
Original Article (Special Theme)

Ethnic Tourism and Ethnic Cuisine: A Case Study of Central Inner Mongolia, China

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Han Chinese guests and Inner Mongolian foods

This article reports dietary culture in relation to transcultural communication in the context of ethnic tourism at sightseeing locations (lüyoudian) using author-collected data on menus in use and foods eaten in pastoralist households in central Inner Mongolia, China.

The author is conducting research on pastoralists’ pastoral strategies on the Mongolian Plateau. To collect the widest-possible range of data, the author has carried out field research over a broad area. During this research, the author often created a travel team consisting of a driver, a co-researcher with good local knowledge, and a guide with many local friends and good local knowledge of roads and other aspects of the territory, all of whom traveled with the author.
These guides are often influential persons in the local community or have many connections with pastoralists, so the author has been treated to food or other hospitality in their company.

At the beginning of the 2000s in the Chinese north-western minority area, there was little difference between the reception for domestic tourists and business travelers with a relationship with local officials. The author’s experiences thus relate to ethnic tourism, in spite of the author’s own role.

Practically speaking, ethnic tourism in China is oriented toward Han Chinese visitors, who are the overwhelming majority in the country, and who are coming to see the culture of ethnic minorities. This entails that it is essential to offer food to tourists that Han Chinese can eat, even if they may consider it to be strange.

Judging from the author’s own experience in the 1990s, the food that is eaten daily in pastoralists’ households in Inner Mongolia contain some items that it may be difficult for Han Chinese tourists to eat, as it contains much animal fat or fermented dairy products.

Thus, food in the context of tourism requires that the locals precisely predict the acceptable range of food for the tourist and control the quality of their guests’ experience. As Hashimoto (2011: 7) pointed out, “tourists do not want a discovery which can reverse their own perspective on life,” this which extends to the experience of eating ethnic food. Thus, the authentic daily food of Mongols will not be preferred as an object of experience unless it is palatable.

It can easily be imagined that the sense of ease that derives from affinity and becoming accustomed is an important factor that regulates the acceptable range of food for tourists. Therefore, the sense of ease is linked to conditions of transcultural communication.

In fact, the menus available at sightseeing places in central Inner Mongolia, where the author carried out field research, are easily
palatable for Han Chinese guests. This implies that the possibility of encountering unpalatable foods is reduced through the careful selection of menu items at Mongolian restaurant in cities.

Ethnic tourism in China

The central research question of this paper is as follows. How does this adjustment of experience regarding the sense of smell and taste appear at sightseeing places? To investigate this question, the author studied the characteristics of Chinese ethnic tourism, as seen in sightseeing locations in central Inner Mongolia, and compared the menus available there, in Mongolian restaurants in cities, and the daily food eaten in pastoralist households. The results show that tourism does not constitute an independent culinary sphere but takes its place as an aspect of a broader context of dietary culture.

Takayama (2007: 20) reported that ethnic tourism is a very popular form of tourism in China. Sightseeing places (lüyoudian) subsist within ethnic tourism in China. Although the word lüyoudian comes from Chinese, it has been incorporated into Mongolian. Such lüyoudian are found in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region and, from the first half of the first decade of the 2000s, in minority-dominated areas of Gansu and Qinghai provinces.

These sightseeing places can be considered in relation to the small-scale ethnic theme parks that are common in China, although there are some differences. Ethnic theme parks are usually run by larger-scale companies and are only open in the daytime, but sightseeing places are usually run by individuals, are at a small scale, and can sometimes provide lodging. Moreover, although sightseeing places are often located at scenic sites, guests consider them to be restaurants and do not expect to enjoy the scenery there.

Thus, ethnic tourism centered on food is provided at sightseeing
places in central Inner Mongolia. In this context, visitors eat a meal in a yurt like the Mongolian *ger* and sometimes remain overnight. Once, sightseeing places functioned as sites for business entertainment, where the guests could enjoy a live show of singers and imported luxury liquor. However, due to the popularization of ethnic tourism in China and the tightening of regulations on the part of the central government of the business entertainment done by local governments, these places tended to incorporate such attractions as horse or camel riding or trips in a dune buggy, in addition to food and drink, sometimes enlarging their scale of operation.

These and relate live shows and attractions are also provided in ethnic theme parks. In this sense, the “ethnic” aspect of guests’ experiences at sightseeing places tend to be standardized similar to what can be found at theme parks.

However, the food at sightseeing places is closely tied to the hospitality offered at the *ger* of a Mongolian pastoralist, in which the main dish is salty boiled mutton, including organs. Of course, differences certainly appear when we take a more in-depth look. For example, sour cream and cottage cheese are not generally served at a sightseeing spot other than in the style of hot candied (*basi*). These are types of Mongolian dairy products that guests who are used to Han Chinese food are less accustomed to than mutton.

Moreover, songs and alcohol, sometimes in large amounts, are often provided together when Mongolian pastoralists entertain guests. However, the performance of songs appears separately from drink at sightseeing places. This appears to reflect guests’ tastes.

Mongolian restaurants in cities

Although the tastes of Han Chinese visitors are reflected in the structure of what is provided, it should not be thought that only the
requirements of tourism and the prejudices of the Han Chinese affect what is on offer. For example, the above-mentioned hot candied (basi) Mongolian dairy products do appear in Mongolian restaurants in cities. Most guests in such restaurants are Mongolian, although Han Chinese are not excluded. The waitstaff at such spots speak Mongolian, although the menus are only in Chinese. Therefore, we presume that the majority of the guests are city-dwellers who live in an environment dominated by the Han Chinese, with whom they regularly interact.

Some items provided at Mongolian restaurants are imported from other provinces near to Inner Mongolia, where Han Chinese or Chinese Muslims (Hui) dominate. Because there is little need to explicitly respond to guests of other ethnic groups, these menus reflect the taste of Mongolian guests. However, the menus are written in Chinese because many items that originate in Chinese cuisine have no fixed Mongolian translation. Because many Mongolians in cities can read Chinese, there is no need to transliterate Chinese into Mongolian. Further, if a guest cannot read Chinese, the waitstaff can assist in Mongolian.

Similar to what Ishige (2013: 199-200) noted in a discussion of Japanese guests who visit ethnic restaurants in Japanese cities, those who visit sightseeing places in Inner Mongolia are interested in Mongolian cuisine and wish to experience it. Such guests are likely more tolerant than those who visit ethnic restaurants in cities due to contextual differences. That is, they expect to eat something exotic. At the same time, even this group has a limit, so adjustments are made. For example, certain types of seasoning, such as soy sauce with chopped green onion or garlic paste, are usually provided to accompany salty boiled mutton in such places, while Mongolian pastoralists habitually eat boiled mutton without seasoning.
An extreme opposite case was the steamed buns with Mongolian dairy products that the author ate in a Mongolian restaurant in 2014 while conducting research. The bun was filled with cottage cheese, salted wild chives, and fermented butter oil, which had a distinctive and acute smell. Although each of these items are commonly eaten in Inner Mongolia among pastoralists, this was the first and only time that the author had eaten them as a filling for a steamed bun. Likely, this represented a local food that is eaten in a small area of central Inner Mongolia. Our driver, who was Han Chinese and lived in the capital of Inner Mongolia, said, “We are not able to eat it” after tasting a small bit, and he did not try it again. However, he did eat the Mongolian fried buns which we ordered at the same time with no difficulty, saying that he was used to it.

Conclusion

It can be recognized that the food available at Inner Mongolian sightseeing places is generally accepted by Han Chinese guests, who dominate the visitors. The sense of ease of this consumption can be derived from a wide variety of media and their own past experience of eating. This is similar to what was found in a case study of Chinese tourists eating cuisine that they regarded as Japanese in Japan, although some of this food would not be considered Japanese by Japanese people (Dong and Takayanagi 2019: 73-6).

However, little media is available that can communicate the experience of eating, including tastes and smells. Moreover, from the author’s own experiences, it is more difficult to find a Mongolian restaurant in a coastal city of China than to find a Japanese restaurant. This means that most tourists do not have the ability to try Mongolian cuisine in advance.

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Thus, the sense of ease with the food provided in Inner Mongolian sightseeing places felt by tourists is not derived from their direct experience of Mongolian food. It is instead constructed from the experience of Mongolian restaurants in cities, shaped by Mongolians who lives in cities, as another locus of transcultural communication.

This process is as follows. 1) A common understanding of the food that Han Chinese guests can eat is developed through communication between the staff at or owners of Mongolian restaurants and customers who understand Han Chinese well. 2) The selection of food at sightseeing places is chosen based on this understanding. 3) A reduction in types of food available helps guests avoid choosing unpalatable meals, enabling them to eat them with a sense of ease.

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