

Original Paper

A Review Article on Chinese and Arab Halal Food Cultures from a Structuralist Perspective

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Abstract

Structuralist anthropology originated from the understanding of symbolic systems in linguistics. This theory regards human dietary habits as part of a symbolic system, providing a clear analytical framework for the study of dietary culture. Scholars have conducted extensive research on the characteristics, influencing factors, and intrinsic elements of Chinese and Arab halal food culture from multiple dimensions, including ethnic, national, and regional perspectives. However, there is still a lack of research on the halal food culture within specific communities, as well as cross regional comparative studies on Chinese and Arab halal food culture. Looking to the future, the academic community should strengthen research in this field by expanding knowledge boundaries and promoting mutual learning and collaborative development among civilizations.

Keywords

Structuralism, Halal cuisine, Arab, China

1. Introduction

Diet is an essential part of human life, and the resulting dietary culture has become an important form of norms, group boundaries, and order display. Structuralist anthropology focuses on the relationships, oppositions, and transformations between cultural elements, providing observational tools for understanding how halal cuisine generates identity order. In this context, halal food, as an important symbol, has rich directional significance. Especially in the historical evolution, Muslim groups from the same faith in Islam have shown different development characteristics between the Arab and Chinese ethnic groups. These characteristics further shape the heterogeneity of different groups and showcase the diversity colors between different civilizations.

This article uses structuralist anthropology as an analytical tool, attempting to summarize its theoretical characteristics by tracing the development spectrum of this theoretical system. Secondly, evaluate the research on halal cuisine in Arab and Chinese societies, compare the focus and results of the two types of research, and point out their shortcomings. The article summarizes the research gaps of the two studies, laying the foundation for subsequent comparative research. The origin of structuralist anthropology comes from the French philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss. A large portion of Strauss's theoretical framework comes from Saussure's study on structuralist linguistics.

2. Theoretical Foundation of Structuralist Anthropology

Saussure saw language as a system of symbols composed of differences and inside the system, the meaning of a single word depends on its position inside the system. He divided linguistic symbol system into two elements. They are signifier and signified, together they constitute a complete linguistic symbol.

Lévi-Strauss further inherited this view, arguing that symbols are important tools for the evolution of mankind. Language can promote mutual understanding between communicators, thereby enriching the cognition of human groups.

A worth-noticing development of structural anthropology is placing this symbolic system in a broader field of the human society. In those books, Strauss expands the symbolic system that only being used in language system to broader cultural domains beyond language. Such as kinship systems, myths, religion, and diet. It is fair to say that Strauss's theory focuses more on the impact of the combination and arrangement of various elements within the structure on action, as well as the implicit logic presented by these arrangements.

In the book *Structural Anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss defines structure as an analytical model. He points out that "the term 'social structure' does not directly refer to empirical reality itself, but rather to a model constructed based on empirical reality."

Strauss believe that social structure can only be seen as models. It only has structural value if it possesses systematic, transform ability, predictability, and overall explanatory power. Further analysis reveals the strong relationships between elements within a structure. Strauss suggest that a repeatable order can be formed, providing a new perspective for understanding society.

Lévi-Strauss's concentrated discussion of food can be found in *The Raw and the Cooked* and *The Culinary Triangle*. His main viewpoint is to regard food as a symbolic system and to analyze the transformation between nature and culture within the three dimensions of raw, cooked, and rotten. His contribution lies in examining food as a complex symbolic system within human groups, where different cooking methods represent the integration of different elements within the food system, shaping the characteristics of human groups.

The limitation of structuralist anthropology's analytical methods lies in its emphasis on stable relationships and structures. This research emphasizes the casual role of structure in society and groups.

However, it should be recognized that this analytical method presupposes research assumptions. In reality, structure also has a certain constructive character, rather than existing as an fixed entity. Therefore, scholars have suggested that it is necessary to avoid treating the models established by researchers as fixed rules shared by members of society in the process of structural analysis.

Despite binary oppositions are helpful for researchers to identify the mechanisms of interaction between nature and culture. Real-world practice often presents intermediate states and multiple interpretations.

In recent years, dietary research has continued the spirit of structuralism in terms of element classification and combination. For example, Katharina Graf and Elsa Mescoli focus on the ongoing shaping of food culture by new elements such as global supply chains, immigration, and commodification. Sabine Parrish pointed out that dietary research presents various research perspectives such as structuralism, political economy, gender studies, and sensory studies. Therefore, more factors have been taken into consideration in the field of structuralist anthropology.

3. Research on Arab Halal Food Culture

Research on Arabic halal food culture mainly includes research on the history of Middle Eastern cuisine and field investigations of social family life and dining customs within Arab countries. Zubaida and Tapper pointed out that Middle Eastern cuisine is shaped by urban, rural, nomadic, and cross-regional trade, presenting a variety of structures.

Food plays a significant role in competing for social prestige and improving social status in the Arab region. Meneley researches the dining process in Yemeni towns as a case study project. He believes that dining activities between different groups in the region are a manifestation of value competition. The host demonstrates prestige and status through the quantity and quality of food, and the guest's acceptance, reciprocation, and evaluation of the invitation also affect the host's status in the entire community. It also reflects the institutionalization of dining.

Shunnaq, through a detailed analysis of the banquet structure, emphasized that its functions include recruiting and rewarding relatives and friends, repaying social debts, confirming male status, mediating disputes, and organizing funeral condolences. At the same time, he pointed out that although Arab banquets have a tradition of sharing the same plate, this does not actually mean that the diners have equal status.

Social factors such as the location of the platters, the distribution of dishes, the order of host and guest, and the order of eating all express hierarchical status, highlighting the continued strong influence of hierarchical order in Arab society. Arab food culture is also closely related to the shaping of national image. Howell conducted a case study on Jordan's national dish, Mansaf. He pointed out that the various raw materials, that is, the elements in the structure of this dish, are not fixed. It is this change that has made Mansaf gradually popularized from rural and tribal areas to urban families and become a characteristic dish of national ceremonies as the country modernized. In this process, tribal symbols

were still preserved and transformed into symbols of the Jordanian national community.

Baron and Press-Barnathan's study on English Israeli recipes also reflects the close relationship between food and national narratives and international political communication. By proposing the concept of "Culinary Zionism," the authors analyzed the process by which Israel incorporated Arab food into its national diet. Scholars have also discussed the impact of dietary structure on similar ethnic groups outside the region. Lücking conducted a case study on Indonesian pilgrims' acceptance of kosher and halal diets in Jerusalem, finding that their choice was influenced by factors such as religious authority, guide interpretations, political perceptions, and emotional affiliation.

In summary, researches on Arabic halal diets have encompassed several categories of issues, including those within the Arab community, across ethnic groups within the region, and national image. Related research indicates that dietary structure and dining etiquette have a significant impact on the social structure, economic operation, and national identity of ethnic groups in the Arab region.

4. Research on Chinese Halal Food Culture

In China, the ethnic groups with halal food customs are mainly distributed among the Hui, Uyghur and other minority groups who believe in Islam. For this specific group, scholars have pointed out that halal food culture has a cohesive effect.

Strup conducted field research on Hui communities in North China, East China and Northwest China and believes that the cultural symbol of halal has a cohesive effect on the Hui community.

For certain special halal foods, scholars have conducted detailed case studies on their social significance from a structuralist perspective. For example, You Xiang (fried dough stick) is a popular delicacy among many ethnic minorities in China who traditionally believe in Islam. Ha Zhengli takes this custom as a starting point to analyze its usage, production characteristics, symbolic meaning and social function, and then reveals the ethnic and religious nature implied in fried dough sticks.

Yu Hong and Li Dekuan proposed that fried dough sticks undergo symbolic transformation in different scenarios: they maintain their sacredness in rituals, but may be de-ritualized and transformed into consumer goods in the market.

In summary, researches on Chinese halal food culture show that halal customs in China have both religious and ethnic characteristics and are influenced by history and economic factors. Their essential characteristics and symbolic expressions may change, but overall, their core directional meaning has not changed much.

5. Conclusion

Current literature provides in-depth case studies from national and ethnic perspectives, emphasizing the "locality" of the research and employing sufficient fieldwork, case studies, and ethnographic research. It analyzes dietary customs in China and the Arab region by acquiring primary sources.

However, the research is insufficient in terms of regional coverage and cross-regional comparisons. For

example, existing studies rarely compare differences between Muslim groups within Arab countries or within China.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that comparative studies of Chinese and Arab halal dietary cultures remain relatively limited. Different civilizations can only engage in in-depth exchanges and mutual learning based on mutual understanding, promoting the development of cultural diversity and global progress.

While there are commonalities between Chinese and Arab dietary cultures, there are also many differences. Future research should build upon existing findings to strengthen cross-regional comparative studies and further analyze the role of halal dietary culture in identity construction, social interaction, and national governance.

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