

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND GLOCALIZATION—A CASE STUDY OF THAI RESTAURANTS IN KUNMING

Zhouyan Yin* and Narong Ardsmiti

Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

***Corresponding author:**
Zhouyan Yin
yinzhoutai@163.com

Received: 25 January 2024

Revised: 7 April 2024

Accepted: 15 April 2024

Published: 1 August 2024

Citation:

Yin, Z., & Ardsmiti, N. (2024).
Cultural identity and
glocalization—A case study of
Thai restaurants in Kunming.
*Humanities, Arts and Social
Sciences Studies*, 24(2),
364–379.

This article focuses on Thai restaurants in Kunming and discusses whether Thai food is adapted to the local taste. It also investigates the values and meaning of Thai food for different consumer groups. The study adopts an ethnographic approach and uses fieldwork and participant observation to examine the complex processes of cultural adaptation, culinary negotiations, and the formation of cultural bonds within this gastronomic landscape. This study reveals the multifaceted facets of Thai cuisine, encompassing ecological dimensions, distinctive gastronomic practices, and cultural customs rooted in Thailand. It explores the transnational mobility of Thai cuisine, tracing its journey across borders and its subsequent glocalization in Kunming's culinary milieu. The study looks at the nuanced strategies deployed by Thai culinary practitioners to integrate authentic Thai ingredients while simultaneously responding to local tastes and preferences. An important aspect of this study is to examine the diverse spectrum of diners visiting Thai restaurants in Kunming. By analyzing the different perceptions and culinary preferences of Chinese and Thai diners, the study unravels the complex ways in which Thai cuisine negotiates authenticity and local resonance. The delicate balance between authenticity and glocalization is proving to be a key strategy for Thai restaurants to maintain their uniqueness while gaining local acceptance. In conclusion, this ethnography sheds light on the vibrant tapestry of cultural identity and glocalization in the context of Thai restaurants in Kunming. Through an in-depth examination of the interaction between Thai cuisine, the community, and the local environment, this study contributes a deeper insight into the intricately complex dynamics that shape the culinary landscape and cultural interactions in Kunming.

Keywords: Thai cuisine; transnational mobility; glocalization; cultural identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The exponential increase in the world's population has led to a greater need for food. The complex cycle of food production, processing, and consumption plays a role in society and culture at various levels, including political, economic, and societal. It also plays a role in physiological nutrition. The study of food culture is critical to promoting harmonious inter-societal understanding, as the diverse fabric of food culture now plays a critical role in shaping intercultural conversations. In this context, Thai culinary culture is a strong

medium for Thailand to showcase its identity on the international stage. According to Roman and Russell (2009), Thai cuisine, which stands out in Southeast Asia for its fusion of numerous flavors from other cuisines, has evolved as one of the most alluring culinary styles in the world. Thai cuisine places great emphasis on delicacy, accuracy, and the use of unique ingredients. This culinary heritage has achieved international recognition and a well-deserved reputation as one of the best cuisines in the world (Roman & Russell, 2009; Bahri et al., 2024; Sharma & Wattana, 2024). As a result, Thai restaurants can now be found in almost every country, corroborating the cuisine's broad appeal.

Food as a fundamental human necessity, extends beyond its nutritional function and encompasses a rich tapestry of cultural and symbolic meanings in different societies. Anthropological investigations into the interaction between food and culture have a long history. Early works such as Taylor's "Primitive Culture" and Radcliffe-Brown's "The Andaman Islanders" explore dietary habits and food-related taboos among various tribes. These discussions highlighted the inherent symbolism of food practices in the fabric of cultural identity and spiritual beliefs (Tylor, 1877; Leach, 1971; Goldschmidt, 2000; Falzon, 2000; Radcliffe-Brown, 2004).

In the contemporary context, the field of food anthropology has evolved and become a focus for the study of not only dietary habits but also the intricate intersections of cultural identity and globalization. Scholars such as Harris and Lévi-Strauss contributed to the founding of modern food anthropology, with Harris' materialistic approach linking food choices to socio-economic factors and Lévi-Strauss's idealist perspective unveiling cognitive structures through dualistic classifications of foods (Jenkins, 1979; Harris, 1998, 2001; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Ray & Srinivas, 2012; Hitch, 2015; Lévi-Strauss, 2012).

Furthermore, the domains of identity and consumption have become increasingly entwined, leading researchers to explore how food consumption contributes to the construction and negotiation of cultural identities. Scholars such as Mintz examined the political-economic dimensions of food, revealing how consumables like sugar shape power dynamics and colonial relationships (Mintz, 1985). This intersection of food and identity came to the fore in the 1990s as globalization brought about the assimilation of Western fast food into East Asian cultures (Watson, 2006; Cwiartka & Walraven, 2013; Ullah & Ming Yit Ho, 2021).

While these discussions have illuminated the broader meaning of food in cultural contexts, the specific investigation of the role of food in cultural identity and localization in the context of Thai restaurants in Kunming remains relatively unexplored. The growing presence of Thai restaurants in Kunming and the convergence of Thai and local Chinese consumers offers a unique perspective to examine the intricate dynamics of cultural adaptation, culinary negotiation, and the formation of cultural bonds within gastronomic spaces.

The China–Laos Kunming–Vientiane Railway started operation on December 3, 2021 (Ermylina, 2023). In 2021, Laos began to build a strong partnership between China and Southeast Asia. The Kunming–Bangkok highway is scheduled to open in 2026, and Kunming's future urban development will focus on strengthening ties with Thailand. Many Thai visitors travel to Kunming every year for tourism purposes, and many foreign students come to Kunming to learn Chinese and technical skills. International commodity fairs are frequently held in Kunming as well. Kunming maintains close business and cultural exchanges with Thailand thanks to precise, practical transportation infrastructure and the two countries' long-standing friendship.

In this study, we embark on an ethnographic journey to unravel the complex interplay between cultural identity and localization in Thai restaurants in Kunming. This research aims to shed light on how Thai cuisine serves as a conduit for transcultural encounters, satisfying the Kunming Thai community's longing for connections to home while satisfying the curiosity and fascination of local diners in search of new culinary experiences. Using anthropological methods, we aim to explore the multifaceted dimensions of Thai cuisine, encompassing ecological, gastronomic, and cultural aspects. By examining the transnational mobility of Thai cuisine and its subsequent localization in Kunming's culinary milieu, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of how culinary practices reflect and shape cultural interactions (Saichan, 2004; Zhenming, 2008; Glassman, 2010; Wang et al., 2020).

With this investigation, we seek to fill the gaps in current research by highlighting the nuanced strategies employed by Thai culinary practitioners to overcome the challenges of integrating authentic Thai ingredients while catering to local tastes and preferences. Furthermore, we aim to unravel the dynamics of various local and Thai restaurant groups that Kunming's Thai restaurants and the intricate methods by which Thai cuisine negotiates authenticity and local resonance. Ultimately, we expect our study to contribute to the broader discourse on cultural identity, culinary adaptation, and localization and promote insights into the complicated dynamics that shape the culinary landscape in the context of Thai restaurants in Kunming.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The research methodology used in this study is a mixed methodology that includes qualitative and quantitative research. For the qualitative approach, 15 Thai restaurants in the Kunming city area were selected

as research subjects. A total of 20 people were interviewed including 15 restaurant owners or managers and 5 Thai chefs. For the quantitative approach, 40 questionnaires were distributed to two selected restaurants: Tai Shuang Jin (THAI ZAPVER GOLD) Thai Restaurant and Clouds 18 Restaurant. In addition, 40 Chinese guests who dined at the restaurants completed the questionnaire.

2.1 Research methods

This section outlines the methodological framework used to conduct an in-depth ethnographic exploration into the complex interplay of cultural identity and localization within Thai restaurants in Kunming. The study is based on a combination of participant observation and questionnaire survey as primary research methods, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the culinary landscape and its dynamics.

2.1.1 Participant observation and interviews

Participant observation serves as the cornerstone of ethnographic research, allowing the researchers to immerse themselves within the research context and glean insights from direct engagement with participants (Hammersley, 2017). In this study, the Thai restaurants in Kunming City, Yunnan province, were selected as the study site. The 15 Thai restaurants are mainly located in the Wuhua, Panlong, Xishan, Guandu and Chenggong districts. The researchers engaged in participant observation by dining at these establishments, and interacting with restaurant staff, guests, and other diners. This immersive approach enabled a deeper understanding of the culinary practices, social interactions, and cultural nuances in the Thai restaurant environment.

At the same time, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including Thai restaurant owners, chefs, employees, and customers. These interviews enabled the collection of comprehensive narratives and perspectives and illuminated various aspects such as culinary practices, menu selection, cultural adaptation, and customer preferences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Flick, 2009). By engaging in face-to-face interviews, valuable qualitative data was collected, capturing the intricacies of cultural negotiation and identity formation.

The author collected extensive primary data through participant observation and interviews. The writing of the article is based on the systematic organization and analysis of these primary materials.

2.1.2 Questionnaire survey

To complement the qualitative insights gained through participant observation and interviews, a questionnaire survey (Martin, 2005) was designed and administered to a broader range of Thai restaurant customers. This quantitative approach aimed to capture broader trends, preferences, and opinions of diners regarding Thai cuisine and its cultural significance. The questionnaire encompassed aspects such as demographic information, dining frequency, favorite dishes, and perceptions of authenticity and adaptation. Quantitative data was collected using a structured questionnaire enabling statistical analysis and the identification of patterns and trends among the surveyed population.

Forty questionnaires were distributed to two selected restaurants. The selection process prioritized feasibility and sought managerial approval. The criteria included selecting small to medium-sized restaurants located in busy commercial or residential areas, with moderate prices for the average consumer. Preference was given to restaurants with a large number of genuine reviews on platforms such as Dianping, have a steady flow of daily customers, and a variety of popular Thai dishes. The restaurants should also have opening hours that cover peak dining times and offer a relaxed atmosphere that encourages diners to participate in the survey. In the end, Tai Shuang Jin (Thai Zapver Gold) Thai Restaurant and Clouds 18 Restaurant were selected.

The combination of participant observation and questionnaire survey enables a comprehensive methodological approach that enables a multi-faceted examination of the research topic. Participant observation provides a deep, context-rich understanding of the Thai restaurant environment, while interviews enable a nuanced understanding of individual experiences and perspectives. The questionnaire survey complements these qualitative findings by providing quantitative data, thereby strengthening the overall analysis and contributing to a holistic understanding of the culinary landscape.

In conclusion, the methodological approach of this study aligns with the principles of ethnographic research by employing participant observation and interviews to gain qualitative insights and using a questionnaire survey to collect quantitative data. This dual-pronged approach is instrumental in uncovering the intricate interplay of cultural identity and localization in Thai restaurants in Kunming.

2.2 Fieldwork sites

The field site for this study is in Kunming, Yunnan province, China. Yunnan is located in the southwestern border region of China and borders Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos. Although Yunnan does not directly border Thailand, it has historically served as a significant gateway for China-Thailand interaction.

Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, lies in the center of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and functions as a political, economic, and cultural center. With an urban area of 21,000 square kilometers, Kunming has a population of approximately 6.95 million people.

This research focuses on Thai restaurants in Kunming. Currently, Kunming's urban landscape is dotted with numerous Thai restaurants of varying sizes. A search for “泰餐厅” (Thai restaurant) on Baidu Maps shows dozens of locations, mostly concentrated in central areas such as Wuhua and Panlong, with smaller clusters in areas such as Xishan and Chenggong districts. Through research, it was found that the owners and chefs of these Thai restaurants are predominantly from Thailand, while some are operated by Chinese. These Thai restaurants can generally be categorized into three types: those operated by Thai owners with Thai chefs, those operated by Chinese owners with Thai chefs, and those operated by Chinese owners with Chinese chefs. Given the limitations of conducting in-depth interviews with all restaurants and the need to ensure comprehensive representation, this study selected various types of Thai restaurants for investigation.

2.2.1 Thai-owned restaurants with Thai chefs

“Clouds 18” (云瑞十八): Located near the Anti-Japanese War Memorial in Wuhua district, this restaurant is run by a Thai owner, Ah Qing¹. It features a Thai chef named Nicky. Ah Qing came to Kunming in 1999 and initially worked for a Chinese Thai logistics company. Due to her passion for cuisine, she opened the “Riyuewan Thai Restaurant” in 2006, which closed in 2016 for operational reasons. In 2019, she founded “Clouds 18” as a Thai restaurant. The restaurant is spread over three floors, exudes a Thai ambiance, and offers a wide range of dishes at a relatively high price level.

“Karn Chonburi Thai Restaurant” (敢·春武里泰国小餐馆): Located in Banzhu Cuiguan, Wuhua district, is jointly owned by two Thais, Pob and Ben, and two Chinese friends. Pob, a 26-year-old woman from Chonburi, eastern Thailand, studied Chinese International Education at Yunnan Normal University. Ben, 29 years old, comes from Chiang Mai, Thailand, and studied Chinese International Education at Kunming University of Science and Technology. The restaurant specializes in multiple simple Thai food offerings.

2.2.2 Chinese-owned restaurants with Thai chefs

“Chim Thai Restaurant” at Kunming Holiday Inn Hotel: Located on Dongfeng East Road in Panlong district, is managed by Kunming Center Hotel and was founded in 2014. Thai chef P is from Mahasarakham province in northeastern Thailand and has been in China since 2006. He was originally invited by the owner of Riyuewan Restaurant to co-manage a Thai restaurant.

“Zha Du Zha Hot Pot Restaurant” (炸嘟嘟泰式火锅店): Located in Wangqiying, Panlong district, this restaurant opened in 2020. The restaurant owner, who previously ran a travel agency in Jinghong, had to switch to the restaurant business due to the pandemic's impact on cross-border tourism. The restaurant primarily offers Thai-style hot pots.

2.2.3 Chinese-owned restaurants with Chinese chefs

“Thai Lai” (泰莱): Thai Lai was founded in 2004 and is located on Ru'an Street in Wuhua district. The restaurant offers a selection of Thai dishes with a focus on Chiang Mai cuisine.

“Dudu Thai Restaurant” (笃笃泰餐厅): Founded in 2020, Dudu Thai Restaurant is located on Dianmian Avenue in Wuhua district. Run by a young couple with a passion for Thai culture and cuisine, the restaurant started as a takeaway business before expanding into a restaurant.

These selected restaurants offer a nuanced representation of Thai cuisine's presence and localization in Kunming's gastronomic scene, highlighting the multifaceted dynamics of ownership, culinary expertise, and cultural adaptation.

2.3 Materials and data analysis

The research used a combination of participant observation, interviews, and questionnaire surveys to collect and analyze data. These methods were chosen to ensure a comprehensive investigation of the cultural dynamics and localization processes in Thai restaurants in Kunming.

2.3.1 Participant observation and interviews

Participant observation served as a crucial method for gathering information during fieldwork. The researcher visited nearly ten Thai restaurants mentioned in the study and conducted participant observations during dining experiences. This approach facilitated interactions with restaurant owners, staff, and Thai and local Chinese customers, and provided a first-hand understanding of the restaurant environment and interactions.

¹ All names mentioned here are pseudonym.

Interviews were conducted with restaurant owners, chefs, and customers to gain in-depth insights into various aspects of the restaurants, including their origins, cultural practices, and customers' perspectives. In particular, the act of eating itself became a means of establishing contact and conducting interviews. By introducing restaurant owners, contacts were made with other Thai restaurant owners, Thai chefs, and a diverse clientele.

In some cases, the researchers also worked in restaurants, facilitating interaction with customers and procuring primary materials. Interviews with customers provided valuable insights into their food choices, preferences, and perceptions of Thai cuisine.

2.3.2 Questionnaire surveys

To collect information about the different categories of guests visiting Thai restaurants, a structured questionnaire survey was conducted. The survey aimed to understand the demographic profiles of customers, their motivations for visiting Thai restaurants, and their perceptions of Thai cuisine.

The "Consumer Demographic Survey for Thai Restaurant Patrons in Kunming" questionnaire was designed and distributed among restaurant patrons. The responses were then statistically evaluated to gain insights into the diversity of customers and their motivations.

2.3.3 Data analysis

Data collected through participant observation, interviews, and questionnaire surveys were subjected to qualitative and quantitative analyses. Qualitative analysis (Gibbs, 2014) aimed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and cultural nuances in the observations and interviews. The transcripts were coded to categorize key themes, and these codes were used to analyze and interpret the data.

Quantitative analysis was applied to the questionnaire survey data to generate statistical insights into customer demographics, preferences, and perceptions. This approach provided a comprehensive overview of the different groups of guests visiting Thai restaurants in Kunming.

By using a combination of these methods and conducting an in-depth analysis of the data collected, this study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics of cultural identity and localization in Thai restaurants in Kunming. The data-driven insights gained will contribute to a deeper comprehension of how Thai cuisine interacts with local tastes and adapts to Kunming's culinary landscape.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Globalization of Thai cuisine and Kunming's Thai restaurants

3.1.1 Globalization of Thai cuisine and the "World Kitchen" program

In the late 1990s, Thailand embarked on a systematic global promotion of its native culinary heritage. This initiative was formalized in 1996 with the establishment of the National Food Institute of Thailand and the launch of the "World Kitchen Project." A special organization, the "Thai World Kitchen Center" was established with the main mission of organizing various activities under the umbrella of "World Kitchen". These efforts aimed to globally propagate and market Thai cuisine worldwide and make it a world-class gastronomic experience. Notably, Malaysian scholar Foong Kiu Ling emphasized Thailand's pioneering role in systematically disseminating Thai culinary culture on a global scale. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Thai restaurants outside Thailand increased from 500 to 5,000—an impressive tenfold increase (Du, 2008). In 2003, there were an estimated 3,000 Thai restaurants in the United States alone, and in 2005 the global number, excluding in Thailand, rose to 7,000 (Auapinyakul & Deebhijarn, 2019). This expansive venture gained momentum as various Thai governmental departments also embraced the cause. The Ministry of Education took responsibility for talent development and introduced learning programs for chefs aimed at mastering the required number of dishes and acquiring cultural and linguistic competencies specific to their host countries. To encourage Thai nationals to open restaurants abroad, the Bank of Thailand facilitated low-interest loans for entrepreneurs, and the Ministry of Commerce formulated policies to facilitate the export of Thai food products. The Thai government also facilitated collaborations between foreign individuals interested in running Thai restaurants and local partners in Thailand and encouraged Thai restaurants abroad to import necessary equipment and utensils from the home country (Du, 2008). A clear success story of this promotional campaign is the "Blue Elephant" restaurant. With twelve branches worldwide in 2008, this restaurant symbolizes the Thai government's strategic focus on this themed restaurant. Its name alludes to the revered color of the Thai royal family and the auspicious elephant—a treasured national symbol. The restaurant's ambiance, decor, culinary offerings, and service standards meticulously adhere to Thailand's cultural standards (Humphrey, 2002; Varanyanond, 2013; Malisuwan & Radenahmad, 2021; Roongsangjun, 2023).

3.1.2 Development of Thai restaurants in Kunming

3.1.2.1 *Introducing Thai flavors by Thai nationals*

The introduction of Thai cuisine to Kunming's culinary landscape dates back to the 1990s. The first Thai restaurant "Man Thai" was opened in 1993 in the Kunming Holiday Inn Hotel. It is noteworthy that one of the hotel's shareholders was a Thai citizen, thus opening Kunming's first Thai restaurant. "Man Thai" on the 18th floor of the Holiday Inn Hotel, pioneered the presence of Thai cuisine in Kunming. Given the novelty and exclusivity of the offering combined with the strategic location, dining at "Man Thai" became a prestigious experience that satisfied the desires of both wealthy guests and the general public.

In the early 2000s, as China's economic landscape evolved, international travel became a fashionable pursuit. Given Southeast Asia's cultural allure and its proximity to Yunnan province, countries such as Thailand gained prominence as favored travel destinations, leading to a surge in Thai culinary exploration. As cross-border interactions intensified, some Thai nationals, like Ah Qing, settled in China. In 2006, Ah Qing, founded "Ri Yue Wan Thai Restaurant" near Kunming World Expo Garden under the leadership of her brother-in-law, Chef P, who previously had experience as a Thai chef in the Netherlands. He aligned his career prospects with Thailand's "World Kitchen" initiative. Their restaurant, catering to upscale clientele reflected an upscale approach to Thai cuisine.

3.1.2.2 *Indigenous Thai restaurants managed by locals*

In the 21st century, in addition to establishments founded by Thai nationals, local entrepreneurs also recognized the potential and began opening Thai restaurants in downtown Kunming. One such establishment, "Yao Hua Li Thai Restaurant" was established in 2008. The owner, a Chinese citizen, transitioned from a career as a tour guide to starting a Thai restaurant. He used his familiarity with Thai culture and cuisine to introduce authentic Thai flavors to Kunming and even hired Thai chefs to ensure culinary authenticity.

In 2003, "Tai Lai Thai Restaurant" founded by Huang ChenHao, entered the Kunming culinary scene. After training as an apprentice and later as a chef specializing in Thai cuisine at the Holiday Inn Hotel, Huang ChenHao took the plunge to open his Thai restaurant on Ruanwai Street. Originally a modest establishment with just three tables, its popularity quickly grew due to its competitive prices and culinary excellence. Currently, "Tai Lai Thai Restaurant" has expanded its capacity to approximately 50 tables, but demand often requires queues, which proves the restaurant's culinary appeal.

Nowadays, there are a variety of Thai restaurants on the streets of Kunming, located both in shopping malls, such as "City Garden Thai Hotpot", "Jiao Ye", "Thai Shuang Jin", and "Ji Yu Thai Hotpot", as well as along the shopping malls, avenues and alleys of the city, such as "Clouds 18" and "Chonburi". Through price adjustments, Thai cuisine has moved away from its mere association with fine dining and made its flavors accessible to a wider range of consumers.

In conclusion, the globalization of Thai cuisine, exemplified by Thailand's "World Kitchen" program, has contributed significantly to the spread of Thai restaurants worldwide, a trend that is also reflected in Kunming. The evolution of the Thai culinary presence in Kunming demonstrates the interplay between cultural identity, local entrepreneurship, and consumer preferences. As Thai cuisine continues to thrive and diversify in Kunming, its development is linked to broader international culinary currents and local dynamics.

3.2 Transnational mobility of Thai culinary practitioners and ingredients

3.2.1 Transnational mobility of Thai culinary practitioners and cultural adaptation

3.2.1.1 *Historical transnational mobility between China and Thailand*

The phenomenon of transnational mobility between Yunnan and Thailand dates back to ancient times, possibly even preceding the Tang Dynasty. During the Yuan and Ming dynasties, extensive trade with caravan traders took place through the regions of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and neighboring countries, which facilitated the trade of goods and led to some settlers establishing residence in these areas. In the 20th century, colonial powers such as Great Britain and France occupied parts of Southeast Asian countries and built railways and roads. This diversification of transportation modes transformed trade patterns for Yunnan. Additionally, there were significant population movements across the southwestern border regions to Thailand in the 1950s (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1986). These migrants included Chinese Nationalist Army soldiers who initially gathered in northern Myanmar and funded the "Anti-Communist and Anti-Russian University" to continue military training. However, there were concerns about their identity and their links to Myanmar insurgent forces, which led Myanmar to appeal to the United Nations in 1953 for the withdrawal of the Nationalist troops from its territory. Many of these soldiers were forced to disperse and eventually arrived in northern Thailand (Ruangsri & Chetpatanavanich, 2018). At that time, some individuals left China due to the land reforms during the liberation of Yunnan, because their family backgrounds were classified as wealthy

farmers or landowners. According to the policies at that time, their land and property were confiscated, and they faced severe punishments. To avoid punishment, many of them left China and moved to northern Thailand. By the 1970s, transnational mobility between China and Thailand had become bidirectional (Chang, 2009). While some border residents returned as domestic politics stabilized, others used family connections to seek opportunities in neighboring countries such as Thailand. In the 21st century, China's improved economic and cultural development, coupled with increasing state power, led to a greater influx of Thai nationals into China, particularly as workers, traders, and students. According to statistics released by the Ministry of Education in 2018 (Moe.Gov.Cn., 2019), Thailand became the second-largest source of international students studying in China. A significant proportion of these Thai students chose Yunnan as their study destination (Lin & Kingminghae, 2017). The closely intertwined mobility of people between China and Thailand indirectly brought Thai cuisine to China. As a result, the popularity of Thai culinary culture in China began to rise in the early 21st century, leading to the emergence of Thai restaurant owners and chefs from Thailand in cities such as Kunming.

3.2.1.2 Emergence of Thai culinary practitioners in Kunming and cultural adaptation

As mentioned, Ah Qing was the first Thai woman to open a Thai restaurant in Kunming. She opened her first restaurant, "Ri Yue Wan," in 2006. To ensure the authenticity of the dishes served, Ah Qing hired a chef from Thailand. Recognizing the rapid development of the Thai cuisine market in China, more Thai individuals ventured into the Thai restaurant scene in Kunming. In this study, there are two Thai owners of Thai restaurants in Kunming: Ah Qing from "Clouds 18 Thai Restaurant" and Pob from "Chunwuli Thai Restaurant". In addition, six Thai chefs work in various restaurants, including "Clouds 18 Thai Restaurant", "Tai Shuang Jin Thai Restaurant", "Yao Hua Li Thai Cuisine Restaurant", "Chim Thai Restaurant" in Kunming Center Holiday Hotel, and "Zha Du Zha Thai Hotpot Restaurant". Pob, a 26-year-old girl from Chonburi, eastern Thailand, came to Kunming in 2012 to study Chinese international education at Yunnan Normal University. From a young age, she expressed a desire to live in another country, which led to her staying in Kunming after graduating in 2016. Initially, she ran a bar with her friends, but due to the unprofitable business, she changed her focus. She mentioned that she missed the Thai cuisine of her hometown while studying and pointed out the relatively high prices of Thai restaurants in Kunming. Inspired by these factors, she decided to open an affordable Thai restaurant to serve Thai students in Kunming. Over the years, most Thai culinary practitioners in Kunming, like Phai, have acquired conversational skills in Chinese to meet daily communication needs. Despite initial language barriers, they managed to communicate with colleagues through gestures and gradually learned the essential culinary vocabulary, which enabled them to prepare dishes efficiently. The remarkable adaptability of these Thai individuals facilitated their integration into Kunming's culinary scene and, even enabled them to converse with curious customers who wanted to speak with the restaurant's Thai staff.

3.2.2 Ingredients: from transnational procurement to local production

3.2.2.1 Key ingredients in Thai cuisine: spices and seasonings

The distinctive flavors of Thai cuisine are largely due to the unique selection of spices and seasonings, including the following:

Lemongrass: A fragrant herb with a lemony aroma, used in dishes such as Tom Yum soup and other Thai soups.

Makrut lime: A tropical fruit, the leaves of which add a citrusy tang to various Thai dishes.

Basil Leaves: Essential in Thai cuisine, adding a unique aroma to dishes, particularly meat-based recipes, often used with minced pork or beef.

Galangal: A spice similar to ginger, imparting a distinct spicy-sweet flavor to Thai dishes.

Makrut lime leaves: Different from regular lime leaves, these leaves contribute to the aromatic and sour notes of Thai dishes.

Fingerroot: Also known as *Boesenbergia rotunda* (Krachai in Thai), it adds a slightly spicy and sweet flavor to dishes. It looks similar to ginger, but has a unique aroma. This herb is an essential seasoning in Thai cuisine, especially in soups.

Fish sauce: Made from fermented fish, it is a key ingredient in most Thai dishes, providing a savory and salty taste.

3.2.2.2 Ingredient procurement: from transnational sourcing to domestic production

A variety of ingredients are required to prepare Thai cuisine, including seafood, meat products, fruits, and vegetables. While these key ingredients are readily available in Chinese markets, some unique Thai seasonings were initially scarce. In the late 20th century, when Thai cuisine was introduced to Kunming, these particular spices were sourced from Thailand due to their scarcity in local markets. However, the light nature of these dry spices made them convenient to import and supply Thai restaurants in Kunming. As bilateral

economic cooperation between China and Thailand has intensified in the 21st century, Thai products, including culinary ingredients, have begun to appear in Yunnan's markets. In particular, the establishment of Thai commodity centers in Kunming, such as the Yunfang Southeast Asian Mall and the Luo Si Wan Thai Commodity Pavilion. These centers offer a range of Thai products, including fruits, snacks, and condiments. Despite the thriving market for Thai ingredients, some Thai restaurant owners have recognized the opportunity for profit through online platforms. Nowadays, various online stores on platforms like Taobao sell an extensive selection of Thai culinary ingredients, often bundled together for convenience. Notably, many of these ingredients are now produced domestically in China, reducing costs associated with international imports. While certain imported ingredients such as fish sauce and coconut milk are still sought from Thailand, the majority of herbs and spices are increasingly grown and sourced in China, predominantly in provinces such as Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan. This shift toward domestic production has allowed Thai cuisine to develop and thrive in Kunming, supporting the localization and sustainability of Thai restaurants in the region. Thais like Wang MeiLi, who has been based in Kunming for almost a decade, have also recognized the convenience and cost-effectiveness of online platforms for sourcing Thai ingredients.

By examining the historical and contemporary dynamics of Thai culinary practitioners and ingredient sourcing in Kunming, this study sheds light on the complex interplay of transnational mobility, cultural adaptation, and culinary localization in the field of Thai cuisine. The integration of Thai flavors and culinary techniques into the local dining scene has not only enriched Kunming's culinary landscape but also deepened the cultural exchange between China and Thailand. As culinary practices continue to evolve, both the culinary entrepreneurs and diners of Thai restaurants contribute to the continuous transformation of Kunming's culinary and cultural identity.

3.3 Cultural representation: Thai restaurants as exoticism and cultural identity

3.3.1 Thai restaurants and Thai ambiance

3.3.1.1 *Restaurant names as expressions of Thai culture*

The nomenclature of Thai restaurants often reflects their distinctive features and contains elements consistent with Thai culture. Many restaurant names use the term "Thai" directly, such as "Thai Shuang Jin," "Thai Lai," "Ming Thai Lemon," and "Chim Thai" in the Kunming Holiday Inn Hotel. These names directly convey the type of cuisine the restaurant offers as Thai.

Others give the names with the cultural and geographical significance of Thailand. The restaurant "KARN" takes its name from the Thai language and suggests that you are loved. "Chun Wu Li," which refers to Pob's hometown, Chonburi, in eastern Thailand, adds a personal connection. Another example is "Zha Du Zha," (Chatuchak) named after the well-known Zha Du Zha (Chatuchak) Weekend Market in Bangkok. This market, with over 15,000 stalls, is a must-visit for almost every traveler or resident in Bangkok. The choice of the name "Zha Du Zha" (Chatuchak) is intended to evoke a sense of familiarity and nostalgia among Thai in Kunming or those who have visited Thailand. "Yao Hua Li" (Yaowarat Street) refers to a famous Chinatown in Bangkok known for its commercial and culinary vibrancy.

These restaurant names either explicitly indicate the restaurant's cuisine or evoke a feeling of familiarity and nostalgia, while at the same time displaying distinctive Thai characteristics. An innovative name is a crucial way to attract customers and is a means by which restaurants articulate Thai culture.

3.3.1.2 *Restaurant decor: Visual expression of culture*

The dining environment itself contributes significantly to the appeal of Thai restaurants, leading many establishments in Kunming to adopt a "Thai-fication" approach to both exterior and interior design. Some restaurants embody the atmosphere of a Thai street stall through minimalist décor reminiscent of shops in places like Chiang Mai. These establishments exude a relaxed and casual atmosphere and allow guests to experience the relaxed atmosphere of Thailand.

Alternatively, high-end establishments feature sophisticated décor akin to upscale Thai restaurants. The likes of "Thai Shuang Jin" and "Clouds 18" present fresh and natural aesthetics, decorating the spaces with wrought iron or wooden furniture and floral arrangements. Such restaurants attract younger clients who appreciate both the dining experience and the opportunity to capture scenic moments to share on social media.

Beyond the design aesthetics that incorporate Thai characteristics, many restaurants adorn their spaces with decorations that feature Thai elements. For example, "Chun Wu Li" (Chonburi) features an artistic rendering of its Thai name on the wall. Thai restaurant "BankokEkk" on Yuanxi Road shows photos of Thai dishes and people in traditional Thai clothing when you enter. Likewise, "Du Du Thai Cuisine" immediately showcases its Thai essence, from the "Tuk-Tuk" sign at the entrance to the numerous Thai decorations such as a model of a "Tuk-Tuk" tricycle, Thai currency, and vintage televisions outside. Inside, the South Buddhist style

is reflected through wall paintings, and Thai license plates and photos of the royal family complete the immersive experience.

Additionally, most Thai restaurants play Thai songs, which, along with the naturally soothing tones of the Thai language and the soothing rhythm of the music, contribute to a sense of relaxation and comfort. Although the majority of patrons may not understand the lyrics, the synergy of visual elements and audio cues creates a temporary feeling of being transported to Thailand.

3.3.2 "The Other's" exotic imagery and "the self's" cultural identity

3.3.2.1 Exotic imagery of "The Other" among Chinese diners

To study Chinese guests visiting Thai restaurants, researchers distributed a total of 40 questionnaires at "Tai Shuang Jin (Thai Zapver Gold) Thai Restaurant" and "Clouds 18 Thai Restaurant". The statistical results are as follows:

(1) Gender

Among the 40 diners, there were 29 women, accounting for 72.5% of the total, and 11 men, accounting for 27.5% of the total. Because Thai cuisine primarily uses high-protein, low-fat ingredients and healthy cooking methods, it is more likely to be preferred by female customers (Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007; Chatcharawan et al., 2023).

(2) Age

Although it has been 20 years since Thai cuisine took hold in Kunming, it is still relatively new compared to Chinese cuisine. Since acceptance of new things generally decreases with age, Thai restaurants primarily attract a younger demographic. The table reveals that the age range of Thai restaurant customers is mainly between 21 and 30 years old, with consumers over 30 years old accounting for only 10% of the total. The majority of food consumers in restaurants are about 25 years old. The findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The age of diners in Thai restaurants

Age Range	11–20 years old	21–30 years old	31–40 years old	41–50 years old
Number	7	29	3	1

(3) Income

Although Thai cuisine requires high-quality ingredients, which generally results in higher prices, the increasing number of Thai restaurants and the improved accessibility to raw materials have made Thai cuisine more attractive to the general public. Statistics reveal that 92.5% of customers have a monthly income of less than 10,000 yuan, and 60% of customers have a monthly income of less than 5,000 yuan. The findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Diner income in Thai restaurants

Monthly Income	3,000 yuan and below	3,001–5,000 yuan	5,001–10,000 yuan	10,001–20,000 yuan	More than 20,001 yuan
Number	16	8	13	2	1

(4) Selection of dishes

Based on the data from the questionnaire survey, the three most popular dishes in Thai cuisine are Tom Yum soup, curry rice/seafood curry with rice, and Pad Thai. As the epitome of Thai cuisine, Tom Yum soup always has a place on the menus of Thai restaurants and often serves as the initial introduction to Thai gastronomy. The preference for curries emanates from the observation that, in comparison to Indian or other regional curries, Thai variants offer an expansive spectrum of flavors and frequently incorporate seafood, culminating in a sumptuously intricate taste profile. Conversely, Pad Thai stands as an omnipresent delicacy gracing the streets of Thailand. A significant number of people who have taken a trip to Thailand or visited the night markets have undoubtedly savored this traditional masterpiece, making it a popular choice among the people of Kunming as well.

(5) Exploring Thailand through culinary artistry

Regarding the multiple-choice question "What were the factors influencing your selection of a Thai restaurant?" within the questionnaire, 8 respondents opted for the category "novelty of dishes," while 20 respondents chose "appreciation for the distinctive flavors of Thai cuisine."

A customer at Chun Wu Li (Chonburi) Restaurant remarked during an interview:

"I have never eaten Thai food before, but I often see advertisements about Thai tourism on some WeChat public accounts. I've always wanted to travel to Thailand but haven't had the time yet. I live nearby and have seen this restaurant doing well, sometimes even with queues outside. So, I thought I should come and try what Thai food tastes like." (Interview with a Chinese customer, September 7, 2022)

A customer at Clouds 18 Restaurant responded to the same question:

"We usually eat at home, normal home-cooked meals. Eating out is a change for the taste buds, you know. I searched the internet for different restaurants, and this one seemed to have good reviews, having never tried it before, we decided to give it a try." (Interview with a Chinese customer, September 7, 2022)

It is clear from the statements that eating Thai food is a unique experience for them. In this current era characterized by the rapid dissemination of information, many people remain familiar with famous Thai destinations such as Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai, which are treasured hotspots among tourists alike. Social media platforms are often teeming with information about Thailand and its burgeoning tourism sector. Although a significant portion of the population is limited by financial constraints or time constraints that prevent physical presence in Thailand, Thai restaurants offer a convenient avenue, enabling them to personally immerse in the cultural tapestry of Thailand. In consequence, these Thai restaurants act as intermediaries, allowing Chinese guests to experience and learn about Thailand.

(6) Thai cuisine as a conduit of nostalgia

Another cohort of patrons who frequent Thai restaurants commonly harbor a profound sentimental attachment to Thailand or its culinary cuisine. According to the survey outcomes, 25 respondents had previously travelled to Thailand or resided there for a certain duration, and upon their return to their homeland, found themselves sometimes missing Thai food. Therefore, they periodically patronize Thai restaurants to satisfy their cravings and remember the experiences they enjoyed in Thailand.

According to a customer at the Zha Du Zha (Chatuchak) Thai Hot Pot Restaurant, he has dined there for the second time. He said,

"I lived in Thailand for 8 years, and after returning to China, I especially missed the taste of Thai hot pot. Previously, someone recommended City Garden Hot Pot Restaurant to me, but only those who have lived in Thailand for a long time would know that it's not authentic. This restaurant is an authentic Thai hot pot, even the soup base tastes like the one in Thailand. The three dipping sauces are also very authentic. There are also papaya salad and mixed instant noodles. The restaurant plays Thai songs, full of memories of Thailand." (Interview with a Chinese customer, September 8, 2022)

A customer at Thai Lai Restaurant also said,

"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I can't travel to Thailand, so I want to find a Thai atmosphere in Kunming. Although this restaurant is not very big, it gives a good impression, reminiscent of Thai street stalls." (Interview with a Chinese customer, September 8, 2022)

3.3.2.2 Cultural identity of Thai people: "Self" in Thailand

Cultural identity is the sense of belonging and connection that individuals feel toward a particular cultural group or community. It includes various elements such as language, customs, traditions, beliefs, and values that are shared by the members of the group and contribute to their collective identity. The author operationalizes the concept of cultural identity through collected data by examining the following key aspects:

(1) Thai community in Kunming: a nexus of historical and geographical dynamics

Yunnan province is in close geographical proximity to Southeast Asian countries and has historically allowed dynamic ebbs and flows of population and goods between its borders and Thailand. Combined with Yunnan's temperate, climate and culturally diverse ambiance, this confluence of factors has organically attracted a substantial Thai population to the region. Currently, the Thai community in Kunming encompasses a spectrum of roles, including students, educators, entrepreneurs, and service industry professionals.

According to a 2016 report by the China News Service, since 2013, more than 2,000 Thai students have enrolled annually, amounting to about one-sixth of Yunnan's total international student population (China News, 2016). The capital, Kunming, plays a central role as a location for more than ten universities in different districts, each fostering an environment welcoming Thai students. Renowned institutions such as Yunnan University, Kunming University of Science and Technology, Yunnan Normal University, and Yunnan University of Finance and Economics have carefully cultivated cooperation with Thai academic counterparts. Beyond students, the Thai diaspora in Kunming encompasses Thai language and Thai boxing instructors originating from Thailand, multinational entrepreneurs active in the Sino-Thai trade, and service professionals in the Thai massage sector, contributing to Kunming's Thai population numbering in the thousands.

(2) Communal cohesion: compatriots nurturing bonds abroad

In Kunming, Thai nationals work in a variety of occupations. They may have limited contact while at work, but in their free time they often meet to socialize and eat together. As Chinese social norms often

emphasize a clear separation between public and private spaces, people are discreet when inviting acquaintances into their homes. As a result, restaurants have become important meeting places for social gatherings. Thai people in particular go to Ah Qing's restaurants, which have become an important place for them. The restaurant owner said,

"My Thai restaurant not only serves as a profitable business but also as a channel for importing and distributing Thai goods. Our products have found a presence not only within Kunming but also have garnered representation in regions such as Sichuan, Guangzhou, and even Beijing. My motivation to start this establishment was based on my passion for Thai cuisine, coupled with previous experience in the management of similar establishments. Furthermore, an innate preference for lively social interactions sparked my desire to provide a space for fellow Thais to come together, eat, and engage in dialogue." (Interview with owner of Clouds 18 Thai restaurant Ah Qing, September 10, 2022)

For Thais seeking a career and life in China, the process often involves detachment from their native milieu and familiar social networks. In the absence of immediate family and friends, social interactions tend to adopt a simplified nature. In addition to colleagues at work, Thai compatriots also become their most important social anchors. As a result, Thai restaurants, offering tastes reminiscent of their homeland and encouraging relaxed conversations become central social venues for interaction within the Thai community in Kunming.

(3) The evocative power of taste: Cultural reminiscences

Food serves as an individual's immediate connection to taste and aroma, frequently imprinting lasting memories within the fabric of human emotion. For Thais residing in Kunming, the city's geographical proximity to their ancestral homeland contrasts with the reality of their two-country environment. This gap in time and space limits the possibility of annual family gatherings to short periods of time and reinforces the deep yearning for their roots. Zhou WeiTing, a graduate student specializing in Chinese International Education at Yunnan University, is from southern Thailand. She shared,

"Despite the variety of dishes offered daily in the school canteen, they predominantly reflect Chinese culinary traditions, lacking the distinct Thai essence. Back home, our coastal location infuses our diet with seafood delicacies such as Tom Yum Soup and curried shrimp. My annual return to Thailand during my studies in Yunnan highlights my longing for the flavors of my homeland. In moments when imitation proves challenging, I turn to Thai restaurants in Kunming. Although not an exact match, the flavors evoke a semblance." (Interview with Thais Zhou WeiTing, September 9, 2022)

The role of the palate in maintaining hometown ties. As international students enjoy their local cuisine, a cascade of memories tied to their homeland unfurls through the sense of taste. The dietary customs and culinary preferences honed during one's upbringing exhibit a remarkable resistance to alteration. The act of eating goes beyond mere sustenance, evolving into a means of spiritual nourishment. Regardless of the passage of time since departing their homelands, the tastes of the home remain etched in memory, metamorphosing into a form of homesickness. Consuming local cuisine not only satisfies the physiological needs but above all also satisfies the longings of the soul.

3.4 Authenticity and glocalization strategies in Thai restaurants

3.4.1 Balancing authenticity and glocalization: Differences in taste preferences among Thai and Chinese customers

Chinese cuisine is diverse and deeply rooted. Early culinary traditions are divided into four major regional styles: Shandong, Sichuan, Jiangsu, and Cantonese. Shandong cuisine emphasizes freshness, saltiness, and clear fragrances, often using soups to enhance flavors and incorporating ingredients like scallions, ginger, and garlic. Sichuan cuisine, originating in the Sichuan basin, features spicy and numbing flavors using chili peppers and Sichuan peppercorns that stand out for their rich and bold flavor. Jiangsu cuisine focused on the Taihu Lake region, emphasizes the use of freshwater ingredients and clear broths to preserve the natural flavors. Cantonese cuisine, originating from Guangdong, highlights freshness, crispness, and delicacy, aiming to retain the original tastes of ingredients. In Yunnan province, Dian cuisine incorporates dishes from various regions, combining influences from Sichuan and Shandong cuisines.

Thailand, a tropical coastal country, has a distinctive culinary identity influenced by its climate and ecology. As already mentioned, there are regional differences in taste preferences in Thailand.

In general, Thai cuisine is characterized by its affinity for sour and spicy flavors. Thai dishes, citrus fruits such as Thai lemons, lemongrass, and makrut lime leaves are often used for seasoning. Lemongrass, known as "香茅草" (xiāng máo cǎo), is often used in soups and curry dishes to give it a unique aroma and spicy taste. Additionally, coconut-based products are widely used in Thai cuisine and are used in dishes such as Tom Yum soup, curries, as well as desserts.

Due to geographical and historical factors, there are similarities and differences between Yunnan's and Thailand's taste preferences. In order to serve both Chinese and Thai customers, Thai restaurants in Kunming have had to adapt their menu offerings.

3.4.1.1 Menu adjustments to preserve Thai flavors

Due to Thailand's predominantly hot climate, many Thai dishes employ cooling techniques like salads and ceviche, such as green papaya salad and various seafood salads. In comparison, Chinese dining habits lean toward cooked foods due to concerns about bacteria and parasites from consuming raw ingredients. Therefore, Thai restaurants in Kunming offer mostly cooked dishes on their menus, with a limited selection of salads like green papaya salad. Head Chef A Peng shared that they periodically introduce new dishes while removing items that do not sell well. He mentioned that dishes such as "凉拌猪肉沫" (liáng bàn zhū ròu mò), a cold dish featuring minced pork mixed with sautéed glutinous rice, are discontinued during colder seasons due to reduced demand. Additionally, certain Yunnan-based Thai restaurants incorporate Chinese-influenced dishes such as Hainanese chicken rice and stir-fried dishes to suit local tastes.

3.4.2 Glocalization strategies of Kunming's Thai restaurants

3.4.2.1 Adjusting dishes while preserving Thai flavors

Variety of dishes: Kunming's Thai restaurants are primarily aimed at Chinese professionals from the city. This clientele's preference for hot dishes contrasts with Thailand's cool culinary tradition. To accommodate this preference, adjustments are made, with an emphasis on warm, cooked dishes rather than salads or ceviche.

Taste Adjustments: Kunming's Thai restaurants retain the essence of Thai cuisine's spiciness and sourness. However, adaptations are made to align with local preferences. For instance, the addition of coconut milk and sugar could be reduced to avoid overly sweet flavors, which could be less appealing to local customers.

3.4.2.2 Bridging Chinese market and Thai culture through promotion

(1) Restaurant pricing and location distribution

A restaurant's location is a crucial factor in determining customer flow and sales. According to incomplete statistics, there are a total of 46 Thai restaurants in Kunming, including chain-operated branches. These are distributed as follows: 20 restaurants in Wuhua district, 6 in Panlong district, 10 in Xishan district, 3 in Guandu district, and 7 in Chenggong district. Based on the information provided on the Dianping platform, there are 11 restaurants with an average cost per person above 100 RMB, 25 restaurants with a cost per person between 50 and 100 RMB, and 10 restaurants with a cost per person below 50 RMB. Restaurants with an average cost per person above 50 RMB are aimed primarily at city workers. Of these 36 restaurants, 33 are located in busy shopping malls or thriving commercial areas such as Shuncheng Shopping Center and Jinma Biji Square in Wuhua district, Tongde Plaza in Panlong district, and Dayuecheng and Nanya Fengqing No. 1 City in Xishan district. The remaining five restaurants with an average cost per person below 20 RMB are located near Yunnan University and Kunming University of Science and Technology and mainly target university students.

(2) Promotion of Thai restaurants

To promote Thai culture and Thai products, the Thai Consulate General has organized events such as the "Thai Food Festival" and "Thai Festival," which focus significantly on the promotion of Thai cuisine. The aim of the Thai Food Festival is to introduce Thai cuisine and tropical fruits from Thailand to Kunming. Since its inception in 2003, the festival has successfully held eighteen editions, with a large number of locals taking part each year. For example, during the 2017 Thai Food Festival, organizers imported 40 tons of Thai fruits and offered various Thai products at discounted prices. Thai chefs were also present, preparing Thai delicacies such as Tom Yum Goong soup and mango sticky rice for citizens to try. In 2020, the festival also took place from June 11 to 17 despite the effects of the pandemic. It was jointly organized by Thailand's International Trade Promotion Department, the Commercial Department of the Royal Thai Consulate General in Kunming, Carrefour supermarkets, and the online shopping platform Suning.com. The 2020 festival mainly relied on online live streaming and offline advertising to promote Thai products. During the event, Carrefour supermarkets conducted continuous live broadcasts on sales at various branches in Kunming. Offline, they offered customers Thai fruits such as durian, pomelo, longan, and rambutan, as well as Thai products such as Thai fragrant rice, fish sauce, tom yum goong seasonings, and coconut milk for customers to purchase.

Furthermore, since 2008, the Royal Thai Consulate General in Kunming has been inviting Thai companies to the "Thai Festival" in Kunming in May, which is intended to promote economic and cultural exchanges between the two sides. The Thai Festival features performances such as Thai dance and Muay Thai (Thai Boxing), as well as exhibitions and sales of Thai food, skincare products, handicrafts, and medicines. In the 2019 Thai Festival held at the 1903 Park, 62 businesses showcased their products at 71 stands. The four

Thai restaurants in Kunming with Thai chefs also set up stalls at the Thai Festival, attracting a large number of citizens to taste their offerings. In terms of flavors, restaurant management, and advertising, Kunming's Thai restaurants respond to the local social environment and public preferences while maintaining their unique characteristics. Additionally, the role of digital media and online platforms in shaping culinary trends and perceptions of authenticity is important.

3.4.3 Understanding the notion of authenticity

3.4.3.1 Distinctions among different Thai restaurants

As mentioned in previous sections, only a portion of Thai restaurants in Kunming are run by Thais or employ Thai chefs. These include "Chim Thai Restaurant", "Clouds 18 Restaurant", "Thai Shuang Jin (Thai Zapver Gold) Restaurant", "Yaohua Li Thai Cuisine Restaurant", "Chunwuli Thai Restaurant", and "Zha Du Zha Thai Hot Pot Restaurant". Among these six restaurants, "Chim Thai Restaurant", "Clouds 18 Restaurant", "Thai Shuang Jin Restaurant", and "Yaohua Li Thai Cuisine Restaurant" are run by Thais, and their Thai managers and chefs have been working in Kunming for several years. These restaurants are relatively consistently positioned as mid-to-high-end Thai cuisine establishments. On the other hand, "Chunwuli Thai Restaurant" and "Zhaduzha Thai Hot Pot Restaurant", which opened in the last two years, target their offering to a more general consumer base. Aside from these six restaurants, dozens of other Thai restaurants in Kunming, such as "Ji Yu Thai Hot Pot", "Thai Lai, Du Du Thai Cuisine", and "City Garden Thai Hot Pot", are run by Chinese people, with Chinese chefs leading the kitchens. While there is competition between these restaurants with Thai involvement, only these four restaurants are eligible to participate in events such as the "Thai Festival," and "Thai Food Festival," and receive the "Thai SELECT" certification from Thailand.

3.4.3.2 Understanding and pursuit of "Authenticity"

In the highly competitive catering industry, the "authenticity" seal of quality is of utmost importance for companies. However, different Thai restaurants have varying interpretations and understandings of what constitutes "authenticity." As part of the research process, it was found that although the definition of authenticity remains consistent across different Thai restaurants, there are still differences in its implementation.

It is generally agreed in Thai restaurants that using real Thai ingredients is an essential part of authenticity. Both Thai and Chinese restaurants emphasize authentic Thai seasonings such as fish sauce, lemongrass, and lime juice. For instance, the head chef at Chim Thai Restaurant mentioned that the authenticity of their dishes stems from using imported Thai curry pastes, such as red curry and green curry, as well as the base for tom yum goong soup. These imported ingredients contribute to a distinct flavor that differs from locally made sauces. However, the Thai owner of "Chunwuli Thai Restaurant", called Pob, believes that all sauces should be made in-house from raw ingredients to capture the "warmth" of true Thai flavors. Likewise, the owner of "Du Du Thai Cuisine" also insists on making her own sauces, even though using pre-made sauces may be more cost-effective.

These discrepancies in approach are due to practical considerations. Smaller establishments like "Chunwuli Thai Restaurant" and "Du Du Thai Cuisine" have the advantage of maintaining stable and consistent flavors because their owners, who also serve as chefs, are directly involved in the cooking process. On the other hand, larger restaurants with multiple chefs in the kitchen may opt for imported Thai sauces for convenience and consistency.

With the development of commercialization and marketization, people's expectations of food have evolved from merely "edible" to evaluating whether the food is "authentic." However, the concept of "authenticity" remains somewhat ambiguous. Both Thai-operated and Chinese-operated Thai restaurants strive to highlight their authenticity to gain a competitive advantage in the market. Restaurants with Thai involvement hold an inherent advantage, as the presence of Thai individuals is perceived as representative of authenticity. Many customers tend to believe that food prepared by Thai people is really authentic. Thai chefs in the catering industry also value the authenticity of their Thai cuisine.

In the survey of 40 Chinese customers who visited Thai restaurants in Kunming, 36 respondents (90%) believed that the presence of Thai owners or chefs influences the authenticity of the dishes. It can be concluded that the presence of Thai people plays a significant role in shaping customer perceptions of authenticity.

The pursuit of authenticity is also evident in the way these restaurants promote themselves through various means, such as their names, decor, and ingredient sourcing. This pursuit of authenticity has led to a focus on the Thai ethnic identity of Thai individuals in Kunming's culinary landscape.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Food is an important part of human life, and the act of eating is more than just physiological nutrition. In a way, it functions as a cultural expression or symbol of regional identity. According to Marvin Harris, "the main differences in the world's food systems can be traced back to ecological constraints and the opportunities available in different areas" (Harris, 1998). In this context, it becomes clear that the selection of ingredients and the culinary concepts of Thai food culture are different and are influenced by both ecological and social elements.

As Marcel Mauss posits, "The fundamental disparities observed in gastronomic traditions worldwide can be ascribed to ecological constraints and the particular opportunities that different geographical locations offer" (Mauss, 2000). This exhibition powerfully describes how ecological variables and sociocultural perspectives inexorably shape the attributes intrinsic to Thai culinary paradigms, from ingredient selection to gastronomic ideology. The relentless advance of globalization has fueled the spread of Thai gastronomy across international borders. Such alimentary transmigration is invariably accompanied by human migratory patterns, thereby engendering not only gustatory novelties but also the diffusion of cultural tenets. As delineated within the compass of this treatise, the burgeoning assimilation of Thai comestibles within Kunming's culinary landscape is inextricably linked to the burgeoning symbiosis between the two nations, forming a web of increased cross-cultural interaction.

Within Kunming's pantheon of Thai dining establishments, patronage can be divided dichotomously: it includes indigenous Thai residents and indigenous Chinese connoisseurs. For the former, Thai food offers an emotive conduit to assuage homesickness and reverberate with redolence of their native terrain. In the latter case, a subset of Chinese epicureans harbors nascent impressions of Thailand, thus enshrining Thai repasts as symbolic of their aspirational destinations. On a tangential plane, other former travelers to Thailand give Thai gastronomy a retrospective nostalgia that summarizes previous experiences.

The penetration of Thai gastronomy into Kunming's epicurean fabric is contingent on two imperatives: a compelling necessity to synchronize with indigenous proclivities, thereby furnishing commensurate adaptations to engender satiation across a heterogeneous palate, while concurrently underscoring its singularity to differentiate it from entrenched Chinese culinary tradition. The Thai culinary enclave in Kunming provided diverse modulations in its meticulous choreography that aimed to preserve the authentic essence while accommodating local preferences. In this nuanced rhythm of modulations, the Thai expatriate population and Thai cuisine at large vociferously attest to their resonance with both the Chinese and Thai epicurean tapestries. The influences of Chinese culinary culture are manifested in the recognizable intertwining of personal inclinations and the actions of the culinary establishment. At the same time, the growth of Thai gastronomy highlights a relentless pursuit of authenticity that demonstrates an unassailable similarity to authentic Thai flavors.

Driven by the juggernaut of globalization, a growing cohort of arcane international dining establishments, spanning the Thai culinary trajectory expounded herein, have insinuated themselves within the Chinese epicurean firmament. While these transnational gustatory forays may not have the widespread influence comparable to culinary giants such as "KFC" or "McDonald's," the critical analysis of these niche culinary tapestries still provides a lens through which to anatomize the emergence and maturation of external cultural influences within Chinese districts. Ergo, the anthropological study of culinary practices is imbued with theoretical seriousness and pragmatic utility, providing an astute understanding of these gastronomic cultures.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the editors and reviewers for their valuable and constructive comments on the manuscript in order to meet the standards and requirements of publication in the Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies.

REFERENCES

- Auapinyakul, W., & Deebhijarn, S. (2019). A structural equation modeling on factors related to the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the United States. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 19(2), 155–153.
- Bahri, S., Nasution, K. Y., Hutabarat, S. W., & Harlina, A. R. (2024). Gastronomic tourism: Experiencing a region's identity through modern cuisine in Asia. *International Journal of Education, Language, Literature, Arts, Culture, and Social Humanities*, 2(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/0.59024/ijellacush.v1i4.453>

- Chang, W. C. (2009). Venturing into “barbarous” regions: Trans-border trade among migrant Yunnanese between Thailand and Burma, 1960s–1980s. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 68(2), 543–572.
- Chatcharawan, M., Jaruporn, M., & Pongkaew, U. (2023). The influence of perceived value and gender on local food consumption intentions in the northeastern cluster of Thailand. *Malaysian Journal of Nutrition*, 29(2), 321–331.
- China News. (2016, July 27). *Educational exchanges between Yunnan and Thailand are gradually getting better, with more than 2,000 international students coming to Yunnan*. <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/sh/2016/07-27/7953629.shtml> [in Chinese]
- Cwiertka, K. J., & Walraven, B. C. (2013). *Asian food: The global and the local*. Routledge.
- Du, Y. H. (2008). Three market strategies of Thailand’s “World Kitchen” program. *The Journal of Foreign Trade Practice*, (6), 51–53. [in Chinese]
- Ermylina, E. (2023). The future challenges of China-Lao railway on Lao’s economic and social development. *Global Local Interactions: Journal of International Relations*, 3(1), 1–11.
- Falzon, M. A. (2000). A brief note on an encounter with the Andaman Islanders. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 22(2), 70–76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23818785>
- Flick, U. (2009). Qualitative methods in evaluation research. *Zeitschrift für Qualitative Forschung*, 10(1), 9–18. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-336552> [in German]
- Gibbs, G. R. (2014). Qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Article 277.
- Glassman, J. (2010). *Bounding the Mekong: The Asian development bank, China, and Thailand*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Goldschmidt, W. (2000). A perspective on anthropology. *American Anthropologist*, 102(4), 789–807. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2000.102.4.789>
- Goldstein, S., & Goldstein, A. (1986). *Migration in Thailand: A twenty-five-year review*. Papers of the East-West Population Institute No. 100. East-west population institute.
- Hammersley, M. (2017). Interview data: A qualified defence against the radical critique. *Qualitative Research*, 17(2), 173–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794116671988>
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Harris, M. (1998). *Good to eat: Riddles of food and culture*. Waveland Press.
- Harris, M. (2001). *Cultural materialism: The struggle for a science of culture*. Rowman Altamira.
- Hitch, S. (2015). Anthropology and food studies. In J. Wilkins & R. Nadeau (Eds.), *A companion to food in the ancient world* (pp. 116–122). John Wiley & Sons.
- Humphrey, C. (2002). Stalin and the blue elephant: Paranoia and complicity in postcommunist metahistories. *Diogenes*, 49(194), 26–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210204919405>
- Jenkins, A. (1979). *The social theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss*. Springer.
- Leach, E. R. (1971). Kimil: A category of Andamanese thought. In P. Maranda & E. K. Maranda (Eds.), *Structural analysis of oral tradition* (pp. 22–48). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (2012). The culinary triangle. In C. Counihan & P. van Esterik (Eds.), *Food and culture* (pp. 54–61). Routledge.
- Lin, Y., & Kingminghae, W. (2017). Factors that influence stay intention of Thai international students following completion of degrees in China. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 18(1), 13–22.
- Malisuwan, C., & Radenahmad, M. (2021). Developing and improving creative healthy food recipes under the Bis Meal Brand to the world kitchen. *Linguistica Antverpiensia*, 2, 3918–3930.
- Martin, E. (2005). Survey questionnaire construction. *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*, 3, 723–732. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-12-369398-5/00433-3>
- Mauss, M. (2000). *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. WW Norton & Company.
- Mintz, L. E. (1985). Standup comedy as social and cultural mediation. *American Quarterly*, 37(1), 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712763>
- Mintz, S. W., & Du Bois, C. M. (2002). The anthropology of food and eating. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, 99–119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4132873>
- Moe.Gov.Cn. (2019, April 18). *Statistical report on international students in China for 2018*. Ministry of Education. http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201904/t20190418_378692.html
- Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (2004). The Andaman Islanders. In A. C. G. M. Robben (Ed.), *Death, mourning, and burial: A cross-cultural reader* (pp. 151–155). Blackwell Publishing.
- Ray, K., & Srinivas, T. (Eds.). (2012). *Curried cultures: Globalization, food, and South Asia*. University of California Press.
- Roman, B., & Russell, S. (2009). *Southeast Asian food and culture*. Northern Illinois University Grade 9–12 (High School) Lesson Module.

- Roongsangjun, T. (2023). Soft power and the development of Thai society. *Journal of Social Work*, 31(1), 89–117. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/swjournal/article/view/261046>
- Ruangsi, W., & Chetpatanavanich, K. (2018). The dynamics of the cross-border trades and the traders of Northwestern Thailand, 1950s to 2010s. *Asian Review*, 31(2), 75–94. <https://so01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/arv/article/view/224873>
- Saichan, K. (2004). Chiang Mai centred subregional development: Chiang Mai-Kunming axis. *Thai Journal of Public Administration*, 2(1), 101–121.
- Sharma, M. A., & Wattana, S. (2024). Western perceptions and the struggle of identity of lesser-known Southeast Asian cuisines. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 35, Article 100885. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2024.100885>
- Sukalakamala, P., & Boyce, J. B. (2007). Customer perceptions for expectations and acceptance of an authentic dining experience in Thai restaurants. *Journal of Foodservice*, 18(2), 69–75.
- Tylor, E. B. (1877). *Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, languages, art and customs (Vol. 1)*. John Murray.
- Ullah, A. K. M. A., & Ming Yit Ho, H. (2021). Globalisation and cultures in Southeast Asia: Demise, fragmentation, transformation. *Global Society*, 35(2), 191–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1747992>
- Varayanond, W. (2013). Fostering food culture with innovation: OTOP/SME and Thai kitchen to the world. In *Japanese International Research Center for Agricultural Sciences International Symposium Proceedings* (pp. 179–190). JIRCAS.
- Wang, D., Kirillova, K., & Lehto, X. (2020). Tourism mobilities through time in China: A developmental and holistic lens. *Journal of Travel Research*, 59(6), 1073–1090.
- Watson, J. L. (Ed.). (2006). *Golden arches east: McDonald's in East Asia* (2nd ed.). Stanford University Press.
- Zhenming, Z. (2008). *China's opening-up strategy and its economic relations with ASEAN countries — A case study of Yunnan province* (No. 435). Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization VRF Series.