

# CHINESE FOOD CULTURE AND FESTIVAL: ROLE AND SYMBOLIC MEANING AMONG HOKKIEN MILLENNIALS

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## ABSTRACT

The practice of preparing and consumption traditional food at home is the foci in most traditional celebrations, mostly accompanied by rich ethnic rituals, practice and symbolic meanings. However, studies showed changes in lifestyle and work demands in post-modernity have impacted the significance of century's old ethnic practices in modern life. Millennials (those born between 1980s - 1990s) are more attracted to branding and commercial foods rather than festival foods. This presents an imminent risk of an erosion of Chinese festival foods and cultural identity. This study explores the symbolic meanings of the Hokkien festival foods, factors influencing the consumption of Hokkien festival foods, and role of Hokkien festival foods among Hokkien millennials. Adopting an interpretivist approach, twenty participants who identified themselves as Chinese Hokkien and were born between 1980s - 1999s in Negeri Sembilan were interviewed for the purposes of data collection. The symbolic meaning of Hokkien festival foods among Hokkien millennials were maintaining relationship with their ancestors by following festive traditions and spending quality time with family members. The role of Hokkien festival foods were to celebrate the traditions, culture and heritage as well as pass those traditions on to the younger generations. There were three main factors that influenced Hokkien festival food consumption, which were changed or set aside in keeping with a more modern lifestyle, affected by the attitude of the younger generation and the fact that parents failed to pass on the traditions.

KEYWORDS: Hokkien, Food Culture, Festival, Symbolic Meaning, Millennials

## PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

In Hokkien culture, foods have different meanings, have a different impact and long festivals (Wen, 2016). Each festival celebration has its own symbolic festival foods that represent that particular festival. The festivals celebrated by the Hokkiens were divided into three categories which are:

- a) celebrating a whole new year,
- b) a time of reunion with family and
- c) memorials to commemorate historical figures (Ma, 2015).

Although food has significant meaning to ethnic Hokkien people, changes in lifestyle appear to impacted the Hokkien culture and food in the modern day. Younger generations are ashamed to be eating traditional foods. The busy lifestyles of the younger generation means that they prefer to eat fast, instant, and ready-to-eat (RTE) foods that require little to no preparation.

This situation has impacted the way traditional foods are being consumed, where the trend of consumption in Hokkien festival food among young generation appeared decreasing (Siti Radhiah & Siti Nazirah, 2018).

This research paper aims to explore the Hokkien culture and its significance to the younger generations especially Hokkien millennials. The younger generations are forgetting the traditions of their own ethnic group. This study is the first endeavour to study Chinese festival foods. And it is hoped that this study can introduce Hokkien food culture and identity in Malaysia. This study may also provide baseline data for the Hokkien festivals in Negeri Sembilan.

Besides, this study can reveal the satisfaction and symbolic meaning differences across the demographics. The data collected can provide to stakeholders interested in Chinese food culture in Malaysia specifically that of ethnic Hokkien people.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative method which makes use of semi-structured interviews was used in this study for data collection purposes. This research was conducted in Negeri Sembilan. A total of 20 participants which fulfil the criteria needed in this study were chosen to be interviewed. The criteria that were needed for this research were Hokkien millennials born between 1980 and 1999.

## **FINDINGS**

This research paper found that traditional Hokkien festival foods have symbolic meanings to Hokkien millennials. The symbolic meanings of Hokkien festival food include maintaining relationships with the ancestors by following festival traditions and keeping the family happiness.

The idea of maintaining relationship with ancestors by following festival traditions consists of five elements which are:

1. commemorating ancestors,
2. improving relationship with family members, relatives, and friends,
3. symbolic festive items with cultural heritage and meaning,
4. passing on family traditions and
5. cultural identity.

In the perception of the participants, Hokkien's festival food was a way to remember ancestors and a symbol of festival. This was due to Hokkien's festival food was a tradition passed from ancestors until today as a means to pass on and to continue the cultural rites of the ethnic Hokkien people.

The elements of happiness with family include

1. celebrating with family,
2. gathering with family, relatives and friends, and
2. being joyous at festival time.

The celebration with family in the festival time was the most meaningful things to the participants. The happy moments with family cannot be replaced as the Hokkien community celebrates togetherness with family.

The role of Hokkien's festival food (HFF) was also important in passing on the traditions. The respondents thought the celebration made them learn and remember the meaning of the HFF. This was a way to make sure that the traditions were passed down through the generations.

The respondents to the survey say they have neglected or forgotten the traditions that have not been celebrated with festivals. The responsibility of transferring the traditions must lie with the old generation

who should pass on what it has learned to the younger generation. Without the efforts of both generations, the traditions will not be passed on to future generations.

There were three main factors that influence the practice of traditions among the participants in this study. The three factors were change in modern lifestyle, attitude of the younger generation and the role of parents in passing on the cultural heritage.

There were four elements of a modern lifestyle like being extremely busy, the ready availability of convenience foods, purchasing power, and modern technology that were also considered as factors in this study. With regard to the attitude of the younger generation, there were four elements considered in this study including good and bad attitudes, the transfer the responsibility to the older generation, and the complicated steps and high skill levels needed to prepare the traditional HFF. The role of parents had the elements of exposure from young and support from family.

## **CONCLUSION**

The symbolic meaning of Hokkien's festival food among Hokkien millennials includes that of maintaining ties with ancestors by following festival traditions and spending quality time with family. Hokkien's festival foods also help with maintaining traditions and passing them on.

There are three main factors that influence Hokkien festival food consumption, which have changed as a result of modern lifestyle, the attitude of the younger generation and role of parents. Traditional culture is a creation of ethnics and symbols of the spiritual life for a long history. It represents the life style and the value system of an ethnics (Tao & Yin, 2017).

Festivals are the elements that reinforce traditional cultures. They are representative of the cultures of each ethnic group as each ethnicity has each got its own festival. The social gathering common consensus, inheriting of traditional cultures, and enrichment of spiritual life are among the roles of festivals (Wang *et al.*, 2021). However, the culture is facing the risk of extinction due to the process of globalization and modernization. This makes the culture gaps between old generation and young generations. The conservation of the culture should be taken immediately to avoid the loss of culture.

## **CONTRIBUTION/PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This research can introduce information about Hokkien culture to society. This research can make society aware that traditions are disappearing among millennials steps must be taken to preserve the traditions before it is forgotten by the community.

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