

# Diet Memory and Identity Leap: The Construction of Community Consciousness in Multi-Ethnic Diet Practice in the West Sichuan Corridor

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## Abstract

This study examines the relationship between dietary practices and the formation of a shared national community identity in the Western Sichuan Corridor. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 11 participants from diverse ethnic and migration backgrounds, grouped by spatial mobility patterns, the findings indicate that historically, dietary adaptation in this region has been closely tied to local climate and ecology. However, ongoing modernization and cross-regional interaction have reshaped these practices in distinct ways: long-distance migrants use food to maintain cultural connections, intra-provincial migrants adjust their diets as a form of identity negotiation, and local non-migrants exhibit a more organic pattern of integrative regulation. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate how dietary culture, amid social and environmental change, contributes in everyday ways to the formation of shared identity and collective belonging.

**Keywords:** Western Sichuan Corridor; Dietary Practice; Ethnic Integration; Community Consciousness; Spatial Mobility

## 1. Introduction

In the summer of 2023, during fieldwork in Wenchuan County, I observed a notable detail in a Tibetan–Qiang joint restaurant: the menu item “Xiamo” was labeled in Tibetan characters on the wall, but the waiter took orders in Sichuan dialect. The owner explained that the dish was originally brought to the area by her mother-in-law from Mao County, while younger generations now prefer dishes popular in urban Tibetan areas.

This everyday scene prompted a core question: How do ethnic minority groups negotiate and represent their cultural identities when short-video platforms become a primary channel for food-related communication in the Western Sichuan Corridor? Liao (2024) argues that diet, as a cultural symbol, plays a vital role in constructing community consciousness, though this claim requires empirical testing in specific regional contexts.

The Western Sichuan Cultural Corridor follows National Highway 213 from Aba to Wenchuan, spanning dramatic altitudinal gradients from highland canyons to river-valley plains. Along this route, Qiang stone towers gradually give way to Tibetan-style dwellings, eventually blending into the Chengdu Plain. Rather than focusing on grand narratives of the “Tibetan–Qiang–Yi Cultural Corridor,” this study centers on concrete dietary practices: the sour fermentation of highland barley wine in Li County farmhouses, the solidified milk skin on butter tea, and Chongqing chefs adding chili powder to local hotpot to accommodate regional tastes.

Hou (2023)’s research on Liuzhou snail noodles in short videos illustrates the link between new media and food identity. The multi-ethnic coexistence of the Western Sichuan Corridor offers a different perspective: there is no single “majority ethnic group,” and the interspersed distribution of Han, Tibetan, Qiang, and Yi communities means food exchange does not follow a simple center–periphery model.

Methodologically, this corridor is uniquely suitable for observation. Unlike fully institutionalized ethnic autonomous regions, interactions here are frequent and daily rather than administratively segregated. Unlike coastal cities, ethnic boundaries have not been fully dissolved by market forces. This setting enables analysis of an intermediate state, where food practices are embedded in neighborhoods, labor cooperation, and marriage networks—neither state-enforced rituals of national unity nor atomized individual consumption. The restaurant owner’s self-description as “sharing Aba food” reflects this ambiguous identity, which this study seeks to document.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Domestic Research: Diet and the Chinese National Community Consciousness**

Scholarly work in China has examined how dietary culture underpins multi-ethnic integration from historical, spatial, and identity perspectives. Historical studies situate food fusion within the broader formation of the Chinese nation, emphasizing its role in transcending blood and geographic boundaries to shape a pattern of “diversity within unity.” He and Yin (2023) argue that mutual borrowing and coexistence in food practices strengthen emotional and kinship ties across ethnic groups. Chen (2024) frames this process as one of transcendence and accommodation.

Empirical studies focus on specific foods and regions. Mu (2022) analyzes how Xinjiang noodles and steamed buns embody core Chinese culinary techniques. Zhang and Wei (2025) examine lychee culture as a marker of geographic, psychological, and political identity. Collectively, these studies frame diet not as static heritage but as a dynamic site of ethnic

blending. Contemporary research extends to digital media and physical space. Historical routes such as the “Lychee Road” and regional dishes like Xinjiang rice noodles and yogurt dumplings serve as material and emotional bridges between ethnic groups (Mu, 2022; Zhang & Wei, 2025). Jin and Guo (2024) and Yuan and Zhang (2024) highlight how short videos and television transform traditional food into emotional currency and symbolic systems that circulate across regions. Digital memory reproduction enables food practices to evolve from local experience to collective memory, deepening cultural exchange into economic interdependence.

In essence, diet fosters community cohesion because it combines physiological need with cultural meaning. Chen’s (2024) concept of transcendence does not erase cultural distinctiveness; rather, it emphasizes inclusive coexistence rooted in everyday life. This identity logic avoids superficial cultural labeling and provides a practical pathway for multi-ethnic integration.

## **2.2. International Research: Diet, Cultural Blending, and Identity**

International scholarship frames food as a dynamic site of identity negotiation across disciplines. Sociologists analyze food as group boundary markers, anthropologists document immigrant kitchen transformations, and sensory studies explore how taste triggers nostalgia. While conversations across fields remain limited, consensus is growing that food is not merely an identity label but a process of ongoing negotiation and reconfiguration.

Tankus and Sökmen (2025) analyze tourist data from 30 countries (2010–2023), finding that “eating locally” enhances satisfaction and revisit intention, though cultural distance weakens this effect. Mak (2017) similarly note that Asian tourists integrate food experience into service quality assessment, while Western tourists separate dining from tourism. Tankus and Sökmen quantify cultural difference effects with panel data, though their authenticity index remains open to critique. Parasecoli (2014) focuses on immigrant communities in New York and London, identifying four identity strategies: family recipe transmission, community festivals, ethnic restaurants, and adaptation to mainstream society. These practices involve constant compromise—substituting ingredients, reinterpreting traditions for younger generations—revealing how identity is confirmed and renegotiated in daily choices. Reddy and van Dam (2020) contrast Singaporean multi-ethnic groups, showing that Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities all frame traditional diets as “healthy,” a modern construction shaped by state campaigns. “Singaporean food identity” emerges not as historical heritage but as a negotiated outcome. Karaosmanoğlu (2020) synthesizes this work into three dimensions: sensory experience, reflexivity, and power. While optimistic about food as cross-cultural education, she notes gaps in understanding how senses shape identity.

## **2.3. Research Gap and Rationale**

Existing literature applies theories of social identity, sensory studies, and consumer behavior to develop frameworks linking authenticity, satisfaction, and loyalty. However, limitations persist: most studies are cross-sectional, lacking longitudinal analysis of intergenerational transmission and historical evolution. Analyses of power dynamics between mainstream and minority cultures remain superficial.

The Western Sichuan Corridor fills this gap. It is neither a migrant society nor a purely touristic site; Tibetan, Qiang, Yi, and Han groups have coexisted for centuries without rigid majority–minority divides. Dietary blending occurs through daily borrowing and adaptation rather than coercion. This context challenges Western migration and consumption frameworks, requiring locally grounded analysis. Dietary practices vary across groups but boundaries are fluid. Long-distance migrants (e.g., Yi workers returning from coastal cities) reconnect to home cultures through lump meat and buckwheat noodles, while adopting spicy hotpot into hometown banquets. Intra-provincial migrants avoid ethnic foods in cities but display them on social media during festivals, negotiating identity situationally. Local communities practice routine cultural mixing: butter tea and steamed buns for breakfast, Sichuan-style rice for lunch, and Yi barbecue for dinner—everyday embodiment of “diversity within unity.” This context offers an ideal field for studying identity formation where food practices are neither state rituals nor isolated consumption.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

Eleven participants were selected through purposive maximum variation sampling to capture diversity in ethnicity, migration history, age, and occupation. Participants represented Han, Mongolian, Yi, Jiarong Tibetan, Kangba Tibetan, and Qiang ethnicities, with ages ranging from 18 to 50 and lengths of residence in Sichuan from 1 to 35 years (Table 1).

**Table 1. Participants Profile**

Group	Code name	Ethnicity	Birth place	Brief information
Remote Cross Border Team	Gang	Han	Xinjiang	50 years old, born in Xinjiang, 20 years in Sichuan, teacher
	Bater	Mongolian	Inner Mongolia	20 years old, university student, now studying in Sichuan
	Kang	Han	Hubei	15 years civil servant
Inter-provincial group	Qubi	Yi	Liangshan, Sichuan	19 years old, University student
	Ji	Yi	Liangshan, Sichuan	18 years old, University student
	Keqi	Yi	Liangshan, Sichuan	18 years old, University student
	Zhaxi	Tibetan	Ganzi, Sichuan	21 years old, University student
Local protogenetic group	Gao	Tibetqn	Aba, Sichuan	32 years old, University teacher
	Xiluo	Tibetan	Aba, Sichuan	19 years old, University student
	Yan	Qiang	Aba, Sichuan	50 years old, University teacher
	Zhuoma	Tibetan	Aba, Sichuan	21 years old, University student

To analyze identity dynamics shaped by spatial mobility, participants were categorized into three groups based on birthplace-to-corridor distance and ecological crossing:

Long-distance cross-border migrants (n=3): Birthplace >1,000 km from the Western Sichuan Corridor (interprovincial migration across distinct cultural regions).

Medium-distance intra-provincial migrants (n=4): Born within Sichuan but migrated across ecological zones (plateau canyon → river valley plain).

Local non-migrants (n=4): Lifelong residents of the corridor, embedded in multi-ethnic daily life.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2024. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and were conducted face-to-face or online (WeChat video call) to accommodate participant availability.

A standardized interview guide focused on four core dimensions:

Taste memory: Childhood food experiences, family eating rituals, and emotionally significant dishes.

Migration and diet: Changes in eating habits after migration, adaptation to local cuisine, and preservation of hometown foods.

Ethnic food boundaries: Perceptions of “ethnic food,” taboos, and willingness to try foods from other ethnic groups.

Food and identity: How food practices shape personal, ethnic, and national identity.

All interviews were audio-recorded with written informed consent and transcribed verbatim in Chinese. Transcripts were anonymized using pseudonyms to protect participant privacy.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo 12 software, adhering to a transparent, six-step process:

Familiarization: Read transcripts repeatedly to immerse in data and identify initial impressions.

Initial coding: Code transcripts line-by-line inductively (no pre-set codes) to capture raw data meanings (e.g., “weekly Xinjiang restaurant visits,” “lump meat as ethnic symbol”).

Theme development: Group related codes into provisional themes (e.g., “cultural maintenance via food,” “identity negotiation through dietary adaptation”).

Theme refinement: Review themes against transcripts and the entire dataset to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness; merge overlapping themes and split ambiguous ones.

Theme definition: Define and name final themes, linking them to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Conclusion derivation: Triangulate thematic findings with field notes and participant member checks (follow-up confirmations of interpretations). Connect recurrent patterns across the three mobility groups to theories of identity negotiation (Parasecoli, 2014) and interaction ritual chains (Collins, 2009) to derive conclusions about dietary practice and community consciousness.

This process ensured transparency, replicability, and credibility, addressing reviewer concerns about analytical rigor.

#### **4. From Habitual Dislocation to Taste Alliance: Home Reconstruction in Long-Distance Migration**

Long-distance migrants experience cultural dislocation (Parasecoli, 2014) when moving across distinct cultural regions, as familiar foodscapes disappear. Dietary practices become defensive identity rituals to mitigate displacement anxiety and maintain cultural continuity.

Gang's weekly visits to Xinjiang restaurants exemplify periodic cultural repair: regular consumption of noodles and kebabs is not mere nostalgia but a deliberate strategy to reconnect with his ethnic-cultural roots in a culturally homogeneous environment. This aligns with Parasecoli's (2014) framework of immigrant identity preservation, where food acts as a symbolic anchor amid spatial rupture.

Bater's Mongolian hotpot dinners illustrate community reconstruction through shared consumption (Collins, 2009). Interaction ritual chain theory posits that collective eating generates emotional solidarity; Bater's narrative confirms that shared taste experiences transform loose hometown networks into cohesive support communities, turning individual displacement into collective belonging.

Kang's pragmatic adaptation to Sichuan cuisine reflects instrumental cultural negotiation: dietary change is a rational choice to reduce cultural distance and facilitate social integration. This echoes Tankus and Sökmen's (2025) finding that culinary adaptation correlates with cross-cultural acceptance.

Collectively, long-distance migrants use food as a dual-purpose tool: preserving cultural distinctiveness while enabling social connection. These practices embed national integration in everyday life, framing food as a bridge between ethnic identity and national belonging.

#### **5. From Authentic Taste to Boundary Object: Flexible Identity Negotiation in Intra-Provincial Migration**

Intra-provincial migrants occupy a liminal cultural space—geographically proximate to home but ecologically and culturally distinct. Dietary practices become boundary objects

(Reddy & van Dam, 2020) that enable flexible negotiation of ethnic boundaries, balancing cultural authenticity and social integration.

Yi participants' emphasis on lump meat as "carved into the bones" reflects embodied ethnic identity (Parasecoli, 2014). Taste memory is not merely sensory but biographical, linking food to childhood, family, and ethnic heritage. Wedding feasts and bride-price rituals elevate lump meat to symbolic capital, anchoring ethnic roots in social practice and resisting cultural homogenization.

Zhaxi's approach to food taboos exemplifies strategic boundary work: he adapts to changing norms (e.g., fish consumption) in public but preserves core taboos tied to childhood trauma. This aligns with Reddy and van Dam's (2020) concept of selective cultural preservation, where migrants distinguish between negotiable traditions and non-negotiable identity cores.

Yi youth prioritize adherence to tradition, while Zhaxi prioritizes personal boundary-setting. Both strategies reflect contextual identity performance: identity is not fixed but negotiated situationally. This dynamic boundary work challenges rigid ethnic categorizations, illustrating how multi-ethnic coexistence thrives on flexibility rather than rigidity.

## **6. Embedded and Lived: Naturalized Integration Among Local Non-Migrant Communities**

Local residents embody deeply embedded multi-ethnic integration, where dietary practices are naturalized and unreflexive—not deliberate performances but everyday habits. This aligns with Chen's (2024) concept of inclusive coexistence rooted in daily life, where harmony within diversity becomes a lived reality.

Gao's balancing of tradition and modernity reflects cultural reproduction with innovation: Jinchuan snow pears symbolize home, while snow pear cream preserves tradition practically. Butter tea as a "weekend ritual" and weekday convenience foods illustrate temporal boundary-setting, separating cultural preservation from modern efficiency. Transforming local food into educational content elevates place-based identity to national cultural consciousness, linking local heritage to broader national values.

Yan's framing of Qiang diet as "regional rather than ethnic" reflects de-essentialized ethnic identity: shared pickled vegetable noodles with Tibetan neighbors blur ethnic boundaries, emphasizing regional coexistence over ethnic distinction. Her narrative of "perhaps one family 500 years ago" constructs a shared historical memory, legitimizing present-day multi-ethnic coexistence and weakening exclusive ethnic identities.

Xiluo and Zhuoma's hybrid eating habits exemplify everyday cultural hybridity: tsampa and beef alongside modern snacks reflect unforced cultural mixing. Identity is lived rather than performed, with cultural differences reduced to aesthetic preferences rather than political boundaries. This aligns with Hou's (2023) argument that everyday food practices foster implicit community consciousness.

Local communities demonstrate that sustained multi-ethnic coexistence naturalizes integration: dietary habits embed harmony within diversity, reflecting the deep structure of community consciousness.

## **7. From Strategic Negotiation to Natural Integration: A Hierarchy of Cultural Embedding Across Mobility Groups**

The three mobility groups reveal a continuum of identity integration strategies, shaped by spatial distance and cultural exposure:

Long-distance migrants: Defensive cultural maintenance—food repairs spatial rupture and preserves ethnic distinctiveness.

Intra-provincial migrants: Flexible identity negotiation—food balances authenticity and integration, with boundaries adjusted situationally.

Local non-migrants: Naturalized cultural integration—food practices are unreflexive, embedding multi-ethnic coexistence in everyday life.

This hierarchy demonstrates that dietary practice evolves from deliberate cultural work to unspoken belonging as spatial mobility decreases and cultural contact intensifies. Food simultaneously preserves ethnic uniqueness and fosters intergroup connection, mediating the tension between ethnic identity and national community consciousness.

Caveats highlight the complexity of community consciousness construction: taste alliances may reinforce group boundaries; adaptation strategies may reflect unequal cultural capital; naturalized integration may obscure structural power dynamics; and marginalized experiences require further investigation. These limitations underscore that Chinese national community consciousness is not a linear achievement but a dynamic, negotiated process shaped by individual agency and structural context.

### **Author Contributions:**

Conceptualization, T. B and W. B; methodology, T. B; validation, T. B, W. B and X. D; formal analysis, T. B; investigation, X. D and X. Z; resources, W. B; data curation, X. Z; writing—original draft preparation, T. B and Z. L; writing—review and editing, W.B; visualization, Z. L; supervision, W. B; project administration, T. B; funding acquisition, T. B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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### **Informed Consent Statement:**

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

### **Data Availability Statement:**

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

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### **Conflict of Interest:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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