



Cultural symbol and national identity in the Hui cuisine: Analysing food documentaries through the circuit of culture

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, food documentaries have emerged as a notable form of media that investigates the complex relationships among food, tradition, culture, and national identity. Chinese cuisine, renowned for its diversity, reflects the country's multi-ethnic composition, which includes minority groups such as the Hui, Uyghur, and Mongolian communities. The Hui people, one of the significant ethnic minorities in China, possess a rich culinary tradition deeply rooted in Islamic and halal practices. Their cuisine not only signifies their national identity but also serves as a potent cultural symbol. This research employed the Circuit of Culture to analyse the interplay between cultural representation and national identity in food documentaries. The research specifically focused on segments representing the Hui ethnic group from the three seasons of *A Bite of China* and *Once Upon a Bite*, as well as *Halal Flavour*. Through the qualitative content analysis of segments produced between 2016 and 2022, this research reveals the intricacies of Hui culinary traditions and the way these documentaries portray cultural symbols. By offering a comprehensive perspective on how national identity, cultural traditions, and cuisine interact within this community, the study enhances our understanding of the role food documentaries play in cultural representation. The findings carry significant implications for documentary filmmakers and cultural policymakers. This research investigates how these documentaries, situated at the intersection of food, cultural symbols, and media, contribute to the construction or transformation of national identity. These insights can inform the production of future documentaries, enabling a more accurate representation of cultural diversity, which, in turn, may contribute to the development of a more cohesive and unified national identity.

Keywords: *Hui cuisine, food documentaries, cultural symbols, national identity, Circuit of Culture*

INTRODUCTION

Hui cuisine, a significant cultural expression of the Hui ethnic minority in China, transcends its basic role as sustenance to embody a deep interconnection between religious observance, historical heritage, and ethnic identity. The culinary practices of the Hui people are strongly influenced by Islamic dietary laws, with the principle of halal governing both the types of food consumed and the methods of preparation (Youchun & Tian, 2019). This religious framework not only dictates dietary habits but also serves as a cornerstone of the Hui's cultural distinctiveness, reinforcing their unique religious and cultural identity within the broader context of China's multi-ethnic society (King, 2020). Food documentaries that focus on Hui cuisine offer a valuable lens through which to examine the symbolic meanings embedded in food practices. These visual narratives provide insight into the complex interplay between food, religion, and cultural identity, often highlighting themes of religious observance, cultural continuity, and communal solidarity (Tuxun, 2022). By portraying Hui food traditions, these documentaries contribute to the broader discourse on how food serves as a cultural symbol and a medium for expressing ethnic identity.

While the popularity of culinary documentaries has increased in recent years, a noticeable gap remains in academic research that specifically addresses the cultural symbols embedded in these films, particularly regarding their role in shaping the understanding of Hui cuisine. Although prior studies have examined the role of food in cultural representation at a general level (Bhattacharjya & Zhaohui, 2017; Dong, 2017), little attention has been given to how these symbols operate within the unique context of Hui culinary traditions and how they are depicted in documentary media. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how cultural symbols portrayed in Hui food documentaries reflect and reinforce key aspects of religious beliefs, cultural identity, and traditional practices (Ain, 2015).

This research aims to explore how cultural symbols in documentaries about Hui cuisine contribute to the preservation and reinforcement of Hui national identity within China's multi-ethnic landscape. By examining how food documentaries serve as a medium to express and sustain Hui cultural and religious values, the study sheds light on how national identity is communicated and maintained. This research provides insights into the complex relationship between food, culture, and media, offering a deeper understanding of how minority identities are integrated into the national narrative.

The findings of this study have important implications for documentary filmmakers, cultural policymakers, and media producers. By highlighting how documentaries represent cultural diversity, this research offers practical guidance for creating more authentic and inclusive narratives. For policymakers, these insights can inform efforts to promote greater cultural representation and cohesion in media. The study also offers targeted recommendations on enhancing media content to better reflect the richness of minority cultures in shaping national identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uniqueness of Hui dietary culture

The distinctiveness of Hui cuisine is often attributed to its observance of Islamic dietary laws. These practices are not only a matter of religious adherence but are also closely linked to the broader cultural and religious identity. Within this field, substantial previous research has laid a robust foundation for understanding the complex relationship between halal dietary norms and religious belief. Studies have shown that halal (permissible) and haram (forbidden) principles dictate food choices, preparation methods, and consumption practices, thereby maintaining religious purity and adherence within the Hui community (Bhatt, 2023). The prohibition of pork and specific slaughtering practices are critical in sustaining the community's religious identity (Ain, 2015). However, while these studies focus on religious adherence, they often neglect the symbolic meanings that food holds in the broader context of national identity, particularly through media portrayals.

Cultural transmission and cuisine

Hui cuisine also plays a vital role in the cultural continuity of the community, with food practices serving as a medium for transmitting traditions across generations. Research highlights how traditional Hui dishes, such as hand-torn lamb (手抓羊肉) and fried dough twists (馓子), are not merely sustenance but symbols of historical and familial heritage (Sun, 2022). Communal events, festivals, and family gatherings are essential for preserving these culinary traditions, as they reinforce both cultural bonds and ethnic identity (Guo et al., 2024). Despite this understanding, a gap remains in how the transmission of these traditions is represented in contemporary media, particularly in documentaries, which play an increasingly important role in narrating cultural stories.

Cuisine and national identity

Hui cuisine functions not only as a marker of ethnic and cultural identity, but also as a tool for negotiating the national identity within China's multi-ethnic society. Studies have shown that food practices are deeply tied to self-perception and external representation, reflecting the community's efforts to assert and maintain its cultural distinctiveness (Liu, 2021; Zhen et al., 2023). Hui cuisine serves as a means of expressing cultural and religious identity while negotiating its position within the broader social fabric (Weng, 2025). Although these studies recognize the importance of food in cultural identity, they often overlook how food documentaries mediate this process, particularly in shaping public perceptions and contributing to the construction or alteration of national identity. Documentary media provide important spaces for negotiating cultural meanings and identities. Li et al. (2023) demonstrated that documentaries are not merely representations of reality but also narrative forms through which social experiences and identities are constructed. This perspective provides a useful foundation for examining how Hui food documentaries mediate ethnic identity and national belonging.

Religious symbols in food

In Islamic cultures, including Hui culture, food holds deep religious and social significance, serving as both a material necessity and a symbolic medium for expressing religious piety, communal identity, and social cohesion (Geertz, 1973). The concept of “halal”, which denotes purity and adherence to divine law, is central to the religious practices of the Hui community and serves as a critical boundary marker distinguishing between permissible (“halal”) and forbidden (“haram”) foods (Liu & Lin, 2020). This strict adherence to Islamic dietary regulations reinforces both the religious and ethnic identity of the Hui, positioning food practices as a fundamental expression of cultural distinctiveness.

Signature dishes, such as lamb skewers and lamb soup, are not merely culinary staples but are also laden with religious symbolism, reflecting the community’s observance of Islamic principles and dietary restrictions (Wu et al., 2014). However, despite the importance of these food practices, there is a paucity of research examining how religious food symbols are mediated through contemporary visual narratives, such as food documentaries. This gap is particularly significant as media representation plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of religious and cultural identities (Caldwell, 2008). Understanding how Hui food practices are portrayed in the media could provide crucial insights into the broader discourse on the intersection of religion, culture, and media.

Cultural symbols and historical identity

Food also operates as a powerful symbol for the transmission of historical memory and the reinforcement of ethnic identity, particularly within diasporic and minority communities (Appadurai, 1981; Mintz, 1996). For the Hui, traditional cooking techniques such as charcoal roasting and steaming serve as tangible links to their ethnic and historical heritage, symbolizing a continuity of practices passed down through generations (Anderson, 2005). Culinary traditions, such as hand-pulled noodles, often associated with broader narratives of migration and intercultural exchange, exemplify how food can encapsulate the historical trajectories of a community, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging and historical continuity (Zhang & Ma, 2016). However, while the role of food as a marker of historical identity has been well documented in broader food studies (Mintz, 1996), a gap remains in scholarly attention as to how such cultural symbols are represented and mediated through food documentaries.

Given the increasing influence of visual media in constructing and preserving cultural narratives, exploring how these symbols are depicted in food documentaries is essential for understanding the ongoing negotiation of ethnic and historical identity in the contemporary media landscape (Sassatelli, 2012). The lack of research in this area underscores the need for a more nuanced examination of the media’s role in preserving and transforming cultural symbols within the Hui community. Fang and Mansor (2024) highlighted that visual signs convey cultural meanings through symbolic representation, demonstrating how media texts transform cultural elements into meaningful narratives. Similarly, Hui cuisine documentaries employ food-related symbols, traditional practices, and cultural spaces to construct representations of ethnic identity and historical

continuity. Visual representation further influences how cultural symbols are interpreted and circulated within media texts.

Culinary practices as social and cultural symbols

Hui cuisine is not merely about practices; they are deeply interwoven with the social and religious fabric of the community, playing a crucial role in the construction of both social cohesion and religious identity (Liu & Lin, 2020). Communal dining, particularly during religious festivals, serves as a critical site where social hierarchies and communal bonds are both reinforced and negotiated. Drawing from the theory of performative social practices (Butler, 1990), these food practices can be understood as symbolic acts that not only reflect ethnic unity but also continually reproduce the community's religious piety and social order. The shared consumption of halal food during communal events embodies a collective identity and reinforces the internalization of Islamic values within the community (Fischer, 2011). However, despite the centrality of these practices in Hui culture, their representation in contemporary visual media remains understudied.

Research gap and contribution

The identified research gaps highlight several areas that require further exploration. First, there is limited research on how Hui religious food practices, such as halal regulations, are represented in visual media, particularly food documentaries, which play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Hui religious and cultural identity. Second, while food documentaries have the potential to act as a bridge between tradition and modernity, there is a lack of scholarly attention on how these media forms capture and communicate the complexities of Hui culinary traditions and cultural continuity. Finally, the representation of cultural regulations, such as halal certification, and their broader cultural and religious implications remain underexplored, leaving a gap in understanding how media influences the perception of food, religion, and identity in the Hui community.

Therefore, the research question is: How does the portrayal of Hui cuisine in food documentaries contribute to the construction of Hui ethnic identity within the broader context of Chinese national identity? What role do food documentaries play in shaping the public's perception of Hui identity? How is Hui cuisine represented as a cultural symbol in Chinese food documentaries, and what cultural meanings are conveyed through this representation?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the representation of cultural symbols in Hui cuisine as depicted in food documentaries. The analysis was framed through the Circuit of Culture framework, which offers a robust theoretical lens for examining how cultural symbols associated with Hui cuisine are produced, represented, and consumed within media narratives. The Circuit of Culture framework consists of five interrelated components: production, representation,

consumption, identity, and regulation. These components serve as the analytical guide for this study. The production aspect explores how Hui cuisine is created and presented in food documentaries. Representation focuses on the depiction and portrayal of Hui culinary symbols within the media. Consumption examines the audience's engagement with these representations and their interpretations. Identity examines how symbols reflect and contribute to the cultural, religious, and historical identities associated with Hui cuisine. Lastly, regulation addresses the influences and constraints imposed on the portrayal of these symbols.

This research specifically aims to uncover how cultural symbols in Hui cuisine reflect and shape religious, historical, and cultural identities through media representations. By integrating the Circuit of Culture framework, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between media portrayal and cultural identity in the context of Hui food practices. The primary data for this study were derived from selected episodes and segments of food documentaries that feature Hui cuisine as a central focus. The documentaries analysed include:

- *A Bite of China* (Seasons 1–3)
- *Once Upon a Bite*
- *Halal Flavour*

These documentaries, aired between 2016 and 2022, were selected for their significant viewership and detailed portrayal of Hui cuisine. Each episode or segment that specifically highlights Hui culinary traditions within these documentaries served as the unit of analysis. This selection criterion ensured an in-depth exploration of how Hui food and cultural symbols are represented in media.

This study examined the cultural symbols associated with Hui cuisine as depicted in the selected food documentaries. The data collection process involved identifying and analysing cultural symbols that embody religious, historical, and cultural meanings within the context of Hui food practices. The cultural symbols are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Hui cuisine cultural symbolism coding table

Category	Description
Religious symbols	Symbols and customs related to Hui cuisine, including:
– Halal practices	Description of halal food, including definitions, production methods, and slaughter processes.
– Islamic rituals	Dietary customs associated with religious rituals, such as Ramadan meal arrangements and Eid al-Fitr foods.
– Religious artifacts	Mention of religious symbols or items (e.g., mosques, Arabic calligraphy, prayers) and their relationship to food.
– Dietary restrictions	Specific dietary prohibitions related to Hui cuisine include the avoidance of pork.
Historical symbols	The historical and cultural heritage of Hui cuisine, including:
– Historical origins of dishes	Narratives about the historical origins of specific dishes and their connections to Hui culture or Chinese history (e.g., hand-pulled noodles, fried dough twists).
– Traditional cooking techniques	Descriptions of traditional cooking methods, such as charcoal grilling or steaming, and their significance in cultural transmission.

Table 1. (con't)

Category	Description
– Migration references	How migration history and cross-cultural exchanges influenced particular dietary habits and cultural development.
Cultural identity markers	Symbols related to cultural and ethnic identity in Hui cuisine, including:
– Community and food	Food rituals or communal activities related to community events (e.g., weddings and religious festivals) and their role in cultural identity.
– Attire and eating habits	Connections between traditional dress and food preparation or consumption, especially in the context of Hui culinary practices.
– Ethnic and religious identity	The role of food in symbolizing or reinforcing Hui and Islamic identity, particularly in comparison to other ethnic groups.
Culinary practices as symbols	Unique cooking practices and their symbolic meanings, including:
– Distinct ingredients	Use of specific ingredients, such as lamb and unique spices, and their symbolism in Hui cuisine and relation to religious or geographical factors.
– Cooking methods	Unique cooking techniques, such as steaming or slow cooking, and their cultural or religious significance, including how these methods are preserved or innovated.
– Serving and eating habits	Dining customs and table manners associated with family or religious activities, and how they reflect cultural values.

Each of these elements is examined to understand how Hui culinary traditions and cultural symbols are represented and interpreted in the media. The qualitative content analysis employed an iterative coding process to identify key cultural symbols related to Hui cuisine. This process involved both deductive and inductive coding strategies. For deductive coding, predefined codes were applied based on theoretical frameworks such as the Circuit of Culture and cultural symbolism theories, focusing on categories like religious symbols, historical references, identity markers, and culinary techniques. Inductive coding was employed to identify and incorporate new patterns and themes that emerged from the data. This included developing additional codes for cultural practices unique to the Hui, such as community-oriented cooking and religious practices associated with halal food. To ensure consistency and reliability, two coders independently reviewed the transcripts and visual data. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, leading to the establishment of a comprehensive coding framework for systematic data analysis.

The qualitative content analysis followed a systematic process of coding, categorization, and interpretation. The initial coding process was guided by concepts and categories derived from the literature, with a particular focus on key visual and textual elements related to Hui culture, including halal food practices, traditional ingredients, and religious rituals. These pre-established codes were informed by prior research on cultural identity and representation, and they were organized into meaningful categories based on their cultural significance and their role in constructing Hui identity. Once the initial codes were applied, they were grouped into higher-level categories reflecting broader cultural themes, such as religious adherence in food practices and national identity through cuisine.

Therefore, these higher-level categories provided a structured framework for examining the portrayal of Hui culture within the documentaries. Each category was analysed in relation to the broader social and cultural contexts, considering how the documentaries emphasized certain aspects of Hui identity while potentially downplaying or omitting others. The analysis then moved beyond simple categorization to explore the interconnections between these themes, focusing on how Hui food practices not only reinforced their religious and ethnic identity but also contributed to a larger narrative about national unity and cultural diversity within China.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Key cultural symbols in Hui cuisine

Table 2. Coverage of cultural symbolism in Hui cuisine

Category	Symbol	Coverage (%)	Analysis
Religious Symbols	Halal Practices	13.55	High coverage suggests halal practices are a primary cultural symbol in Hui cuisine, highlighting their importance.
	Islamic Rituals	12.66	The relatively high coverage of Islamic rituals highlights their significance in Hui cuisine, reflecting the impact of religious practices on the culinary culture.
	Dietary Restrictions	2.05	The lower coverage suggests that although dietary restrictions are present in Hui food culture, they are not frequently highlighted in the documentary.
Historical Symbols	Historical Origins of Dishes	10.11	High coverage reflects the importance of historical origins in Hui cuisine, indicating a deep connection to the past.
	Traditional Cooking Techniques	3.73	Lower coverage implies that traditional cooking techniques are less emphasized in cultural symbolism compared to other aspects.
	Migration References	4.33	Moderate coverage shows that migration history has some significance in Hui food culture, reflecting the impact of historical movements on cuisine.
Cultural Identity Markers	Community and Food	5.92	Moderate coverage suggests that food plays a significant role in community building and reinforcing cultural identity within the Hui population.
	Ethnic and Religious Identity	6.97	High coverage demonstrates that Hui cuisine is crucial for expressing ethnic and religious identity, highlighting its cultural significance.
Culinary Practices as Symbols	Distinct Ingredients	10.30	High coverage of distinct ingredients highlights their importance in cultural symbolism, making them key to the uniqueness of Hui cuisine.
	Cooking Methods	4.93	Moderate coverage suggests that cooking methods are a notable but secondary aspect of cultural symbolism, indicating less emphasis than on ingredients or historical references.
	Serving and Eating Habits	1.19	Lowest coverage suggests that serving and eating habits are the least significant in terms of cultural representation in the documentary.

Table 2 illustrates that the key cultural symbols in Hui cuisine include halal practices, Islamic rituals, the historical origins of dishes, distinctive ingredients, and the connection between food and community. These symbols highlight the importance of religion, history, cultural identity, and culinary practices in Hui food culture. In comparison, dietary restrictions, serving, and eating habits have lower coverage, suggesting they play a less prominent role as cultural symbols. Overall, religious symbols such as halal practices and Islamic rituals hold a significant place in Hui culinary culture.

Reinforcement of religious identity through food

The documentaries prominently featured Hui religious identity through the portrayal of halal food practices. They depicted ritual slaughter, the use of specific ingredients, and the avoidance of foods like pork, underscoring the central role of religious observance in Hui daily life and their identity as a Muslim minority in China. This supports the idea that food practices are both a marker of group membership and a means of cultural preservation.

Cultural integration and the narrative of national unity

Hui cuisine was depicted as both unique and integrated into China's broader culinary landscape. The documentaries highlighted Hui food practices while also emphasizing shared cultural values with the Han population, such as family, tradition, and communal meals. This presentation constructed Hui culture as an integral part of China's multi-ethnic unity, reflecting the state's emphasis on ethnic harmony and national cohesion.

Shifts in representation over time

In comparing documentaries from 2016 to 2022, a shift in how Hui culture was portrayed was revealed. Earlier works focused on the exotic aspects of Hui food, while more recent ones, such as *Once Upon a Bite*, framed it as part of a shared national heritage. This shift indicates an effort to integrate minority cultures into the mainstream cultural narrative, aligning with recent government policies on ethnic integration and cultural cohesion.

Modernity and tradition in tension

Another significant finding was the tension between modernity and tradition in the portrayal of Hui cuisine. On one hand, the documentaries celebrated the preservation of traditional Hui food practices, emphasizing their historical and cultural roots. On the other hand, there was also a focus on modernization, including the adoption of new cooking technologies, the commercialization of Hui cuisine, and the influence of global culinary trends. This duality reflects the broader societal tension between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing modern development, particularly in the context of a rapidly changing China.

Media's role in shaping public perception

The findings indicate that food documentaries do not merely record Hui culinary practices but construct particular ways of understanding Hui culture through visual

imagery, narration, music, and representations of communal dining. This observation is consistent with Fang and Mansor (2024), who argue that visual elements in screen media function not only as aesthetic choices but also as cultural and narrative tools. Food-related media similarly connect culinary practices with broader meanings concerning culture, religion, heritage, and identity (Miller et al., 2023). By presenting Hui cuisine as an expression of cultural heritage and social belonging, the documentaries may contribute to the public understanding of Hui traditions while positioning the Hui identity within the broader narrative of Chinese cultural diversity. Nevertheless, such mediated representations remain selective and may not fully reflect the diversity of lived experiences within the Hui community.

Cultural representation and identity: The role of Hui cuisine in Chinese food documentaries

Although food documentaries may contribute to the public understanding of the Hui culture, their representations do not necessarily correspond fully with how Hui communities understand and express their own identities. Since documentaries are produced for broad audiences, they may selectively emphasize visually distinctive or culturally unfamiliar elements of Hui cuisine. Such framing can simplify the diversity of Hui identity or portray it as exotic in comparison with Han Chinese culture. Consequently, a romanticized or homogenized representation may emerge, obscuring differences in culinary practices, religious observance, regional traditions, and everyday experiences within Hui communities.

While food documentaries can generate cultural pride by showcasing unique culinary traditions, they might also risk misrepresenting or commodifying Hui cuisine for entertainment purposes. This could create a disconnect between the public perception of the Hui identity and the authentic lived experiences of the Hui people. Hui cuisine can be seen as a symbol of the Hui ethnic group's religious and cultural identity, and food documentaries often capitalize on this symbolism. Dishes like “Yangrou Paomo” (mutton and bread soup) or “Hui-style beef noodles” are typically framed as culturally significant, representing the Hui's Islamic beliefs and their historical place within the Chinese society.

Documentaries may frame Hui cuisine as a cultural bridge that reflects China's multiculturalism. This representation can convey a message of unity in diversity, suggesting that while Hui food is distinct due to its Islamic roots, it is an integral part of the larger tapestry of Chinese cuisine. Documentaries might highlight the fusion of Hui cuisine with other regional Chinese cuisines, showcasing how the Hui community has interacted with other cultures over centuries. At the same time, the narrative of preserving authenticity—especially in relation to religious dietary laws (halal)—might be emphasized as a point of cultural pride and identity preservation.

These insights provide a structured framework for analysing how Hui cuisine is depicted in documentaries and its role in shaping and reflecting both public perceptions and Hui's self-identity. By focusing on the nuances of representation, you can gain a deeper understanding of how food plays a central role in the construction of ethnic and national identities in a multicultural society like China.

CONCLUSION

This paper significantly enhances our understanding of how Hui cuisine is portrayed in contemporary Chinese documentaries. It highlights the central role of food practices in reinforcing Hui's religious identity, illustrating how halal food practices and dietary laws are depicted as integral to the Hui's distinct ethnic and religious identity. Additionally, the study reveals how Hui cuisine is framed within the broader context of Chinese culinary diversity, reflecting the state's narrative of national unity and multicultural integration. This portrayal highlights shared cultural values while acknowledging the unique contributions of Hui cuisine, thereby contributing to the discourse on ethnic harmony and national cohesion.

Future research could further explore the impact of these media portrayals on Hui communities themselves. Investigating how these representations affect the Hui's self-perception and cultural practices will provide a deeper understanding of the internal effects of external portrayals. Comparative studies with other minority cuisines could offer insights into how different cultures are represented and integrated into the national narrative. Longitudinal studies could track how the depiction of Hui cuisine evolves over time in response to socio-political changes. Additionally, examining audience reception will reveal how various viewers interpret and react to media representations of Hui cuisine, informing the effectiveness of media in shaping cultural perceptions. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of these documentaries on the self-perception of the Hui community, particularly in urban contexts, where traditional identities are constantly being renegotiated.

In conclusion, this paper provides valuable insights into the portrayal of Hui cuisine and its implications for ethnic identity and cultural integration. By examining the intersection of tradition and modernity in media representations, the research highlights the significant role of food in shaping cultural narratives and societal attitudes. The findings underscore the importance of nuanced and accurate media portrayals in fostering a deeper understanding of minority cultures and contributing to more inclusive cultural policies. As media continues to play a significant role in shaping public perceptions, ongoing research in this area will be essential for promoting cultural appreciation and integration.

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