

Exploring the Wenzhou Spirit in Chinese Diet: A Comparative Study of Regional Diversity and Diaspora Adaptation

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Abstract. This study examines how the "Wenzhou Spirit" influences dietary practices in the Wenzhou region and its global diaspora. The Wenzhou Spirit, known for its entrepreneurial drive and cultural resilience, shapes the region's culinary traditions, which emphasize fresh, local ingredients and traditional methods. By comparing these practices within China and among the diaspora, the research highlights the balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to new environments. Interviews with Wenzhou locals and diaspora members reveal how these culinary traditions evolve, demonstrating the Wenzhou Spirit's role in sustaining and spreading the region's food culture globally.

Keywords: Wenzhou Spirit; Chinese Diaspora; Culinary Adaptation; Cultural Preservation; Entrepreneurship; Wenzhou Cuisine.

1. Introduction

The "Wenzhou Spirit" originates from the Wenzhou people's desire to have a better life, with cultural perseverance, Wenzhou people build upon the largest ethnic Chinese diaspora group. Wenzhou food also follows Wenzhou people to different parts of the world, blending into different cultures and cuisines. This paper follows the research question about how the "Wenzhou Spirit" manifests in the dietary practices of the Wenzhou region, and how these practices compare and contribute to the broader context of North-South dietary differences in China, as well as the Chinese diaspora's culinary adaptation and preservation abroad? Based on interviews with Wenzhou people and Wenzhou Cuisine experts. The "Wenzhou Spirit" not only exemplifies the unique dietary customs of the Wenzhou region as a distinct embodiment of North-South dietary differences in China but also illustrates the dynamic adaptation and preservation of these culinary practices among the Chinese diaspora, underscoring the global influence of regional Chinese cuisines.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Literature Review

As a typical city in Southern China, to analyze how the Wenzhou spirit influences the diet in China and the Wenzhou diaspora's unique food traditions and features, to have an overview of the comparison between Southern and Northern China's diet differences is essential. Especially about how cultural differences, geographical factors, transportation, and crops can affect the diet between Southern and Northern China.

Cultural differences between Northern and Southern China significantly influence dietary patterns in these regions, reflecting historical, geographical, and climatic variations. In the North, the diet is heavily influenced by the colder climate and arable plains, leading to a preference for wheat-based foods such as noodles, dumplings, and breads. In contrast, Southern China, characterized by its warmer weather and abundant rainfall, favors rice as a staple and incorporates a greater variety of fruits, vegetables, and aquatic foods into its cuisine. These dietary distinctions are not merely a matter of preference but are deeply embedded in the historical migration patterns, agricultural practices, and culinary traditions unique to each region, thereby perpetuating distinct cultural identities through food (Zhang et al., 2020). The entrepreneurial spirit of Wenzhou, driven by its diaspora, has led to a



dynamic and adaptive culinary scene that not only preserves traditional Wenzhou dishes but also integrates global flavor.

Geographical factors play a critical role in shaping the dietary habits of Northern and Southern China, driven primarily by differences in climate, terrain, and natural resources. In Northern China, the colder and harsher climate limits the variety of crops that can be grown, leading to a reliance on wheat and millet as staple foods. This region's broad, flat plains are conducive to extensive wheat farming, resulting in a diet rich in noodles, steamed buns, and various breads. In contrast, Southern China benefits from a warmer and more humid climate, which supports a diverse range of agriculture, including rice paddies and a variety of fruits and vegetables. The terrain here, characterized by hilly landscapes and abundant rivers, also supports the cultivation of tea and the farming of fish and other aquatic life, which prominently feature in the Southern diet (Zhao et al., 2022). These geographical influences not only determine the types of food that are readily available but also influence the cooking methods and flavors typical of each region, such as the steaming and stir-frying prevalent in the South compared to the boiling and baking more common in the North. Wenzhou's mild climate and fertile land facilitate the cultivation of a variety of crops and seafood, which enriches the local diet with fresh vegetables, fruits, and aquatic foods, reflecting a typical Southern Chinese preference for fresh and seasonal ingredients.

The development and variation in transportation systems between Northern and Southern China have had a significant impact on the dietary habits and food availability in these regions. Based on Li et al., (2021)'s research, Historically, the challenging terrain and less developed infrastructure in Southern China made the transportation of perishable goods difficult, encouraging a reliance on local produce and fresh ingredients. This led to a cuisine that is rich in diversity, with a strong emphasis on freshness and seasonal eating. Conversely, Northern China, with its more extensive and historically significant railway and road networks, has had greater access to a variety of foods, including those not locally produced. This connectivity facilitated the transport of durable food items like grains and preserved foods, which could withstand long travel times without spoiling. Thus, Northern diets could incorporate ingredients from distant regions, leading to a cuisine characterized by preserved foods such as pickled vegetables and dried meats, alongside staples like wheat and corn. Furthermore, the modernization of transportation, especially the expansion of highways, high-speed trains, and improved refrigeration in logistics, has started to diminish these regional differences. It has enabled a more uniform distribution of diverse food products across the country, allowing people from different regions to access a broader spectrum of ingredients year-round. This development has gradually led to a fusion of culinary practices and a more homogenized national cuisine, though distinctive regional flavors and preferences still persist. Improved transportation infrastructure in Wenzhou enhances the city's access to diverse ingredients from both domestic and international sources, enabling a fusion of traditional and modern culinary practices that cater to both local tastes and global trends.

The distinct agricultural conditions in Northern and Southern China significantly influence the types of crops grown, which in turn shape regional dietary patterns. In Northern China, the cooler climate and fertile plains are ideal for growing wheat, millet, and other grains. Based on Chang et al. (2018)'s study, these crops form the basis of the Northern Chinese diet, which features foods such as noodles, dumplings, pancakes, and various types of breads. The preference for these wheat-based foods is also influenced by the drier conditions, which are less conducive to rice cultivation. On the other hand, Southern China, with its warmer and more humid climate, is well-suited for rice cultivation. The abundance of rice fields in this region makes rice the staple food, accompanying almost every meal. The South also benefits from its diverse and lush terrain, including mountainous areas and rich river deltas, which support a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and tea plants. This diversity is reflected in the Southern diet, which is rich in fresh vegetables, fruits, and aquatic foods, brought from nearby rivers and lakes. The contrast in staple crops—wheat in the North and rice in the South—leads to fundamentally different eating habits and culinary techniques. Northern Chinese cuisine often features heavier, oilier dishes with a focus on flavors from soy sauce and vinegar, suitable for the

energy needs of colder environments. Southern cuisine, in contrast, tends to be lighter, with a greater emphasis on natural flavors, steaming, and stir-frying to preserve the freshness of ingredients. This diversity in agricultural production and dietary preferences highlights the profound impact of regional crop cultivation on China's culinary landscape. The predominance of rice cultivation in the region, supported by Wenzhou's conducive climate and terrain, anchors the local diet in rice-based dishes, which are often complemented by a rich array of locally sourced vegetables and seafood, highlighting the region's strong connection to its agricultural landscape.

2.2. Investigating the Influence of Diaspora on the Wenzhou Spirit and Its Culinary Tradition

The "Wenzhou Spirit" embodies the unique blend of entrepreneurial zeal, innovative adaptability, and a strong commitment to community and cultural preservation, which collectively shape the Wenzhou region's dietary practices and culinary traditions.

According to the Zhejiang Government's website, Wenzhou Spirit can be officially summarized in four sentences: the entrepreneurial spirit of starting from nothing and working hard; the autonomous spirit of not waiting for anything and relying on oneself; the pioneering spirit of venturing out into the world and being at home in all corners of the globe; and the creative spirit of daring to innovate and being good at innovating. Wenzhou Spirit is mainly reflected in the business, because Wenzhou people dare to start a business, and dare to leave their hometown to fight for a career, which is why many overseas Chinese are very Wenzhou people, these diasporas can also show the spirit of Wenzhou. According to the official definition on the Zhejiang government website, Wenzhou Spirit is open and creative entrepreneurship, this will undoubtedly also affect the food culture of Wenzhou people.

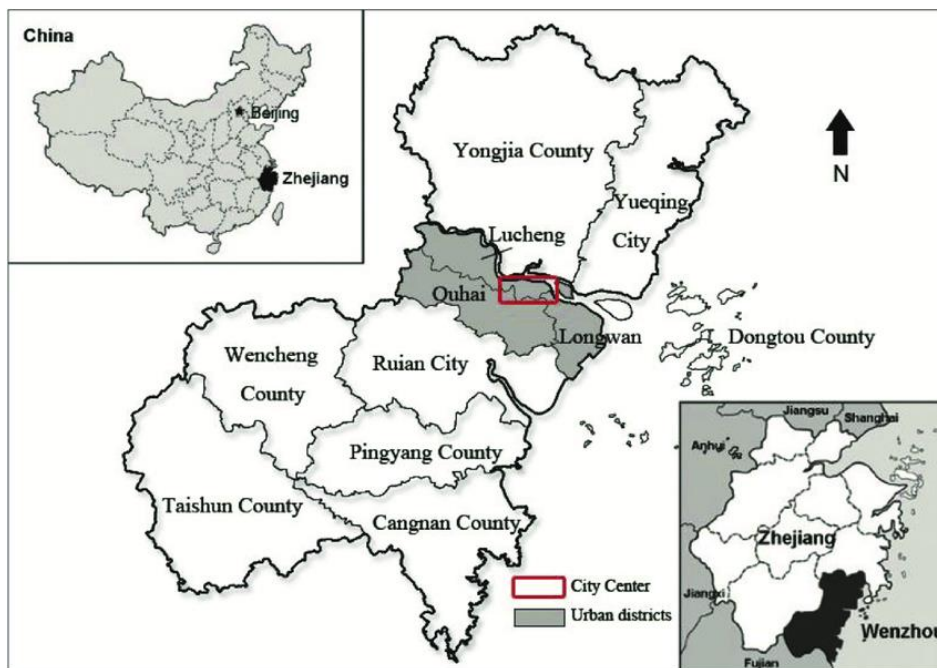


Figure 1. Map of Wenzhou



Figure 2. Map of China (Beijing and Wenzhou are highlighted)

Wenzhou has a population of 9 million people located on the southern coast of China with 70% mountain, 20% farmland, and 10% water. It's known as very humid year round with heavy rain, so crops are very rare because of the weather and geological situation. Wenzhou is a coastal city with high degrees of exports, including tea, wine, jute, timber, paper, alunite, etc. The land of China is usually separated into north and south by the Yangtze River. People call places north or south according to the location corresponding to the river. Still based on the Zhejiang Government's website, the Wenzhou Spirit is significant to China as it embodies the drive for economic development and resilience, inspiring entrepreneurial growth and diversification in other regions across the country.

Then, comes the term diaspora and its influence on the Wenzhou spirit. Wenzhou people started to spread all around the world in the 1920s, mostly in European countries such as Italy. This is caused by the shortages of resources and job chances. Wenzhou spirit is highly bonded with the sense of family connection, this is highly valued due to the vast amounts of Wenzhou people in different places of the world and the difficulty of them meeting one another (Li, et al., 2021). This entrepreneurial ethos, characterized by resilience, innovation, and a strong network of family-based businesses, has been instrumental in spreading Wenzhou's distinctive food culture across the globe (Chan, 2019). As Wenzhou natives established restaurants and food businesses overseas, they not only promoted regional specialties but also adapted their offerings to local tastes, thus expanding the influence of Wenzhou's culinary heritage and entrepreneurial practices (Li & Fung, 2021). This global presence underscores the dynamic interaction between migration, cultural exchange, and economic expansion, emblematic of the Wenzhou Spirit's impact beyond its geographic origins.

2.3. Method

1) Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on semi-structured interviews to explore how the "Wenzhou Spirit" manifests in the dietary practices of the Wenzhou region and among the Wenzhou diaspora. To gather comprehensive insights, interviews will be conducted with a diverse group of participants, including Wenzhou cuisine experts, local residents in the Wenzhou area, and members of the Wenzhou diaspora in various countries.

2) Participants

A total of 10 participants will be selected using purposive sampling to ensure a representation of both genders, multiple age groups, and different levels of familiarity with Wenzhou culinary traditions. This will include 4 Wenzhou cuisine experts, identified through culinary institutions and renowned local eateries, and 6 community members.

3) Data Collection

Interviews will be conducted in Mandarin or the local dialect, depending on the participant's preference, to facilitate comfort and clarity. Each interview is anticipated to last between 45 to 60 minutes, allowing participants to delve deeply into their experiences and perspectives on the influence of the Wenzhou Spirit on their dietary habits. Interviews with diaspora members will be conducted via video calls to accommodate geographical constraints, while those with local residents and experts will be conducted in person, adhering to ethical guidelines and confidentiality agreements.

4) Data Analysis

The interviews will be transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. Thematic analysis will be applied to the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the research question. This analysis will involve coding the data in iterative rounds, refining themes, and drawing connections between the regional dietary practices in Wenzhou and the adaptations made by the diaspora.

This methodological approach aims to provide deep insights into the cultural and culinary dynamics shaped by the Wenzhou Spirit, highlighting both regional continuity and change due to diasporic influences.

2.4. Findings

The interviews conducted with both the local Wenzhou population and members of the Wenzhou diaspora reveal distinct manifestations of the "Wenzhou Spirit" in dietary practices, influenced by entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, and a strong sense of cultural preservation. These findings highlight both the continuity and evolution of Wenzhou's culinary traditions across different environments.

1) Local Culinary Traditions and the Wenzhou Spirit

In the Wenzhou region, participants emphasized the importance of local ingredients and traditional cooking methods, which are seen as core to preserving their cultural identity. Local experts and residents described a rich culinary tradition characterized by seafood, local vegetables, and rice-based dishes. For example, JN, a local chef, mentioned, "Our dishes are not just food; they are a representation of our heritage. I always ensure that the fish is caught fresh from our waters and the vegetables are picked from nearby farms. This connection to our land is what makes Wenzhou cuisine unique." The importance of fresh, locally sourced ingredients was consistently highlighted, reflecting a deeply embedded value of utilizing the natural bounty provided by Wenzhou's geography. This practice was strongly linked to the entrepreneurial aspect of the Wenzhou Spirit, with many locals engaged in small-scale farming and fishing that directly supplies the regional markets.

2) Adaptation and Innovation Among the Diaspora

Among the Wenzhou diaspora, the culinary practices displayed significant adaptation to local ingredients and consumer preferences in their new environments. Participants living abroad shared stories of how they modified traditional Wenzhou dishes to accommodate the availability of different ingredients and to appeal to local palates. For example, LY, who moved to the United States, explained, "In place of traditional Chinese rice, I often use quinoa or barley, which are more readily available here and offer a similar texture. Although the grains are different, I make sure to keep the flavors authentic by using the same seasonings and cooking methods." One common adaptation was the use of alternative grains in place of traditional Chinese rice, driven by local availability and cost considerations. Despite these changes, the diaspora maintained core elements of Wenzhou cooking techniques, such as steaming and stir-frying, which participants identified as essential to retaining the "Wenzhou taste."

3) Entrepreneurial Drive in Culinary Ventures

Both local and diaspora participants highlighted the entrepreneurial spirit as a crucial element of their culinary practices. In Wenzhou, this was manifested in the proliferation of small eateries and family-run restaurants that specialize in local cuisines, often innovating within traditional recipes to attract

tourists and new generations. For instance, ZY, a restaurant owner in Wenzhou, shared, "We've taken our traditional seafood dishes and added modern twists to appeal to younger customers, all while staying true to our roots. This way, we keep our heritage alive and our business thriving." The Wenzhou diaspora frequently engages in the restaurant business, introducing Wenzhou cuisine to global audiences. For example, YL, who owns a restaurant in Paris, noted, "We offer classic Wenzhou dishes with slight modifications to suit French tastes, like using local herbs, but the essence of our cuisine remains unchanged. It's our way of sharing a piece of home with the world." This entrepreneurial approach not only helps in sustaining their economic livelihood but also serves as a medium for cultural expression and preservation.

4) Cultural Preservation through Food

The role of food in cultural preservation was a prominent theme across all interviews. Participants expressed a strong desire to maintain a connection to their Wenzhou roots through culinary traditions, which they passed down through generations. For example, WX, a second-generation Wenzhou immigrant in Canada, shared, "My mother taught me how to make traditional Wenzhou dishes like 'fish ball soup' and 'Wenzhou dumplings.' I now teach my children the same recipes, so they never forget where they come from." This was particularly evident among the diaspora, where food serves as a direct link to their heritage, amidst diverse cultural influences. Celebratory dishes and traditional festival foods were especially significant in this regard, with participants taking great pride in preparing and sharing these with both Wenzhou and non-Wenzhou friends and family.

These findings illustrate the dynamic interaction between the Wenzhou Spirit and the culinary practices of the Wenzhou people, both in their native region and across the diaspora. The entrepreneurial zeal, coupled with a commitment to cultural preservation and adaptability, not only sustains but also enriches Wenzhou's dietary traditions in the context of global migration and cultural exchange.

2.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the "Wenzhou Spirit" is intricately woven into the dietary practices and culinary traditions of the Wenzhou region, reflecting a rich tapestry of entrepreneurial zeal, innovation, and cultural perseverance. This spirit is evident in both the local culinary landscape, characterized by the use of fresh, local ingredients and traditional cooking methods, and in the adaptive strategies of the Wenzhou diaspora, who have successfully integrated their culinary heritage into diverse cultural contexts around the globe. The resilience and adaptability inherent in the "Wenzhou Spirit" have not only preserved but also enriched Wenzhou's culinary traditions, enabling a dynamic interaction between local customs and global influences. This ongoing process highlights the significance of food as a medium for cultural preservation and expression, ensuring that the "Wenzhou taste" continues to thrive amidst the ever-changing landscapes of migration and globalization.

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