial affection, mutual respect, and attachment to one's hometown welcomes anyone into a Hakka household. This sentiment extends to their reverence for ancestors, interpersonal relationships, and patriotic devotion.

"Yao Chicken" holds an esteemed place in Hakka sacrificial rituals, symbolizing both ancestral veneration and the continuity of family traditions. However, with the rapid development of modern society, the prominence of traditional customs has gradually diminished, and the "sense of ritual" associated with these practices has lessened. Rituals such as New Year ancestor worship and temple ceremonies have been simplified over time. Despite this, the preparation of "Yao Chicken" provides opportunities for the revival of local traditions. In the process of constructing the clay oven for "Yao Chicken" every brick and lump of earth becomes a symbol of familial love and unity among the Hakka people. The flames of the oven, in turn, represent family harmony, the flourishing of descendants, and the continuity of ancestral customs. The stone oven used to prepare "Yao Chicken" is not merely a culinary tool but a testament to the ingenious combination of craftsmanship and architectural aesthetics, preserving the wisdom of the Hakka people across generations.

## 7. Conclusion

The cultural symbols embodied in "Yao Chicken" are integral to Hakka culture, serving essential functions in identification, mediation, integration and communication. These symbols carry deep significance in the construction of Hakka traditional culture, fostering emotional bonds and supporting the transmission of cultural heritage. Therefore, common characteristics of peoples' diet, preferences, taboos and so on are embedded within. Thus, food plays a crucial role in shaping the collective identity of a group, community, or nation. Moreover, the relationship between food and identity is not a straightforward matter of recognition but rather a dynamic and dialectical process involving adaptation, rejection, and reinterpretation.

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