

IDENTITY DEFINED BY  
'LOCALITY' OR 'ETHNICITY' ?

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**Abstract**

*This essay offers an examination of ethnicity and locality defining people's identity in China. The focus will first be on the definition of ethnicity and locality. After that the essay will analyze what factors influence people's identity. In addition, as a main aspect, food and foodways will be emphasized in order to discuss whether ethnicity or locality defines people's identity more. My study will be based on two case studies, one is Urumqi in Xinjiang, and the other is Enshi in Hubei. Finally, it will conclude that ethnicity shapes locality in some situations. Meanwhile, locality shapes ethnicity as well. In fact, it is an interaction in defining a person's identity in China.*

**Keywords:** *identity, identity Crisis, locality, ethnicity*

A person's identity in China is defined by many factors including ethnicity and locality. Nowadays, food has already involved in people's expression of identity (Wu, 2005). In recent years, scholars have made great contribution to studying whether a person's identity is defined more by ethnicity than by locality through the research of food and foodways as well as other aspects. For example, Cesaro (2000) and Smith (2002) analyze in terms of food culture, ethnicity plays a more important role in shaping Uyghur identity. As Wu (2004) argues Enshi people prefer to emphasize the locality to define their identity. Due to the regional differences, it cannot be fully confirmed the whole country has the same result. However, scholars have generally agreed that in China it is an interactive relations that both ethnicity and locality shape people's identity.

When mentioning ethnicity, it is evident that ethnicity is not simply a set of relationships, but more refers to a historical process (Honig, 1992:08). For many constructivists, they believe that ethnicity is not separate, but interrelated. That is, ethnicity is generated in the social process, it is not only negotiable, but also varied (Smith, 2002). As Gladney (1996) also argued, ethnicity is a continuous process which has been negotiated between the state and self, furthermore, the changing social environment will redefine it periodically. Another view may help to explain the meaning of ethnicity as well. That is ethnicity is not just mean ethnic identity, but it is also a political control for cultural differences to some extent (Khan, 1995). Compared with the enclosed content of ethnicity, understanding the locality may be easier. Basically, locality refers to an area. In order to examine whether a person's identity is defined more by locality than by ethnicity in China, it is better to demonstrate what aspects will be analyzed to explain and support the argument first.

Admittedly, food and foodways are just a small part of culture in China. Besides, many other aspects such as religions, politics, festivals and education influence a

person's identity as well. For example, as anthropologists argue, festivals are important activities for people to maintain their identity. In other words, Chinese people may enhance their sense of identity by relying on their festivals (Ibid.). In addition, regional differences, rural-urban divide, political manipulation also influence people's identity. However, since food plays a key part in Chinese daily life, as a main line, food links political, religious, commercial and ethnic issues together (Zhang, 2002). In fact, in cultural and social aspects, food has connected with practice. In the process of eating, it is not only a demand for food, but also an activity including where to eat and with whom to eat. Cooking and eating are both a social and cultural process, food can be associated with the construction of identity (Cesaro, 2000). As Wu (2005: 359) argued food symbolism is heavily involved in the human expression of identity.

In this essay, although food culture will be a main factor to be analyzed, other factors such as languages, policies, ethnic discrimination will also be examined. Undoubtedly, it is not easy to draw a conclusion whether in China a person's identity is defined more by locality than by ethnicity. Because of its historical background, regional development, ethnic construction, each region in China has its own characteristics. It cannot be divided in the same standard. Therefore, in order to examine the topic more generally and intensively, two regions will be selected as case studies. One is Urumqi in Xinjiang and the other is Enshi in Hubei province.

In the past, nearly a century, interaction between Uyghurs and Han Chinese has begun to increase. One thing should not be ignored is that a few decades ago, the Han Chinese immigrant population was already 40 percent of total population in Xinjiang (Smith, 2002). Thus, Han Chinese have played a very significant role in shaping the identity of contemporary Uyghurs. Before analyzing how the ethnicity and locality influence Uyghurs, apart from the food culture factor, three other main internal factors which lead to the strengthening of Uyghur' identity and the consolidation of ethnic boundaries nowadays in Xinjiang will be demonstrated. First is Chinese government policy for the Han Chinese migration to Xinjiang; second is the Chinese language that has gradually strengthened in this region; third is the Han Chinese exploration of natural resources in Xinjiang (Ibid.).For migration policy, in order to stabilize this important border area, Chinese government advocates that large numbers of Han Chinese migrate to Xinjiang. Since increasing numbers of Han Chinese came to Urumqi, the connection between Han Chinese and local people has also developed. However, it is clear that this continuous trend has some impact in this region. Firstly, the Han Chinese migration to Xinjiang has brought huge pressure to the local fragile ethnic boundaries; it leads to the increasing cultural differences in this region(Ibid.). For example, if Uyghur people want to gain some opportunities for education and employment, they have to blend into the region which the Han Chinese dominated. Furthermore, in big city like Urumqi,

many Han Chinese are not willing to adopt the culture of Uyghurs. On the contrary, they hope Uyghur people can adapt the culture of Hans. All that makes Uyghurs consider Han Chinese practice ethnic discrimination (Ibids). Secondly, in the past 50 years, the Chinese language has become institutionalized in the fields of education and work. It is evident that a great number of Uyghur realized that if they want to find a good job, it is necessary to speak Chinese fluently. In addition, some universities are willing to recruit people who can speak both Uyghur and Chinese languages. This results in the unemployment rate of Uyghurs becoming more than Han Chinese in this region (Ibids). Thirdly, Uyghurs argued it is desirable for Han Chinese to exploit natural resources in this area. Many Uyghurs even suggested the natural resources should not be controlled by the Chinese government; meanwhile, they should combine to make political independence from the People's Republic of China. (Ibid.). Many Uyghurs argue the only way to have a peaceful coexistence between Uyghurs and Han Chinese is to establish an equal stage for both sides (Ibids).

In Xinjiang, language as one of the symbols embodies the ethnicity as well as locality. It is evident that most Uyghurs prefer to speak the Uyghur language in order to distinguish the local Uyghur ethnic identity from the outsider's. Although in large cities, especially Urumqi, a great number of Uyghurs can speak Chinese very fluently, most of them have emphasized that this is only for a need of convenient communication. For example, among Smith's (2002) investigations, a Uyghur whose name is Tomur said he works in a company which was established by the Han Chinese and during his work time, he only speak Chinese with those Han people who cannot understand Uyghur. However, as soon as he leaves the working environment and goes back home, he speaks the Uyghur language. Since in cities, most of Uyghurs have to master Chinese now in order to compete with the immigrant Han people. But they all emphasize that learning Chinese is just for working, it is the only way to find satisfactory jobs in a society which was created by Han Chinese, like Urumqi. According to the investigation, it seems that language is a channel for Uyghurs to express their ethnicity and in that case a Uyghur's identity is defined more by ethnicity than locality. However, the rural situation should not be ignored. In rural areas, the phenomenon which uses language to define ethnicity is indeterminate. Because in rural areas, many Uyghur farmers have just received little education, no matter learning Chinese or Uyghur language. But they often display Chinese to outsiders (Ibid.). Therefore, in my opinion, for such a situation in rural areas, it cannot fully prove that a person's identity is defined more by locality. It is rather more complex than this rural investigation and maybe it needs concrete analysis in particular conditions.

Another example to support the argument that Uyghurs' identity is defined more by ethnicity is about time. It is undeniable that Beijing time is a standard time around the whole country. However, many Uyghur people persist in using

local time despite the inconvenience. If people ask Uyghurs about time, they often ask people which time they ask, Beijing time or Xinjiang time. This approach that insists on using Xinjiang time instead of using the unified Beijing time reflects Uyghurs preferring to adhere to the traditional customs to some extent. In addition, from another perspective it also reflects the rejection of Han dominance by Uyghurs (Ibid.). Interestingly, on the issue of defining time, the different perspective is not just between Han Chinese and Uyghurs, but is even more complex. Hui Muslims in Xinjiang consider Beijing time and Xinjiang time actually is the same time. Similar to those Han Chinese in Xinjiang, Hui Muslims agree Beijing time applies to all areas in China including Xinjiang (Ibid.). It is evident that time is another symbol in daily life that reflects ethnicity and is taken to enhance Uyghurs' identity. Even in the same region, different ethnic groups such as Uyghur and Hui, usually emphasize their own ethnicity in order to define their identity.

In fact, today in Xinjiang, ethnic isolation still exists between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. For example, Uyghur people usually avoid visiting Han Chinese homes. Meanwhile, they do not like Han Chinese visiting their homes as well (Ibid.). It is easier to observe on the streets of Urumqi, that Han Chinese walk on the street with Han Chinese the same situation applies to Uyghurs', while Han Chinese almost never walk together with Uyghurs. Furthermore, Han Chinese seldom participate in the Uyghurs' social gatherings unless it is an official requirement. According to Smith's (2002) research, since the 1990s, the Uyghur identity started to use the words 'us' and 'them' to distinguish the relationship between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. Uyghur people constantly emphasize their ethnicity no matter what occasion. This, in other words, reflects that people's identity is defined more by ethnicity than locality at least in such a particular region.

From this paragraph, the relationship between ethnicity and food culture in Xinjiang will be discussed. It is widely known that cooked wheaten food is the staple food of Uyghurs, for example, noodles and naans. Uyghurs prefer to eat mutton. In summer, there is a great demand for fruit. However, the demand for vegetables is less and vegetables were introduced to Xinjiang by Han Chinese (Cesaro, 2000). The typical Uyghur food is braised meat rice with carrots and hand-pulled noodles. When cooking this typical food, they usually put mutton and few vegetables in it. Actually, there is an obvious difference between Uyghur and Han cuisine. The difference is not only in ingredients, but also the taste and the approach to eating. In a Han Chinese meal, rice and food are separate; usually they have a bowl of rice and several dishes. But the Uyghur meal is often composed of a main course. For instance, for a formal meal, during the time of preparing the main course, the guests will be given tea and some small food, such as walnut, almond and biscuits; then the main course is braised meat and rice, after that offers some fruits (Ibid.). When mentioning food culture in Xinjiang, it is necessary to explain Qingzhen (Halal) first.

Qingzhen is one of the Chinese interpretations, means pure and true (Ibid.). In Uyghurs, the word Qingzhen is usually connected with food. It illustrates what people can eat and what they cannot eat. In other words, people cannot eat non-halal food (Ibid.). In Urumqi, outside the restaurants, a note should be provided to indicate the restaurant serves Han Chinese meals or a Halal meals. The difference is that Han Chinese restaurants offer pork, which means unclean food for Uyghurs. While Halal restaurants offer beef or mutton, but do not offer pork. According to this distinction, there are three types of restaurants in Xinjiang. The first one is Han Chinese restaurants run by Chinese, which offer Han food including pork; the second is Qingzhen restaurants run by Chinese, which offer Han and Uyghur food but not pork; the last one is Qingzhen restaurants run by Uyghur and Hui people (Smith, 2002).

In Xinjiang, it has become a social fact that Uyghurs resolutely refuse to eat Han Chinese meals. They use the food boundaries to reject Han Chinese (Ibid.). Many scholars did research on the significance of maintaining the ethnic boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese through halal food consumption and the pork taboo (Gillette, 2000). Several examples will illustrate whether a person's identity is defined more by ethnicity or by locality, or maybe it is actually an interaction in shaping a person's identity. According to Cesaro's (2000) research, some specific instances of educated young people in Urumqi may demonstrate this argument. The first example is a young person named Anwar who found a civil servant job after graduating from Xinjiang University. When he was a student, he got a chance to go to Beijing. One day he and his classmates will go to Tianjin for a short trip. In the morning he had breakfast in a small Uyghur restaurant in Beijing. However, after they arrived in Tianjin, the Uyghur restaurants could not be found, but only Hui restaurants. Although Hui restaurants also offer halal meal, he and some of his classmates decided to have no lunch and even not go into that restaurant. He explained to Cesaro because he is distrusts any other non-Uyghurs, he made the choice of no lunch that day (Ibid.). Another example happened on campus in Xinjiang before the Mid-Autumn Festival, a young man named Tursun said he would not buy mooncakes to eat, although those mooncakes were made of fruit. In his view, those mooncakes were not Qingzhen food, non-Qingzhen food equals unclean food. The concept of unclean food represents for example, they are not sure whether the pan which was used to made mooncakes was also used for cooking pork. Since they distrust Han Chinese, they never eat the food which is touched by Han Chinese (Ibid.). These two examples demonstrate that Uyghur identity is more defined by ethnicity when mentioning the foodways, since Uyghur people always emphasize and distinguish between Uyghur food and non-Uyghur food. Furthermore, the above examples also explain the factor that trust plays a key role in Uyghurs' daily life of selecting food. However, in some situations, things are not always constant.

There are some cafes in Urumqi which were run by the Han Chinese. A Uyghur person named Baxtiyar said he often goes to the café to drink or eat. Undoubtedly, those cafes are not Qingzhen. In addition, the menu of the café also includes pork meals. However, for young Uyghur people, they just regard such café as a Western style. In that case, they did not show their distrust of the café although they actually know these cafes are not Qingzhen (Ibid.). Maybe as Gillette (2000) argued it is easier to make interaction between Uyghur and Han Chinese people through the consumption of Western food. This Western food provides a common stage for both to eat together. Similar to this example, although Uyghurs reject eating in the Qingzhen restaurants which are run by Han Chinese, some of them in particularly situations might go to such restaurants as well. For instance, Uyghurs have meal with Han Chinese together. Meanwhile, nowadays, a great number of young Uyghurs like to celebrate their birthday in this kind of Qingzhen restaurants that are run by Han Chinese (Smith, 2002).

In Urumqi, particularly in some special occasions, such as weddings, there is a dish known as so say, since it was made by Uyghur cooks, Uyghur people consider so say is not Han Chinese cuisine. However, say means stir fry, it is influenced by Han cuisine (Cesaro, 2000). It is evident that in the field of food, Uyghur's attitude towards Han Chinese is vague. On the one hand, at a religious level, Uyghur reject Han Chinese food. On the other hand, in some celebrations and public occasions, such as weddings, it seems Uyghur have adopted the cuisine of Han Chinese to some extent (Duarra, 1993).

Another example is about Enshi in Hubei province. Enshi is the capital of Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture, as an ethnic autonomous prefecture, it was established in 1983 and is given the title of the youngest ethnic autonomous prefecture in China (Wu, 2004). As an ethnic food, Hezha food is very famous in Enshi. Since the 1990s, a large number of Hezha restaurants opened in Enshi autonomous prefecture. Meanwhile, the news of Hezha restaurants was widely spread around the country. Hezha food reflects the high unity of local regional identity. As Wu (2004) noted almost all Enshi people, no matter whether he or she belongs to which ethnic group, they prefer to regard themselves as diners who eat Hezha. According to the research about crops and food culture in Enshi, scholars discovered the local folk cuisines adopted the label of Tujia cuisines. In other words, those local foods which were sold in Hezha restaurants were categorized as Tujia cuisines. However, for Enshi people, in fact, they are very indifferent and ignorant of Tujia identity (Ibid.). The common people in Enshi argued they still do not know Hezha food belongs to Tujia culture; they consider Hezha as a specialty in Enshi (Ibid.). The expansion of Hezha restaurants reflects the demand for the local food. Because of local identity, it is difficult to describe and divide the food customs in different ethnic groups. Hezha food belongs to the whole region not just Tujia (Ibid.). It seems in Enshi,

a person's identity is defined more by locality than by ethnicity through food cultures.

To conclude, in China, a person's identity is defined by both ethnicity and locality. Because of different regions, the changes in government policy, food culture and foodways, political manipulation, the historical background of social development and so many other factors, it is difficult to determine that whether a person's identity is defined more by ethnicity than by locality. According to the case study of Xinjiang, it is evident that in Uyghur daily life, their practical ways of distinguishing time, language, ethnic boundaries as well as food customs reflect Uyghur's identity is defined more by ethnicity to some extent. However, it cannot be fully confirmed that the whole area is the same, because in recent years, ethnic group people have gradually assimilated into the dominant Han culture as well. For example, as it has mentioned young Uyghurs prefer to celebrate a birthday party in restaurants which are run by the Han Chinese. Furthermore, another important factor cannot be ignored. Since the population of Xinjiang accounts for only a small part of the country, while the history of this region is also complex, the survey results of this region cannot be a representative for the whole China situation. For another example of Enshi, it shows an Enshi person's identity is defined more by locality than by ethnicity. However, it is also not comprehensive.

Due to the particularities and limitations of the reference information, and the complexity of the regions as well as many other factors, all of these may influence the result of analysis. Therefore, from the perspective of food culture, it can be concluded perhaps in some cases, a person's identity is defined more by ethnicity, and in other cases, it may be defined more by locality, in fact, it is more often an interactive relationship. Although as Klein (2006) noted the idea of cooking specialization in the area of space is popular in contemporary China, when defining different regions' people, it is often described what they eat. However, the change of food and foodways has connection with social economic development; this also reflects the impact of globalization on regional food and cuisines (Wu, 2002). As Rack (2005) argued a person's identity is a process issue, is an action and interaction. It is different under varied environment. Therefore, in China, not only ethnicity, but also locality shapes a person's identity, it is actually an interactive relationship.

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