

Research on integration strategies and cultural adaptability of regional cuisines in China's urban dining environments

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Abstract. This thesis explores how regional cuisines from various parts of China have successfully integrated into the dining markets of large cities amid urbanization, focusing on their adaptation mechanisms, market challenges, and future development trends. Firstly, through the study of successful cases in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, the thesis reveals how regional cuisine brands cater to the diverse needs of urban consumers through dish adjustments, restaurant atmosphere design, and brand promotion strategies. Secondly, it analyzes the challenges faced by regional cuisines in highly competitive and saturated urban environments, especially issues like homogenized competition and decreased brand differentiation. To address these challenges, regional cuisine restaurants seek to maintain competitiveness through dish innovation and health-oriented transformations. Finally, the thesis forecasts the future development trends of regional cuisines in urban dining markets, pointing out that health orientation, upscale positioning, digitalization, and policy support will become important drivers for the sustained development of regional cuisines. Through an in-depth analysis of these factors, this study provides a theoretical basis and practical reference for the continuous innovation and development of regional cuisines.

1 Introduction

With the accelerated process of urbanization in China, the dietary needs of urban residents are increasingly showing a trend of diversification. Regional cuisines from various parts of the country have gradually occupied a place in the dining markets of large cities. Regional cuisines are not only reflections of the dietary cultures of various regions, carrying profound history and regional characteristics, but also reflect the evolution and development of China's urban consumer culture. In first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, the popularity of regional cuisines not only showcases the diversity of dining choices but also highlights the flexible coping strategies adopted by regional dining cultures when adapting to urban environments.

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This thesis aims to systematically explore the mechanisms by which China's regional cuisines integrate into the dining markets of large cities, analyze the market challenges they face, and predict their future development trends.

Firstly, the thesis will provide an overview of China's major regional cuisines and analyze their popularity in the dining markets of large cities. Through the study of successful cases, the thesis will explore how regional cuisines effectively connect with the needs of urban consumers through differentiated market strategies. This section will reveal the performance and advantages of regional cuisines in meeting the diverse needs of urban consumers.

Subsequently, the thesis will focus on analyzing the challenges faced by regional cuisines in urbanized dining markets. With intensified market competition, urban dining markets are becoming increasingly saturated, and regional cuisines face immense competitive pressure when entering large cities. By combining specific market data and the current state of the dining industry, the thesis will explore how regional cuisines position themselves in highly competitive environments and analyze their strategies for coping with market saturation.

The core part of the thesis will focus on how regional cuisines smoothly integrate into urban dining markets through adaptation strategies, covering aspects such as taste adjustment, restaurant design, and dish innovation. Simultaneously, it will explore the role of marketing and promotion strategies in driving the popularity of regional cuisines, especially the impact of brand building and social media. Additionally, the study will analyze economic factors such as cost control and pricing strategies to reveal the paths for regional cuisines to achieve sustainable development in large cities. Finally, the thesis will look forward to the development prospects of regional cuisines in future urban dining markets, combining policy support and market dynamics to explore their potential expansion directions.

Through an in-depth exploration of the adaptation mechanisms, market challenges, and prospects of regional cuisines in China's large cities, this study aims to provide a theoretical basis for the sustained development of regional cuisines and offer practical references for practitioners in the dining industry.

2 Case analysis

2.1 Analysis of successful integration cases

In China's rapidly developing dining industry, regional cuisines have gradually transitioned from local delicacies to nationwide popularity, successfully integrating into large cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, becoming highlights of urban dining culture.

For example, "XinRongJi" focuses on Zhejiang cuisine, combining its delicate and refreshing dishes with the demands of luxury dining. By leveraging high-quality ingredients and exquisite plating, it attracts a significant number of high-end customers. The Shanghai branch of "Mountain Pomegranate" has entered the market with specialty dishes like Guizhou sour soup fish, integrating Guizhou's ethnic culture into modern urban life. The restaurant's batik decorations and authentic dipping sauces allow consumers to experience Guizhou's unique charm while savoring delicious food. It also emphasizes delicate small portions, catering to Shanghai consumers' pursuit of refined dining. "Que Garden" in Guangzhou blends the spiciness of Hunan cuisine with the freshness of Cantonese cuisine, retaining the core flavors of Hunan cuisine while reducing spiciness to suit Guangdong diners. Its upscale decor and private dining environment also attract many customers for business banquets.

The success of these restaurants stems from their flexible adjustments to the flavors of regional cuisines, emphasis on cultural experience, and precise market positioning to meet the needs of different consumer groups when entering large city markets, thereby standing out in the fiercely competitive urban dining scene.

2.2 Market demand and consumer preferences

In China's large urban dining markets, various regional cuisines exhibit diversified appeal among consumers, reflecting the complex interaction between dietary culture and market demand. With the acceleration of urbanization, consumers' dietary preferences are influenced not only by taste but also reflect changes in cultural identity, social class, and health trends.

Firstly, "Hunan cuisine (Xiang cuisine)", known for its distinct spiciness and rich oil, has captured an 18.5% market share, becoming a popular choice in large cities [1]. Classic dishes like "stir-fried pork with chili" and "stir-fried yellow beef" are favored by consumers of different age groups. Its widespread distribution and penetration nationwide demonstrate Hunan cuisine's success in adapting to the needs of various urban groups. This predominantly spicy flavor caters to the appetite demands of fast-paced lifestyles, providing a relatively stable market foundation.

Following closely is "Sichuan cuisine", with a market share of 17.5% [1]. As a cuisine renoshare [omestically and internationally, Sichuan cuisine features spicy, numbing, fresh, and aromatic flavors, offering a rich variety of dishes. Classic dishes like "Mapo tofu" and "Kung Pao chicken" are well-known. In recent years, innovative dishes like Sichuan hot pot and spicy skewers have rapidly expanded, especially in first-tier cities, showing strong market competitiveness and demonstrating its potential for continuous growth.

In contrast, "Cantonese cuisine" secures its position in large cities with a 14.7% market share [1]. Due to its light taste, exquisite cooking techniques, and emphasis on the original flavor of ingredients, Cantonese cuisine is an ideal choice for high-net-worth consumers and health-conscious groups. As urban residents pay increasing attention to healthy eating, the light and nourishing characteristics of Cantonese cuisine gradually attract more consumers, further promoting its expansion nationwide. Especially driven by subcategories like tea restaurants and beef hot pot, its market share is expected to continue growing.

"Jiangsu and Zhejiang cuisine" (Jiangzhe cuisine) occupies a place in large cities with a 10.1% market share [1]. Although its popularity in some regions is not as high as Sichuan and Hunan cuisines, classic dishes like "West Lake vinegar fish" and "Dongpo pork" still have high recognition nationwide. This cuisine meets some consumers' dual demands for taste and health with its tender, refreshing, and non-greasy characteristics.

Other regional cuisines present specific consumer group positioning:

"Northeast cuisine", with a 7.9% market share, attracts customers seeking large portions and affordable prices [1]. Especially in northern large cities, brands like "Old Zhiqing" and "Little Northeast" are very popular.

"Northwestern cuisine", although only accounting for 5.4% of the market share [1], attracts consumers who prefer strong flavors and high-protein diets with its unique meat culture centered on beef and mutton, showing competitiveness in specific markets.

"Anhui cuisine" (Hui cuisine), with a relatively low market share of 3.4%, has seen an increase due to the standardization and expansion of Hui merchant brands [1]. In Beijing, for example, Anhui cuisine has risen from a marginal position to a more mainstream choice, demonstrating the significant impact of brand promotion and cultural revival on market competitiveness.

2.3 Competition and market situation

In China's first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, competition in the dining industry is highly intense. Traditional cuisines represented by Cantonese and Sichuan cuisines occupy considerable market shares, with numerous restaurants offering similar menus and tastes. This not only provides consumers with abundant choices but also leads to a decline in brand recognition. As homogenized competition intensifies, it becomes

increasingly difficult for restaurants to attract customers solely by relying on dishes, forcing them to invest more energy in other aspects of differentiated competition, such as restaurant environment design, marketing methods, and pricing strategies. According to data from the "2023 Hunan Cuisine Development Report," approximately 2,750 new Hunan cuisine restaurants were added nationwide in the past year, while only about 600 closed down [2]. This figure undoubtedly reflects the intensification of market competition, further increasing the pressure among restaurants to vie for limited customer resources.

Simultaneously, regional cuisine restaurants not only face direct competition from peers but also need to cope with the penetration of international and innovative cuisines into the market. As consumer tastes and preferences become increasingly diverse, regional cuisine restaurants must continuously innovate to stand firm in the competition. Taking Shanghai's dining market as an example, in addition to traditional regional cuisines like local Shanghai cuisine, Sichuan cuisine, and Cantonese cuisine, the rise of international restaurants and fusion cuisines provides consumers with more abundant choices. According to the "Global Cuisine in Shanghai: 2024 Dining Consumption Trend Report", Shanghai has 66 restaurants shortlisted in the 2024 Black Pearl Restaurant Guide, ranking first nationwide, with international cuisine accounting for 35%[3].

Therefore, regional cuisine restaurants face not only survival pressure but also greater challenges and requirements in brand building, market positioning, and operational strategies.

3 Adaptation strategies

3.1 Menu adaptation

In China's large cities, the success of regional cuisines depends not only on retaining their traditional flavors but also on their flexible adaptation to diversified taste demands. Regional cuisine restaurants adjust key flavors such as spiciness, sweetness, sourness, and other crucial tastes in their dishes to better align with urban consumers' taste habits.

When facing the majority of urban consumers, restaurants first need to pay attention to adjusting spiciness and seasoning. Taking Sichuan cuisine as an example, this cuisine is famous for its strong spicy, and numbing flavors. However, in international metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai, restaurants find that most consumers are not accustomed to overly spicy food, prompting them to make corresponding adjustments in seasoning to suit a wider range of taste preferences. Therefore, many Sichuan cuisine restaurants choose to reduce the spiciness of their dishes and use more condiments that can harmonize the spicy flavor, such as sugar or vinegar, to balance the overall taste experience [4,5]. For instance, Beijing's "Huda Restaurant" has introduced "Fragrant Spicy Pig Trotters", reducing the dish's spiciness so that people who cannot eat spicy food can also enjoy it. They may also enhance the taste and enrich the flavor by adding an appropriate amount of sugar.

For consumers who have migrated from the cuisine's place of origin to large cities, the authenticity and original flavor of the restaurant are often more attractive, better satisfying their nostalgia and expectations for hometown flavors. For example, Shanghai's "Tan Sisters Hunan Restaurant", jointly operated by two sisters from Xiangtan, Hunan, insists on transporting many ingredients directly from their hometown to ensure the presentation of authentic Hunan flavors. The restaurant has not made obvious taste modifications to the dishes, maintaining the original flavor. Their signature dishes, such as "spicy crayfish" and "dry pot fish roe", use high-heat quick stir-frying methods to fully retain the freshness, aroma, and spiciness of Hunan cuisine, especially the uncompromising spiciness, allowing customers to experience authentic Hunan night market flavors.

3.2 Dish innovation

The motivations for innovation mainly come from two aspects: changes in consumer tastes and market competition.

Firstly, urban consumers tend to prefer refined and innovative dining experiences, especially with increasing quality requirements for regional dishes. They not only want to enjoy traditional flavors but also hope to taste improved and innovative dishes. To meet these needs, restaurants often update their menus regularly, launching seasonal or innovative dishes. For example, “Zuijiangnan Seafood Restaurant” (Taizhou cuisine) has its “Jiangnan Shrimp Cake” winning the Classic Zhejiang Cuisine Innovation Award. This shrimp cake selects fresh scallions, an appropriate amount of salt and Sichuan pepper, combined with clear water and flour to shape the prototype. The freshly fried shrimp cake is golden and crispy, exuding an enticing aroma. A bite reveals a crispy exterior and soft interior, with the fragrant and fresh taste dancing on the tongue, as if savoring the taste of spring in Jiangnan.

In a highly competitive market environment, innovation is not only reflected in the improvement of dish flavors but also in the application of new ingredients and modern cooking techniques. With the globalization of urban food supply chains, rvisually orientedsily obtain various fresh or rare ingredients and, combined with modern cooking techniques, launch creative regional dishes. For example, Chengdu's "Yinba 1986" restaurant uses quantified fermentation to replace natural fermentation in making tender peas, experimenting with temperature, yeast and lactic acid bacteria ratios, and time, making the production traceable, more stable, nutritious, and safe, reflecting an innovative approach where science enters Chinese cooking.

3.3 Restaurant design and atmosphere

In modern dining, the atmosphere design of a restaurant has surpassed mere aesthetics and has become a key factor influencing customers' consumption decisions and brand loyalty. Therefore, good decoration and design play an important role in attracting customers, especially female patrons. Female consumers often have higher aesthetic requirements for restaurant environments; visual experiences and decorative details occupy an important position in their consumption decisions. A restaurant with exquisite decoration and unique design can attract them to experience and even share their dining experiences on social platforms. This sharing behavior on social media, especially on visually oriented platforms like Instagram and Xiaohongshu, can effectively expand the restaurant's popularity and appeal. For example, “Suzie's Garden” in Shanghai, after renovation, transformed an old house into a bright cream-colored space and opened up a spacious garden. With greenery and a romantic southern French ambiance, the overall environment is leisurely and natural, very suitable for taking photos, attracting many stylish patrons to check-in.

For Chinese regional cuisine restaurants, the atmosphere is not only reflected in the decoration but also serves as a bridge between regional cultural heritage and modern urban life. By incorporating regional cultural elements into the restaurant design, establishments can establish a deeper emotional connection with customers. This integration can convey the history and regional characteristics of the cuisine, enhancing customers' cultural identity and sense of belonging. For example, “Xinghuatang·Jin Merchants Private Kitchen” (Shanxi cuisine) is a restaurant that has been selected for the Dazhong Dianping Must-Eat List for two consecutive years and is known as the "ceiling of Jin cuisine." The restaurant's classical decoration displays Shanxi opera headwear and arranges Jin opera performances during lunch and dinner, allowing diners to immerse themselves in the unique charm of Shanxi culture while enjoying delicious food.

3.4 Brand building

A restaurant needs not only to ensure the taste of its dishes but also to focus on brand building to effectively attract target consumer groups.

Firstly, “brand authenticity” is the core factor in promoting regional cuisines. Consumers increasingly value the close connection between brands and regional cultures, especially in the dining industry, where brands that convey regional characteristics and traditions are more likely to gain consumers' trust and favor. By emphasizing the source of ingredients, traditional cooking techniques, and cultural origins, restaurants can enhance the authenticity of the brand, making it more unique and credible [6].

Secondly, “localized brand positioning” and “brand storytelling” are complementary strategies that help restaurants deeply integrate into the cultural and emotional needs of target consumers in urban markets. Localized brand positioning aims to enhance the accessibility and regional identity of the brand by integrating it with local culture. Successful restaurants may incorporate the city's unique architectural styles, historical figures, or cultural symbols into their designs, attracting consumers interested in local culture. This not only enhances consumers' sense of belonging but also elevates the brand's emotional value and market positioning [7]. Simultaneously, brand storytelling conveys deeper cultural significance by narrating the brand's background, dish origins, and cultural heritage. This storytelling, combined with cultural symbols, forms a distinct image and cultural association of the brand in consumers' minds, further strengthening its uniqueness [6].

Finally, the choice of “restaurant name” plays a crucial role in brand building. An appropriate brand name can quickly convey the restaurant's core culture and regional background, helping consumers quickly identify the brand among many competitors. The name reflects the cuisine's origin or cooking style and enhances the brand's cultural adaptability, especially when entering new markets. Localization of the name and adaptation to language habits help the brand quickly gain recognition and acceptance from local consumers [6,7].

Therefore, the combination of restaurant name, brand positioning, and storytelling strategies can form a strong market influence in brand promotion, especially in competitive urban markets, helping regional cuisine brands stand out.

3.5 Influence of media

Social media and food platforms have played a crucial role in the dissemination and promotion of regional cuisines. In China, platforms like “Dazhong Dianping”, “Meituan”, and “Xiaohongshu” not only provide consumers with convenient dining choices but also offer effective stages for regional cuisines to showcase and promote themselves. The reputation and evaluation systems of these platforms play a key role in brand recognition. Ratings and reviews given by consumers directly affect restaurant performance and influence potential customers' decisions. Therefore, higher ratings and positive reviews can quickly enhance a regional cuisine's market awareness, attracting more consumers. For example, brands like “Mountain Pomegranate” and “Xinrongji” perform well on major food platforms' rankings and have been repeatedly rated as “Must-Eat” recommended restaurants.

However, as competition intensifies, some restaurants induce consumers to make false evaluations and ratings through marketing discounts, leading to a mismatch between the actual quality of popular restaurants and their reputation. Platform providers are actively taking measures to maintain the fairness and authenticity of evaluation systems in response.

Additionally, “food bloggers” play a key role in the promotion and popularization of regional cuisines. They often showcase the unique charm of regional cuisines to a broad audience through detailed reviews and vivid descriptions. Bloggers' recommendations and

introductions not only influence consumers' choices but also have a profound impact on the popularity and brand image of regional restaurants.

For example, after food blogger “Ulala” tasted “Cai Jianbing” in Tengzhou, more people learned about this specialty food born during the peak battle of the Sichuan Army's resistance—the Defense of Teng County. The popularity of Tengzhou Cai Jianbing was greatly enhanced, attracting many tourists and food enthusiasts to taste it.

3.6 Cost and pricing strategies

In the dining industry of large cities, balancing dish quality and cost is a core operational challenge. Restaurants need to maintain high quality while attracting customers through reasonable pricing and ensuring profitability.

Firstly, “cost and quality management” is crucial. Restaurants reduce costs and maintain standards by optimizing raw material procurement, inventory control, and supply chain management. Establishing long-term cooperative relationships with suppliers and using seasonal menus are common strategies, maintaining high quality through price concessions and seasonal ingredients [8]. For example, “Shake Shack”, in its global expansion, maintains high quality through strategic supply chain cooperation while effectively controlling costs. It uses high-quality ingredients and adjusts menus based on regional supply to optimize costs.

Secondly, managing the “perception of price and quality” is key to pricing strategies. Customers often directly link price with quality, so pricing must reflect dish quality and maintain the brand image. Understanding market price sensitivity is also important. Restaurants can adjust prices based on regional characteristics to attract specific customer groups. For example, “Starbucks” maintains its high-end brand positioning by adopting a pricing strategy higher than the market average. This consolidates its upscale image and increases customers' trust in quality. Additionally, Starbucks flexibly adjusts prices based on different cities' economic levels and customer demands, demonstrating keen market insight.

“Dynamic pricing and promotional strategies” are effective in coping with market demand fluctuations. Restaurants can adjust prices based on customer flow, increasing prices during peak periods and attracting customers through discounts during off-peak times, thereby boosting revenue and consumption willingness. “McDonald's” widely applies this strategy, optimizing revenue by offering promotional packages at different times. For example, it offers promotions during breakfast and lunch, while pricing higher during dinner, helping maintain profitability during peak times and attracting customers during off-peak periods through promotions [8].

Finally, “technology and data-driven pricing strategies” improve operational efficiency. By analyzing customer behavior through big data and AI, restaurants can accurately predict demand and optimize pricing and inventory management, reducing waste. Digital platforms enable personalized recommendations, enhancing customer engagement and loyalty, thus increasing long-term profitability [8]. “Domino's” uses data-driven technology to predict consumer behavior through big data analysis and adjust prices and promotions in real time. Its app pushes personalized offers, increasing customer engagement and loyalty, and further optimizing cost management.

4 Future trends and policy support

With the intensification of urbanization and the popularization of healthy eating concepts, regional cuisines face pressure for transformation and innovation in the dining environments of large cities. Health orientation, upscale positioning, digitalization, and policy support will become important trends in the future development of regional cuisines.

Firstly, “health orientation” is an inevitable path for regional cuisines to adapt to modern consumption trends. Traditional regional cuisines like Sichuan and Hunan cuisines are known for being rich in oil and strong flavors, but as health consciousness rises, consumers prefer low-salt and low-oil diets [9]. Dining enterprises need to innovate dishes, reduce the use of seasonings, and introduce fresh, healthy ingredients. This not only meets modern consumers' needs but also aligns with government-promoted healthy eating policies. For example, the "Dietary Guidelines for Chinese Residents" clearly advocates reducing the intake of salt, oil, and sugar, encouraging the dining industry to provide healthier dishes [10].

Secondly, the trend of “upscale and boutique positioning” is gradually emerging in large cities. With consumption levels rising, regional cuisines are no longer limited to home-style dishes but pursue higher standards in cooking skills, ingredient selection, and dining experiences. Many regional cuisines have begun to showcase refined characteristics in the high-end dining market, attracting consumers who pursue gourmet experiences [9]. This upscale trend not only enhances the market value of regional cuisines but also promotes the internationalization of regional food cultures.

Thirdly, “digital platforms” play a crucial role in promoting the dissemination and market expansion of regional cuisines. Currently, regional cuisines not widely developed are gaining greater promotion opportunities through digital media in China. With the rapid development of social media platforms, more regional delicacies are becoming known and gradually entering the dining markets of first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. For example, “Guizhou cuisine”, through promotion by food bloggers on “Douyin” (TikTok), has quickly gained widespread attention in large cities. “Mountain Pomegranate” is a successful example of this phenomenon, successfully entering Shanghai's "Must-Eat" list with high-quality dishes and precise marketing strategies, becoming a representative case of Guizhou cuisine entering first-tier cities.

Finally, “policy support” is a key driving force for the future development of regional cuisines. The government actively encourages the innovation and inheritance of regional cuisines through policies like cultural protection and healthy eating promotion. For example, “Chengdu” has launched the “Tianfu Cuisine” plan to enhance the international influence of regional cuisines [9]. Additionally, government-promoted healthy eating policies provide guidance for the transformation of regional cuisines, ensuring they retain cultural characteristics while catering to market demands.

5 Conclusion

In the context of urbanization, China's regional cuisines have gradually integrated into the dining markets of large cities, becoming an important part of urban food culture. Through successful case analyses, it is evident that regional cuisines adapt to diverse consumer needs and enhance cultural identity through flexible dish adjustments and unique restaurant designs when entering large cities. This success relies not only on traditional flavors but also manifests in brand building and creating dining atmospheres.

However, as market competition intensifies, regional cuisines face severe challenges of homogenized competition and market saturation. To address these issues, restaurants innovate menus and adjust towards health orientation, satisfying modern consumers' demands for healthy eating while retaining traditional flavors. Additionally, promotion by social media and food bloggers has greatly enhanced the popularity and influence of regional cuisines in urban markets, especially among younger groups.

Despite providing important insights into the integration of regional cuisines into large city dining markets, this study has limitations. Firstly, it focuses only on some major cuisines and does not comprehensively cover China's diverse regional cuisines and their respective challenges and potentials. Future research should expand to more regions to explore

diversified development paths of different regional cuisines. Secondly, the study concentrates on first-tier cities, neglecting the consumption preferences and cultural differences of second- and third-tier cities. Market performance in these cities may differ from that of first-tier cities; future research should delve deeper into this. Additionally, the study mainly relies on market data and industry reports, lacking empirical research. Future studies can further reveal consumer preferences and behavior patterns through consumer surveys.

Looking ahead, the health orientation, upscale positioning, and digitalization of regional cuisines will become the main trends in their development. Under policy support and increasing consumer health awareness, regional cuisines are expected to continue maintaining competitiveness in urban dining markets, promoting the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture.

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