

# Exploring the Concept of Hunan Province Food Heritage: The Case Yong Feng Chili Sauce

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)  
2024, Vol. 16 (1) pp 697-710  
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UiTM Press  
Submit date: 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023  
Accept date: 21<sup>st</sup> December 2023  
Publish date: 30<sup>th</sup> April 2024

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## Proposed Citation:

Li, Q., Fuza, Z. I. M., Sharif, M. S. M., & Ramly, A. S. M. (2024). Exploring the Concept of Hunan Province Food Heritage: The Case Yong Feng Chili Sauce. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 16(1), 697-710.

## Abstract

With the growing global interest in cultural heritage sustainability, food heritage, particularly in China, faces significant challenges, including the impact of globalization and the need for effective preservation and transmission strategies. This study aims to explore the concept of food heritage in Hunan Province, China, with a specific focus on Yong Feng Chili Sauce, a notable example of food heritage. Conducting a systematic literature review which is a part of qualitative technique focused on terms such as "food heritage", "heritage food", "traditional food", and "local food." The article review covered a wide range of references from 2008 to 2023, providing a thorough summary of the progress and status of food heritage studies. This study identified fundamental aspects of food heritage, encompassing its preservation and productive protection. This study shows that Hunan's food heritage, represented by Yong Feng Chili Sauce, contains rich cultural identity, traditional knowledge, and sustainable practices. The findings highlight the complexities of preserving food heritage in the face of modernization pressures, providing valuable insights for local Chinese governments. This study could be a steppingstone for discovering how other food heritage can be sustained to this day.

## **Keywords:**

Food Heritage, Yong Feng Chili Sauce, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Preservation of Food Heritage, Productive Protection of Food Heritage.

## **1 Introduction**

Food is essential for specific groups or communities residing in specific locations as part of cultural heritage (Di Giovine & Brulotte, 2016). As inherited from the past, food is regarded as an expression of identity and an indispensable part of culture and heritage (Mat Som et al., 2019). In the realm of human settlement, a diverse array of societies and cultural groups have created important skills and approaches in regard to the cultivation, preservation, and conversion of sustenance. They have also established various consumption traditions and eating habits worldwide, which constitute the food heritage (FH) of mankind.

Recently, scholars have increased their interest in FH, motivated by seeking cultural heritage sustainability (Zeng & Wang, 2019), the growing interest in traditional food products (Barska & Wojciechowska-Solis, 2018), the standardization threats of globalization to FH, and the achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals by FH (Fontefrancesco et al., 2022), among others. Extensive analyses have been presented on topics including the identification of FH (Di Giovine & Brulotte, 2016; Porciani, 2020; Ramli et al., 2017), food preferences and choices in achieving FH sustainability (Cheng, 2020; Kamaruzaman et al., 2022; Kapelari et al., 2020), and the pattern and assessment of sustainable development of food cultural heritage (Moro, 2016).

Further study goes onto investigating the heritagization of food and the relationship between FH and sustainability (Dai et al., 2018; Kannike & Bardone, 2021; Sidali et al., 2016; Zocchi et al., 2021). In China, the exploration of FH is not as extensive as in Western countries; the main areas of study concentrate on the conservation of FH (Yang & Sun, 2020; Yu & Xie, 2014) and the transmission of FH (Lin, 2019; Song et al., 2019; Xu, 2020). In the current social process, China's food culture reflects real values and universal attributes that influence the economic, social and cultural levels (Chen, 2021). Tian et al. (2018) propose that Chinese FH encompasses enduring traditional cultural tenets from Chinese society, notably the Yin and Yang philosophy, ethical principles, and perspectives on nature. These elements have persisted across generations, constituting a valuable cultural legacy deserving of collaborative safeguarding.

The Hunan Provincial Government reviewed and released a total of 5 batches of provincial-level ICH RL from 2006 to 2021 (Province, 2021). There are 44 food ICH elements, including 38 traditional technique elements, and 6 folklore elements (Center, 2016). Culture (2014) reports that the Yongfeng Chili Sauce Making Technique (YFCS) was inscribed as a provincial food ICH in 2009, categorized under traditional techniques in Hunan province. The traditional making techniques of Yongfeng Chili Sauce originated in the 16th century during the late Ming Dynasty and have been transmitted from generation to generation in Shuangfeng Community (Ba, 2010).

Historically, the production of YFCS was family-based, the mothers were responsible for the making activities. Several chili sauce workshops emerged in the mid-17th century to produce and sell YFCS on a large scale, once sold throughout the country and exported to Thailand, Singapore, and other countries. Like many other heritage foods, YFCS experienced the rise and fall in the market (Cao et al., 1998).

In the relevant literature on YFCS, scholars have briefly explored its history and researched traditional making techniques in the food science section, industrialization, and marketing. However, literature on the foodways of YFCS, including cultural value, place identity, production practice, transmission methods, heritagization, are inaccessible due to a lack of relevant academic research. According to Crain (2022), sustainable food practices and foodways of a particular community continuously shape and inform FH and might result in some conceptualization of FH within an individual. Lee (2018) elucidates that traditional food, including recipes and foodways, can be subject to protection based on the Convention, and the promotion of food knowledge is necessary for the effective protection of food and foodways. Many experts argue that transmitting food knowledge to the younger generation is crucial to maintain local cultural identity and preserve food tradition, especially since traditional food knowledge is essential for food culture sustainability (Abd Aziz et al., 2021). Some scholars have attempted to identify and recognize the importance in the transmission of traditional food knowledge among the younger generation (Sharif et al., 2016), the mode of food knowledge transfer (Md. Sharif et al., 2018; Nor et al., 2012; Shariff et al., 2021), and from the perspective of the role of FH in the tourist experience (Nor, 2020; Omar et al., 2015; Tunc, 2019), as well as FH safeguarding and sustainability (Zocchi et al., 2021).

Multiple phenomena fragment and limit the persistence of FH (Quintero-Angel et al., 2022). They examine the concept of food modernity as a phenomenon characterized by adaptations in traditional food practices due to extensive food production, urbanization, monoculture, and population growth. The production processes associated with the industrialization of food and the global changes in purchasing and consumption patterns of prepared foods have led to cultural fragmentation. This fragmentation is evidenced by pressure on FH, homogenization of diets and food practices, loss of traditions, recipes, techniques, and traditional preparation methods, etc. (Allen et al., 2014), and limited reproduction of traditional recipes, even within homes. Additionally, some traditional practices and techniques for preparing heritage foods may conflict with current food hygiene standards (Almansouri et al., 2021). In summary, the oral spread of intergenerational knowledge and food practices, the cohesion of families and communities around food, and the disappearance of recipes and the risk of this loss of FH in their preparation all affect fragmented and vanished cultural value (Quintero-Angel et al., 2022).

## **2 Methodology**

The aim of this study is to explore the concept of Food Heritage in Hunan Province, using Yong Feng Chili Sauce as a case study. The literature review process adopted a systematic approach, primarily utilizing three databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). To deeply understand the meaning of food heritage, the researcher used the keywords “food heritage”, “heritage food”, “traditional food, and “local food,” and determined the relevance of search terms through the examination of the titles and contents of the literature.

During the selection process, the search was refined by specifically targeting articles that pertain to food, history, and culture. All acquired documents underwent a comprehensive analysis, with their titles, abstracts, and keywords being assessed based on the prescribed inclusion criteria. These criteria encompass: (i) publication of the document in either English or Chinese language to facilitate precise comprehension of the material; and (ii) inclusion of research articles, book chapters, or government website content within the scope of literature considered. Particularly, the literature search focused on works published between 2008 and 2023 to capture recent and relevant insights. Due to the scarcity of food heritage definitions, we specifically used government websites to obtain authoritative and accurate definitions. This timeframe was chosen to encompass a comprehensive view of the evolution and current discussions in the field of food heritage.

Through comprehensive analysis of 30 selected publications and two official websites, we classified and interpreted various gastronomic concepts according to predetermined heritage dimensions, such as cultural value, methods of protection, and productive protection. The selection of these dimensions was based on an in-depth understanding of food heritage research, aiming to capture its multidimensional characteristics and impacts. The significance of dimension found from this systematic literature review are food heritage, preservation of food heritage, productive protection of food heritage.

## **3 Findings**

### **3.1 Food Heritage**

Food, as inherited from the past, plays an important role in cultural identity within multicultural environments, as emphasized by Di Giovine and Brulotte (2016). FH is distinct from heritage food. Scholars give great concern and attention on the concepts of FH, while they find it is challenging to define FH’s boundaries due to the heterogeneous and fragmented conceptualizations(Zocchi et al., 2021). Bessièrè (1998) proposes that FH includes “agricultural products, ingredients, dishes, and cooking artefacts. It also comprises the symbolic dimension of food, such as table manners, rituals, techniques, recipes, eating practices and food-related behaviours and beliefs.”

Several scholars (Bowen & De Master, 2011; Littaye, 2016; Matta, 2013) have adopted this conceptualisation of FH. Matta (2013) presents FH as encompassing aspects related to agricultural products, ingredients, dishes, preparation techniques, recipes, food traditions, table manners, as well as the symbolic and material dimensions, such as utensils and dishware. Bessiere and Tibere (2013) further define FH as a set of material and immaterial elements of food culture considered as a shared legacy or a common good, tracing the community's food trails, for example, the used recipe and cooking technique (Tibere & Aloysius, 2013). They argue that the rich cultural value fosters a sense of 'belongingness' and enhances people's pride, potentially increasing the willingness to conserve and preserve cultural FH. In Ramli et al. (2013), FH is related to the origin of the food products and food production of local produce. Quintero-Angel et al. (2022) clarify FH as an important body and techniques associated with the production, storage and processing of food, in addition to various dietary customs, historical legacies, and culinary rituals observed globally throughout the development of human societies, distinct civilizations, and cultural frameworks.

In the context of China, scholar defines food intangible cultural heritage as heritage related to the production, exchange, and consumption of food, including aspects like food production ICH, food exchange ICH, and food consumption ICH (Qian, 2022). Examples include the Pixian Douban Production Technique, and Yongfeng Chili Sauce Production Technique, categorized as ICH in food production and condiments.

In summary, the term FH serves as an umbrella concept encompassing various definitions, such as agri-food heritage, culinary heritage, and gastronomic heritage, with each focusing on different aspects of the food culture and heritage (Zocchi et al., 2021). Agri-food heritage mainly addresses the relationships between agricultural products, production practices, and traditional knowledge, often expressed through the concept of terroir (Teigen De Master et al., 2019). Culinary heritage mainly focuses on the practices and elements related to food preparation and consumption, playing a significant role in identity formation and reflecting socio-cultural elements attached to the culinary sphere (Mardatillah et al., 2019; Welz, 2013), the continuity and evolution of practices and knowledge, as well as their intergenerational transmission (May, 2013). Culinary heritage emphasizes practices, regional or national boundaries of heritage, and its marked political connotation (Matta, 2021).

In terms of gastronomic heritage, it shares similar elements on the role of elements such as sociability, legacy, identity, tradition, and sense of belonging (Romagnoli, 2019), in addition it has a more comprehensive dimension that can include products, practices, and knowledge related to the cultivation, harvesting, and conservation of agricultural products (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013). These aspects of food heritage highlight the interconnectivity of physical objects, geographical areas, cultural contexts, and the formal recognition of heritage elements (Zocchi et al., 2021).

Scholars research the relationship between traditional food and FH. In the examination by Ramli et al. (2017), it is stated that traditional cuisine is intricately tied to familial heritage and has been instrumental in shaping social interactions. These

researchers found that FH was defined as traditional food by ordinary Malay people, who understand the definition, criteria and type of traditional food associated with FH. Traditional foods are part of the UNESCO lists, serving not only as FH but also as an important part of a strategy to raise awareness of FH (Di Fiore, 2020). In summary, it is acceptable to consider traditional food as FH.

Scholars also explore the national or regional food identity. Social, cultural, political, and economic aspects influenced the formation of food identity. Mintz and Du Bois (2002) summarize that food serves to both solidify group membership and set groups apart, like all culturally defined material substances. The process of constructing identity is of utmost importance and significantly influences the perception of a nation (Ramli et al., 2014; Ramli et al., 2020). As a marker of regional identity, food is utilized to investigate the process of 'heritagisation' for rural tourism promotion (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013), which can reactivate local memory and produce tourist identity. Porciani (2020) argues that food, taste, cuisine, and gastronomy are crucial markers of identity inherently connected to constructions of place, tradition, and the past.

Despite the importance and the need to preserve to maintain cultural diversity for future generations, FH has been under threat since the early 2000s. Thus, safeguarding and promoting FH are often considered possible ways of achieving the goal of social and cultural sustainability (Zocchi et al., 2021). Concerning with FH sustainability, scholars explore various perspectives. Kapelari et al. (2020) report that cultural knowledge of FH is important for understanding food choices and consumption preferences, which might enhance sustainable food choice. Bessière (1998) highlights the ever-changing nature of FH and defines food heritagization as a fluid process and social practice, describing it as the dynamic realization, adaptation, and reinterpretation of elements from the past attached to a given group, its knowledge, skills and values. Food heritagization is the transformation of food, places and practices into cultural heritage as values are attached to them, essentially describing heritage as a process (Sjöholm, 2016). Zocchi et al. (2021) delineate the evolving process of food heritagization, encompassing the identification, validation, and enhancement of heritage, while emphasizing the pivotal challenges within the realm of FH. These findings may be relevant to a variety of stakeholders and audiences in the food and gastronomy sectors as a starting point for future reflections on the role of food heritagization in promoting more sustainable food practices and addressing global challenges. On the other hand, the documentation of FH and biocultural heritage marks the starting point of their safeguarding and promotion processes, contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals of environmental and social sustainability (Fontefrancesco et al., 2022). Zocchi et al. (2021) Zocchi and colleagues (2021) explore the examination of the dynamics underlying the heritagization of food, and assess the potential risks linked to this phenomenon. In the latest research conducted by Quintero-Angel et al. (2022), it is suggested that the susceptibility to the

erosion of Food Heritage (FH) arises from the impact of modern dietary practices on traditional values that have become fragmented and outdated. These values include the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and culinary techniques through oral means, the bonding of families and communities through food, and the total obliteration of recipes and their methods of preparation.

### **3.2 Preservation of Food Heritage**

Preservation of cultural heritage is crucial to any community and culture (Shariff et al., 2008). The process of archiving and protecting ICH facilitates the transmission and construction of social memory. However, the living and changing nature of ICH creates bottlenecks in its preservation. Therefore, forming a solid archive of ICH has become an important means of preserving it (Chen & Xu, 2016). Preserving FH is more challenging than physical objects because it involves values, beliefs, behaviors, and societal rules, which are difficult to quantify (Shariff et al., 2008).

Scholars discuss the methods of FH preservation and the main issues from different aspects. Some scholars illustrate that many traditional culinary skills are at risk of being lost, addressing concerns such as existence, authenticity, trust, and transmission, while archives can reflect the development and evolution of culinary skills (Guo & Zhang, 2017; Liu et al., 2017; Shu et al., 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to raise archival awareness among government departments, pay attention to the collection and archiving of materials for food ICH, strengthen the archival management of bearers, and establish a collaborative management mechanism for the protection of food ICH archives. The Kimjang exhibition in Korean museums covers four categories: history, preparation process, regionality, and the scientific value of kimchi which limits viewing kimchi as an artificial product rather than as a social practice in everyday life, and thereby ignoring the continuity and sustainability of traditional food practices (Lv, 2019).

Museums are an important vehicle for the preservation of human memory. The establishment of a food museum can preserve and promote the history and culture of ICH, carrying the educational purpose of transmitting knowledge and culture, and compensating for the gradual extinction of ICH. Food museums are growing in popularity globally, both as places to visit and as venues to study, playing an important role in preserving culinary culture, history, and identity, especially as they focus on terroir (Tunc, 2019). In China, the establishment of the Chinese Sauce Culture Museum, the Pauling Vinegar Museum, the Hong Kong Museum of Human Diet, and the Chengdu Sichuan Cuisine Museum, each highlights the culture of the cuisine (Cao et al., 2015).

Food museums concentrate on the origins of the food we ingest; the artifacts, rituals, and locations where food is grown, cooked, and exhibited; and the venues where food is purchased and consumed. Huang (2020) investigate the preservation of FH via interactions between humans and computer systems, specifically focusing on

applications in human-computer interaction (HCI). Their study delves into the current and future possibilities of HCI design within the realm of human-food interaction in Taiwan.

However, the archival and display approach to preserving material objects related to ICH in museums is a tacit acknowledgement that ICH has lost its vitality and has become a cultural relic that needs to be rescued. This condensation and fragmentation arise from the quest for the 'authenticity' of heritage, i.e., the emphasis on restoring it to its original state or maintaining it as it is, which is also an 'invention of tradition'. This approach runs counter to the Convention's definition of ICH (Cheng, 2020).

### **3.3 Productive Protection of Food Heritage**

The food ICH is created in production practices, and its cultural connotation and skill value are reflected in the production process. People mainly share the heritage through the possession and consumption of traditional food. Therefore, their protection and transmission can only be realized in production practice (Yu & Xie, 2014). According to Mr Ji Hongkun, "production and consumption are the best ways to transmit the food ICH". As long as the cultural image of Chinese food civilization is preserved and the cultural lineage continues, commercial practices are acceptable (Hongkun, 2012). The implementation of productive conservation is a major innovation in the protection of China's ICH, aligning with the spirit of "taking measures" and "revitalization" in the UNESCO Convention. It also complies with the provisions of Article 37 of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China* on "reasonable use" and "development". Productive protection is advocated, considering the intrinsic properties of traditional skills and the current survival situation; however, it is distinct from industrialization, and issues of authenticity, holism, transmission and innovation need to be properly addressed (Liu & Leng, 2016).

As the practices of productive protection deepen in the field of traditional skills-based ICH, some scholars have proposed a focus on the productive protection of food ICH, with a major emphasis on the transmission of skills and knowledge. Yu and Xie (2014) are among the first scholars to study food ICH productive protection. They argue that productive protection can stimulate the vitality of food ICH, and the principle of such measures should facilitate its intergenerational transmission, but the "pan-industrialization" of ICH needs to be prevented. In the process of productive protection, adhering to traditional skills, developing brands, enhancing cultural connotations, and innovating is an inevitable choice for the sustainable development of food ICH (Du & Zhang, 2014).

Food authenticity implies a relatively native and stable relationship between people and place in terms of material energy, culture, and emotion (Zeng & Wang, 2019). The emphasis is on a 'relative invariance' in the face of modern societal changes, and any change in the subject ('body'), object ('food'), and their interaction will affect the original state of the 'body-food' relationship (Chen & Weng, 2018; Zeng & Wang, 2018). The eating and cooking habits with a "local flavour" form the authenticity of the



local cuisine. Therefore, examining the FH authenticity requires considering the food itself, the context of its consumption, the way it is eaten, its habits, as well as the meanings, values, and 'bodily' sensations that people assign to it (Zeng & Wang, 2019). In analyzing the "Meiheju Vinegar Brewing Technique", Huang and Xu (2020) conclude that even though the new social, consumption and industrial structures have introduced new functions and values of ICH, the essence and meaning of its authenticity remain unchanged.

Some scholars proposed the idea of holistic protection of food ICH, i.e. the protection of all the contents and forms that cultural heritage possesses, including the bearers and the ecological environment (Wenzhang, 2013). Han (2016) suggests that productive protection of ICH is manifested in three main areas: 1) the hybridity of ICH, the symbiosis of real existence and the inseparability from life; 2) the integrity of the protection content; 3) the material elements of the ICH, covering the physical and geographical environment, the history of the community members and their present daily life. The productive protection of food ICH is about more than just the food production process; it is also about preserving the authenticity of traditional skills holistically and establishing protected areas for classified protection(Li, 2021). As research progresses, studies on sustainable protection approaches for food ICH have also emerged. The cultural connotation, historical origin, status, and heritage value of Shaoxing's Yellow Wine heritage element need to be identified, positioned, planned, authentically protected, and sustainably utilized(Weiming & Xiaofang, 2013). Huang and Xu (2020) find that the practice of industrial tourism in the East Lake Vinegar Park has achieved the integrity of ICH productive protection in terms of people, products, and production processes.

In summary, the productive protection of food ICH should be viewed from the perspective of development, ensuring that it adheres to its own inheritance and development principle. If the "core skills" are preserved and the intrinsic cultural values and attributes are not fundamentally changed, concerns about "authenticity" and "holistic" aspects in the productive protection process may be mitigated. Transmission is an essential attribute of ICH, and innovation is an important means of gaining consumer recognition in the commercialization of heritage food products (Liu & Leng, 2016). The transmission of "core skills" and "core value" should not be arbitrarily changed in the productive protection process. Transmission, innovation, and market are the three fundamental elements constituting productive protection of ICH, and none can be dispensed with (Huang & Xu, 2020; Wenzhang, 2013). Productive protection of ICH is an important measure to realize the living transmission of ICH and self-regeneration. Exploring and addressing the issues of "industrialization", "authenticity", "holistic", and innovation in the productive protection of food ICH can serve as a model in practice.

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored the food heritage of Yongfeng Chili Sauce in Hunan Province, China. It has been found that although food heritage is widely discussed in theory, its concepts and boundaries need further clarification in practice, especially in the production and consumption of Yongfeng Chili Sauce. Furthermore, the validity of the food heritage must be evaluated through research involving a variety of stakeholders operating within the food heritage production industry. This study serves as the cornerstone for a comprehensive examination of FH, a topic earmarked for forthcoming scholarly research.

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