

Flavors of Fusion: The Role of Thai Street Food in Shaping Culinary Experiences for Chinese Tourists

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Abstract

This study investigated the significance of Thai street food in shaping the cultural and gastronomic experiences of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand. As culinary tourism gains global traction, street food has emerged as a key aspect of authentic cultural immersion, particularly in Thailand, where it is deeply embedded in daily life and national identity. This study employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with 25 Chinese tourists in central Bangkok, to explore their perceptions and experiences with Thai street food. The findings indicate that the unique flavors, affordability, and convenience of street food are major attractions for Chinese tourists. Moreover, street food offers tourists direct interaction with local culture, allowing them to experience Thai customs and social dynamics in an informal, everyday setting. The study also uncovers that while tourists appreciate the variety and accessibility of Thai street food, some concerns persist, particularly regarding hygiene and the impact of weather conditions on the dining experience. Despite these challenges, Thai street food remains an essential and enjoyable component of the overall travel experience for Chinese visitors. The research contributes to the growing body of literature on gastronomy tourism by emphasizing the role of street food as both a cultural symbol and a tourism attraction. This study highlights the importance of supporting street vendors and maintaining high standards of food safety to enhance the street food experience for international tourists, making it a sustainable and competitive element of Thailand's tourism industry.

Keywords: Thai food, culinary tourism, street food, tourist experience, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Thailand's rich culinary culture has become a key focus of the Thailand Tourism Authority's promotional efforts. By integrating culinary tourism with the agricultural sector, Thailand has not only elevated its food tourism profile but also strengthened its economic base. As a critical component of the nation's tourism strategy, the Tourism Authority of Thailand set ambitious

goals in 2017 to increase gastronomy tourism revenue from 20% to 25% of the overall tourism revenue by 2018, contributing 750 billion baht to the economy (Hutasingh, 2020). Street food vendors, in particular, played a significant role, generating 270 billion baht in revenue from over 100,000 sellers nationwide (Cohen & Avieli, 2004).

In 2016, Thailand's culinary industry contributed 20% to the tourism sector, ranking fourth after accommodation, transportation, and retail (Jerram, 2016). Chinese tourists alone accounted for a significant portion of the spending on food, contributing 83.3 billion baht that year, surpassing tourists from Russia, the UK, Malaysia, and the USA (Hutasingh, 2020). This substantial contribution underscores the critical role of street food in attracting and immersing visitors in Thailand's unique culinary experience (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

Thai street food, deeply embedded in the nation's culture and daily life, is a major draw for visitors, offering them an authentic taste of Thai culinary heritage (Chuenpagdee, 2014). Street vendors are found on almost every corner in bustling areas like Bangkok, serving up affordable, flavorful, and convenient meals (Rampai et al., 2024). This vibrant street food culture not only provides sustenance but also offers tourists a direct glimpse into Thai customs and social dynamics, making it a vital part of their travel experience (Cohen, 2012). However, concerns regarding hygiene and weather conditions continue to influence the overall dining experience (Seo & Lee, 2021).

The rise of culinary tourism in Thailand, particularly street food, reflects the growing global interest in gastronomy tourism (Ellis et al., 2018). This study aims to explore the role of Thai street food in shaping the cultural and gastronomic experiences of Chinese tourists, focusing on how these encounters contribute to a deeper understanding of Thai culture.

Food plays a pivotal role in tourism, with culinary tourism acting as a powerful driver for local employment, business development, and economic growth (Rishad, 2018). Many countries capitalize on their native cuisine as a primary tourist attraction, enticing visitors eager to experience regional food, history, culture, and symbolism (Chang et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2018). Food not only enhances travel experiences but also offers a window into the traditions and lifestyles of a destination (Long, 2005; Jerram, 2016).

Within the field of culinary tourism, food-based tourism has emerged as a key concept. This type of tourism includes visits to food producers, food festivals, restaurants, and specialized sites, all aimed at tasting and experiencing the unique characteristics of a region's culinary offerings (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Ellis et al. (2018) outlined five critical elements of culinary tourism: motivation, authenticity, culture, destination orientation, and management and marketing (Anggara et al., 2023).

Street Food and Tourist Experience

In particular, street food plays a vital role in shaping the overall tourist experience. Research by Long (2015) on street food in Taiwan highlights the sensory dimensions of the street food experience, such as enticing aromas, sounds, and flavors, which allow travelers to engage deeply with the local culture. Through these sensory experiences, tourists interact with local customs and traditions, while enjoying informal dining. Street food disrupts the traditional hierarchy of

formal dining by offering a more democratic and accessible gastronomic experience (Jerram, 2016). This communal and egalitarian nature of street food fosters shared experiences among diners, enhancing the social and cultural dimensions of tourism.

Street food also plays a significant role in connecting tourists with local communities. By participating in a casual, street-side meal, travelers gain insight into the daily lives of locals, making it a cultural immersion that goes beyond traditional dining experiences. This dynamic adds an extra layer of authenticity to their visit, allowing tourists to interact with the region's people and traditions in a more intimate setting (Cohen & Avieli, 2004).

Rise of Culinary Tourism and Motivation Factors

In recent years, food tourism has evolved from a secondary aspect of travel to a primary motivator for certain tourists (Tendani et al., 2023). Countries, particularly in the developing world, promote their variety of street food offerings, emphasizing their affordability, convenience, and availability, making street food a major attraction (Seo & Lee, 2021). Food tourists, who seek to sample a broad array of local dishes, have become a distinct category of consumers, driven by the desire for unique culinary experiences (Kivela & Crofts, 2006).

Four primary motivational factors have been identified as influencing food tourists: physical, cultural, interpersonal, and status-related (Fields, 2002; Ryu & Jang, 2006; Sparks, 2007). Physical motivation stems from the desire to experience new and exciting foods that provide sensory pleasure, enhancing travel through the senses of sight, taste, and smell. Cultural motivation involves a traveler's interest in engaging with and learning from local customs, using food as a bridge to understand the cultural identity of the destination (Tendani et al., 2023). Interpersonal motivation emphasizes the role of shared meals in fostering connections and relationships with fellow travelers or local residents, as sharing food during vacations creates lasting memories and strengthens social bonds. Lastly, status-related motivation revolves around the prestige associated with exclusive or high-quality dining experiences, which can elevate one's social status and reputation through food tourism.

Economic Impact of Street Food

Street food provides significant economic benefits, both for vendors and tourists. It offers a cost-effective way for visitors to immerse themselves in the local culture while keeping expenses low, contributing to the economic sustainability of the local community (Lee et al., 2019). Furthermore, the affordability and accessibility of street food make it an attractive option for tourists from all socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those seeking authentic and budget-friendly travel experiences.

Research has also shown that street food plays a role in urban economic development, with vendors supporting local economies by sourcing ingredients and products from nearby suppliers. This contributes to the overall economic impact of tourism in the region, further establishing street food as a vital component of the tourism industry (Fusté-Forné, 2023).

Research Gap

Despite the growing role of street food in Thai tourism, there is a notable research gap in understanding how street food facilitates cultural immersion, particularly among Chinese tourists. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the economic aspects of street food or its general appeal, with limited exploration into how street food contributes to cultural experiences for specific tourist groups. This is especially significant for Chinese tourists, who come from a country with its own rich street food tradition and may have unique perceptions and comparisons when experiencing Thai street food.

Although the Thailand Tourism Authority has promoted Thai street food as a key aspect of the country's culinary tourism strategy, little research has delved into how these promotional efforts impact Chinese tourists' perceptions and experiences. Understanding how these tourists perceive the cultural significance of Thai street food and how it shapes their overall tourism experience will provide valuable insights into cross-cultural food tourism.

In light of this theoretical framework, we found it essential to investigate how Thai street food shaped the cultural and gastronomic experiences of Chinese tourists. Our study sought to examine the role that street food played in the cultural immersion of Chinese tourists and how it influenced their perception of Thai culture. To address this, several key questions guided our inquiry. First, we aimed to explore how Chinese tourists interpreted the cultural significance of traditional Thai street food dishes, assessing whether they recognized the historical or cultural narratives behind the dishes and how these stories influenced their perception of Thai culture.

Next, we examined the extent to which the experience of eating Thai street food helped Chinese tourists understand local customs and daily life, evaluating how street food served as a window into the Thai lifestyle, values, and social dynamics. Additionally, we analyzed specific aspects of the street food environment—such as interactions with vendors, the ambiance, and food preparation methods—that contributed to a deeper cultural understanding for Chinese tourists. Finally, we took a comparative approach to explore how Chinese tourists perceived Thai street food culture in relation to their experiences in their home country, aiming to uncover how these cross-cultural comparisons shaped their understanding of Thailand's cultural identity.

This approach allowed us to comprehensively investigate the intersection of street food, cultural immersion, and cross-cultural comparisons, providing valuable insights into the role of Thai street food in enhancing the tourism experience for Chinese visitors.

2. Method

This study employed a cross-sectional design to gather data from participants at a single point in time (Spector, 2019). Using a qualitative approach (Creswell & Clark, 2004), we aimed to understand the contextual factors influencing urban street food consumption. The research was conducted in real-world public street environments where participants naturally engaged with street food. Qualitative methods, known for their flexible structure (Miles et al., 2019), allowed us to focus on the phenomenon of street food consumption without manipulating any variables, observing it as it naturally occurred (Farrelly, 2013; Spector, 2019).

Participants

Thailand's tourism industry relies heavily on Chinese visitors, who account for both the majority of tourists and the fastest-growing segment of the market. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2020), 8.8 million Chinese travelers visited Thailand in 2016, accounting for approximately 27% of all arrivals. No other single country came close. Indeed, entire regions fell short of China, with ASEAN visitors totaling 8.7 million and Europeans 6.2 million. The total Chinese visitor counts increased from 750,000 in 2000 to slightly around 9 million in 2016. The rate of growth has moderated but remains high, with visitor numbers increasing 10.3% in 2016. In 2019 alone, Thailand welcomed over 10.99 million visitors from China, making up 28.4% of the total number of international visitors to the country.

Considering exponential growth, China is well ahead of any other country as the world's greatest source of tourists, with over 100 million Chinese traveling abroad annually, and this number expanding by over 16% annually (Lee et al., 2011). However, this is not just a matter of arrivals and departures, as the volume of people passing through has a major financial impact. An estimated \$261 billion was spent by Chinese tourists in 2016, an increase of 12% from 2015 (Kwek & Lee, 2010). Spending by Chinese tourists has increased significantly since 2004; the average amount of money they spend during their travels has increased by more than 100%. In fact, perhaps their decision to visit Thailand was positively influenced by their intention to consume local food (Dedeoğlu et al., 2022).

The study employed a purposeful sampling strategy of typical sampling (Miles et al., 2019) to identify individuals and sites that were information-rich (Patton, 2015). We selected those individuals who exhibited the essential characteristics of first-time visitors from the People's Republic of China. These participants statistically typified the major portion of foreign tourists visiting Thailand over the last decade. These purposefully sampled individuals were targeted because first-time visitors to a foreign land were believed to be eager to partake in a wide range of diverse events offered by the destination country, including food experience (Lau & McKercher, 2004).

As in Table 1, the participant profile included 25 individuals, evenly split by gender (48% male, 52% female), with most aged between 26 and 45 years. Nearly half (48%) had a middle income, and 60% held a bachelor's degree or higher. While 52% were occasional travelers, 68% had prior experience with Thai food. Most participants (40%) stayed in Thailand for less than one week, offering diverse insights into the street food experience.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore Chinese visitors' impressions of street food in central Bangkok. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed, featuring open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' views and experiences with urban street food. These questions focused on themes such as the uniqueness of the meals, the sense of adventure in trying new cuisines, and the cultural immersion associated with eating street food. The research specifically targeted high-traffic areas, such as night markets, pedestrian plazas, and popular tourist spots, to ensure a diverse representation of street food consumers and maximize participant involvement.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Demographic Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	12	48
Female	13	52
Age (years)		
18–25	6	24
26–35	9	36
36–45	10	40
Income Level		
Under \$20,000	8	32
\$20,000–\$50,000	12	48
Above \$50,000	5	20
Education Level		
High School	4	16
Bachelor's Degree	15	60
Master's Degree or higher	6	24
Travel Frequency (in a year)		
More than 3 trips	8	32
1–2 trips	13	52
Less than 1 trip	4	16
Duration of Stay in Thailand		
Less than 1 week	10	40
1–2 weeks	9	36
More than 2 weeks	6	24
Prior Experience with Thai Street Food		
Yes	17	68
No	8	32

Before conducting the interviews, the study's objectives were explained to participants, with assurances that their participation was voluntary, confidential, and unpaid. With their consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Each interview averaging 1 hour and 15 minutes. The data analysis team systematically anonymized and cleaned the transcripts to protect participant privacy and ensure confidentiality throughout the study. In the final stage, the transcriptions were thoroughly analyzed and summarized to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, while preserving their anonymity.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is an iterative and comparative process, involving the systematic reduction and interpretation of large volumes of textual data. For this study, we employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method for collecting qualitative information, followed by a rigorous coding process to categorize and analyze the data (Bengtsson, 2016). Coding, as defined by Strauss and Corbin (2015), involves breaking down data into fragments, conceptualizing these fragments, and then integrating them to develop a theory. Codes, which serve as metadata, capture the main ideas of sentences or paragraphs in as

few words as possible. This process allowed us to distill key insights from the interviews and identify recurring themes.

We used in vivo coding to emphasize the participants' actual spoken words, which is particularly beneficial when working with specific cultural groups (Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). In vivo coding enables researchers to highlight how participants use language to convey meaning, ensuring that their voices are clearly represented in the data. After coding, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns and relationships across the dataset.

The data analysis process involved several key steps. First, in the open coding phase, we fragmented the interview transcripts into meaningful units and grouped similar units together, which was crucial for identifying preliminary categories based on the participants' experiences and perceptions. Next, during focused coding, we refined these categories by determining which were most relevant to the research questions. In the axial coding phase, we connected related categories into broader thematic groups, helping to organize the data into more cohesive patterns. Finally, during selective coding, we integrated the categories into core themes that addressed the research objectives and provided a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Methodological Integrity

While quantitative research strives for internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, and consistency, qualitative research focuses on establishing trustworthiness through criteria like credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the rigor of this study, we carefully designed and implemented semi-structured interviews following these criteria. A key concern in qualitative research is the level of confidence researchers have in their observations and interpretations, ensuring they are not misled (Miles et al., 2019).

The credibility of a study hinges on whether the findings are accurate and believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the trustworthiness of our study, we employed several strategies. First, we spent two weeks at each research site to develop a deeper understanding of the context. Additionally, two pilot interviews were conducted to refine the interview protocol, and research assistants were trained in methodology. Peer debriefing sessions were held twice a week to objectively review the transcription, categorization, and theme development. We also used member checking by inviting some participants to review a draft of our report, ensuring accuracy and addressing any concerns.

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the ability to apply findings to other contexts (Tobin & Begley, 2004). We provided detailed descriptions of the participants and the settings to help others assess whether the results might be transferable to their own context. To ensure data saturation, we employed two methods: one operational, where we tracked the emergence of new codes across interviews, and one theoretical, where we regularly reviewed the coding process to identify key variations in concepts. We alternated between case selection and data analysis to ensure all variations were captured and no new themes emerged.

To ensure the reliability of the study, we followed a well-structured, traceable, and well-documented process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). We aimed to make the study reproducible with the same participants, coders, and settings. For dependability, we provided detailed documentation of the research procedures, including an audit trail of the data collection process, and assessed the accuracy of coding through the use of a codebook. By standardizing the interview process, we achieved a high level of inter-rater agreement among our interviewers.

During each interview, we used the same set of questions in the same order, ensuring that coders understood the context of each response. This consistency allowed for accurate data interpretation and reduced bias. We also applied Krippendorff's alpha to measure inter-rater reliability, setting a cutoff of .80 to ensure a high level of agreement, which exceeded the generally accepted thresholds set by previous researchers (Banerjee et al., 1999; Popping, 1988; Landis & Koch, 1977). Through this consistent procedure and high agreement, we categorized the data reliably, ensuring the validity of the findings. Our clear and comprehensive documentation of methods allows others to assess the validity of the study.

We maintained a reflective journal to document our actions, thoughts, and feelings throughout the study, and held weekly team meetings to verify and validate the findings with other members of the research team. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, achieving confirmability enhances credibility, transferability, and dependability. By meticulously documenting our processes and soliciting feedback from team members, we ensured that the study could be replicated and that the results were robust and valid.

3. Findings

The themes that emerged from the central phenomenon were organized into two overarching theoretical constructs: experience and compliance. These constructs offer a deeper understanding of the cultural and social significance of Thai street food, allowing us to draw generalizable conclusions applicable across various contexts. The first construct, experience, was comprised of three key themes: distinctiveness, economic value, and service. This construct was central to addressing the main research question, focusing on the participants' overall experience and their perceptions of Thai street food. Their responses primarily reflected these three themes, with distinctiveness capturing the unique sensory appeal, economic value highlighting the affordability, and service emphasizing the interactions with street vendors. The second construct, compliance, encompassed two themes: regulation and locality, which explored the legal and geographical aspects of street food stall operations. Together, these constructs provided a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences and the broader social dynamics at play in Thailand's street food culture.

The theme of distinctiveness, characterized by both the rich flavors and visually enticing presentation of Thai street food, was a key factor that strongly resonated with Chinese participants. They consistently described Thai street food as both aesthetically appealing and flavorful. Descriptions such as "inexpensive yet elegant" and "affordable but high quality" (物美价廉) were frequently used, with terms like "tasty," "delicious," and "palatable" commonly

employed to convey their satisfaction with the flavors. Participants particularly highlighted the "unique characteristic flavor" of Thai food, with several noting its bold and distinct taste profiles, often described as "strong" (浓) or "spicy" (辣). This distinctive intensity of flavor was a recurring point of appreciation. One participant [P10] specifically noted, "The taste was strong and spicy, but I liked it. Thai food has a very distinct flavor that I haven't found anywhere else." This feedback underscores the appeal of Thai street food's flavor profile, which not only differentiates it from other cuisines but also enhances the overall culinary experience for foreign visitors.

The visual presentation of Thai street food played a key role in attracting tourists, as illustrated by one participant [P19], who noted, "The food here looks really tempting. When I first saw it, I immediately wanted to try it." This focus on both flavor and appearance highlights the crucial role these elements play in shaping the overall dining experience. Another participant [P4] reinforced this idea, stating, "The food looks delicious and inviting. I couldn't resist trying it." For many, the first sensory experience with Thai street food was visual, and participants [P4, P17, P19] frequently described it as "delightful," "delicious," "tempting," and "appetizing," emphasizing the strong visual appeal that initially drew them in. The sight of street food clearly played a significant role in captivating Chinese visitors, who were enticed not just by the flavors but by the vibrant and appealing presentation. These reflections underscore how the Fine Flavor and Alluring Looks categories worked in tandem to elevate the sensory appeal of Thai street food, making it a memorable and enjoyable aspect of the overall tourist experience.

The theme of economic value comprised two categories: reduced cost and increased visibility. From an economic perspective, the cost of consumption was reportedly lower in Thailand than in China. The visiting participants found Thai street food to be very affordable in most cases. A participant [P9] maintained: "They sell food at an affordable (实惠) price here. I could eat two square meals for less than the price I pay for one back home." Another participant [P16] confirmed, "Usually you can eat enough for less than 60 baht (about US\$ 2)."

Several participants also remarked on the Economic Value of Thai street food, emphasizing its affordability compared to food prices in their home countries. A participant [P9] remarked, "The food here is so cheap compared to what I usually pay back home. I can get a full meal for much less." Similarly, a participant [P16] shared, "I could eat a full meal for less than 60 baht here, which is incredibly affordable." Another participant [P11] pointed out the clarity of pricing, saying, "The signs were written in Chinese, and the prices were clearly visible. It made me feel more confident about what I was buying." These observations fall under the Reduced Cost and Increased Visibility categories, showing that affordability and transparency in pricing enhance the overall street food experience for tourists.

In addition, the price of Thai street food was manifested through various signs and signage posted in Thai and Chinese at the stall. The participants found it clear, transparent, and helpful in understanding the pricing before making a purchase decision. A participant [P11] argued:

Though I don't read Thai, I can understand the price and other conditions by looking at the Chinese-written signage posted above the stall. I don't think Thai food vendors can be trusted—but at least they were not trying to rip me off.

The theme service encompassed three categories: caring service, limited supply, and wide variety. The participants agreed that street food vendors provided good service, were courteous, and had good manners when talking with foreign customers. Not only were the food vendors amiable and helpful, but they were also trying to improve the efficiency of communication by using a lingua franca. A participant [P4] noted, “The Thais are pretty friendly to foreign tourists. They are eager to use English to communicate.”

The Product Offering theme revealed both positive and negative aspects of street food availability and service. A participant [P13] noted, “By the time I arrived, some of the dishes I wanted were already sold out. You need to be early if you want to try everything.” This comment highlights the Limited Supply category, where popular dishes often run out quickly. On the other hand, a participant [P12] praised the service, saying, “I was surprised that the vendor cut the fruit into small pieces for me. You don’t get that kind of service everywhere.” Similarly, a participant [P4] stated, “The street vendors here are very friendly and eager to help, even trying to speak English to communicate with us.” These reflections contribute to the Caring Service category, emphasizing the attentiveness and friendliness of street vendors.

Thai street food vendors were eager to make consumption an effortless process for the customers because a typical transaction was completed outdoors, and so lacked the luxury of indoor dining. To offset that, some vendors make their business more convenient for customers. For example, a participant [P12] was fascinated by the service commonly delivered by a fruit vendor and noted, “The roadside fruit stall sellers in China won’t cut the fruit into small pieces for you. But they do it here.” Additionally, a typical roadside food stall had limited storage space, so they made sure the ingredients went to the best use. A participant [P13] claimed,

The ingredients of Thai roadside stalls are relatively fresh, and the quantity is generally not too large, so if you get there late, most dishes will probably be sold out.

The second theoretical construct, compliance, was used to address the first subordinate research question, focusing on legal regulations and measures regarding the physical and geographical placement of street food stalls. Participant responses centered on two key supporting themes: regulation and locality. Within the regulation theme, two critical categories emerged: sanitation management and health safety. Participants expressed clear expectations for improved sanitation and the implementation of stricter health regulations, highlighting the need for better oversight in maintaining hygiene standards to ensure food safety.

A participant [P3] made a point concerning the ways the vendors go about handling their food preparation on-site by saying: “I believe a certain number of roadside stalls can effectively promote the food culture of the country, but the governing body really needs to focus more on hygiene.” The issue of sanitation concerned another participant [P1], who remarked:

They would prepare the ingredients and then put them aside for a while before they cooked them. In the meantime, they might not seal or cover it properly. It is only a matter of time before the food gets contaminated.

Participants expressed significant concerns about sanitation management, viewing it as a potential health risk. One participant [P14] recounted a personal experience, stating, “I had a

seafood dish from a roadside stall the other evening, and it upset my stomach all night. It wasn't friendly for people with a sensitive stomach like me." This sentiment was echoed by others who observed hygiene lapses among vendors. For instance, a participant [P3] noted, "They should focus more on hygiene. I saw some vendors leaving food uncovered for too long." Another participant [P1] expressed concern about the handling of food, saying, "The food isn't always properly sealed or covered, and that makes me worry about contamination." These observations underscore broader concerns about food safety and fall under the Sanitation Control category, highlighting the need for stricter health and safety regulations to ensure that tourists feel confident and secure when enjoying Thai street food.

The theme locality encompassed two categories: physical location and climatic environment. Locality refers to the site of the phenomenon under study that involves a place and its environment. In this study, the locality was specific to urban areas in metropolitan Bangkok. Some responses painted a vivid picture of Thailand's urban food landscape, highlighting its diverse and enticing culinary scene. The participants expressed their anticipation for a more enhanced and well-organized layout of food stalls, highlighting their frustration with the current situation. Specifically, a pavement densely occupied by food stalls was not safe and actually posed a hazard to pedestrians. A participant [P2] recounted his Chinatown experience by stating:

The stalls were crammed in so close together, it felt super cluttered. It was lively and all, but it was hard to walk through—there was barely any space to move. Honestly, they should just block off the traffic and make it a pedestrian zone, 'cause you're risking getting hit by a car while walking!

Several participants discussed the Locality theme, particularly emphasizing the physical setup of food stalls and the impact of Thailand's climate on their dining experience. The hot and humid weather was frequently mentioned as a challenge for enjoying street food outdoors. One participant [P7] remarked, "Eating in the hot sun is not very enjoyable. The weather here makes it tough to fully enjoy the food." Another participant [P6] echoed this sentiment, adding that "the hot weather speeds up food spoilage, which can be a problem for more sensitive dishes." These comments illustrate how Thailand's climate, especially the intense heat, can detract from the overall street food experience, particularly for international tourists unaccustomed to such conditions. For some, the weather was seen as a significant drawback, potentially affecting outdoor culinary tourism.

In addition to the climate, participants also raised concerns about the physical arrangement of food stalls. One participant [P2] noted, "The stalls in Chinatown were so crammed together, you could barely walk through without bumping into someone." The lack of space made navigating the streets difficult, highlighting the challenges posed by the congested layout. When comparing Thailand to China, another participant [P15] observed that "In China, we have more regulations on where vendors can set up, but here it seems like you can set up anywhere, which makes it less organized." This contrast underscores the differences in how street food operations are managed between the two countries, with Thailand's more flexible approach leading to a less structured but more accessible street food environment.

These reflections reveal that both environmental factors and the layout of the stalls played a critical role in shaping the dining experience for tourists. The climate, particularly the heat, not only impacted the enjoyment of outdoor dining but also affected food quality, as noted by another participant [P6], who mentioned that the weather hastened food spoilage. Meanwhile, the physical arrangement of stalls, while contributing to a lively atmosphere, also posed logistical challenges for visitors. Together, these factors shaped the overall experience of Thai street food for foreign tourists.

The convenience and omnipresence of street food in Thailand were recognized by the participants. They all agreed that “Thailand is great for street food. You can get it anywhere around the city—not only in the designated areas but also in residential neighborhoods.” This response revealed that the city was lax on regulating the use of public areas, which differed from in China, as another participant [P15] revealed:

In China, they mostly have urban planning rules that restrict where you can set up a stall—you can’t just do it anywhere. But here, it feels like you can set up shop pretty much anywhere. It’s convenient, but not very organized. The city doesn’t seem to mind.

The answer to the second subordinate research question was induced from the codes in such categories as fine flavor, economic value, caring service, wide variety, and physical location, drawn from various themes. The Thai and Chinese street food, though sharing some resemblances, differed in these dimensions.

Overall, most participants felt that Thai food was not markedly different from Chinese cuisine, although they did observe that the variety in Thailand appeared to be somewhat more limited. The flavors were familiar to them, and many participants noted that Thai street food closely resembled the dishes they were accustomed to in their regular diet. This familiarity fostered a sense of connection for Chinese visitors, as the meals often reminded them of the food from their home country. A participant [P5] associated it with meals in their home country due to the closeness in taste and asserted:

What I just had here in Chinatown didn’t taste a whole lot different from that in China. Not really different from what I eat every day. So it doesn’t make me crave a home-cooked meal or anything.

The participants seemed to acknowledge that the cost of essential goods was lower in Thailand. Specifically, the street food price was described to be relatively more affordable in Thailand than in China. The participants hardly, if ever, had a problem with defraying the expenses of street dining throughout their stay in the country. In fact, they found it relatively inexpensive to take an extended vacation or even to live in Thailand. Comparatively, China’s average cost of living is 2.47% higher than Thailand’s (Numbeo, 2022), so they unquestionably did not have qualms about venturing into the street food landscape.

It was reported that though a substantial amount of Thai food tasted like its Chinese counterpart, it was an exact replica. For example, the Chinese “spicy” taste was apparently not identical to the traditional Thai hot flavor that was based on bird’s eye chili. The spicy Chinese flavor was

associated with numb-spiciness (麻辣 in Chinese) derived from Sichuan peppers, as one participant [P8] asserted, “It tastes spicy, but it isn’t the taste I grew up with.”

Thai street food vendors were keen to simplify the consumption process for customers, especially since transactions typically took place outdoors, without the comforts of indoor dining. Vendors made concerted efforts to enhance the dining experience despite these limitations. For instance, one participant observed, “The roadside fruit push-cart sellers in China won’t cut the fruit into small pieces for you, but they make it convenient for us to eat here.” This attention to detail was noted as a distinction between Thai and Chinese street food vendors, with participants commenting that vendors in China were less focused on providing such conveniences, highlighting the extra care taken by Thai vendors to accommodate customers’ needs.

Surprisingly, some Chinese participants were not deterred by the more exotic dishes that are not commonly available in China. These included items such as fried worms, marinated raw seafood, mangoes with sticky rice, banana roti prata, and salted grilled fish. Instead of being put off, many embraced the experience, which left them with a memorable impression of the vibrant and diverse nature of Thai cuisine. This exposure to a wide array of flavors and textures added to the uniqueness of their food journey in Thailand, showcasing just how colorful and adventurous Thai food can be. In this regard, a participant [P1] expressed:

What amazes me most about Thai street food is the fried worms. You can hardly get fried worms in China. They might be found only in special places like here.

Thailand, located in central Southeast Asia about 15 degrees above the Equator, experiences a relatively consistent year-round temperature of 25 to 28 °C (77 to 82 °F), with limited seasonal variation. The country enjoys sunny weather for much of the year, creating a warm and stable climate. In contrast, China, being a much larger country, experiences a diverse range of inland climatic variations, from temperate to extreme weather conditions. These diverse climates contribute to a broader and more varied culinary landscape in China, offering a wider array of food choices that reflect the country’s geographical diversity. One participant [P10] observed:

China’s geographical environment is complex, having a variety of climate changes. So, our street food is also greatly varied. But Thailand’s country-wide climate changes are not as starkly different. The result is that the selection of street food here is not as wide as in China.

4. Discussion

The Findings section of the study aligns well with the research questions regarding the role of Thai street food in shaping the cultural immersion of Chinese tourists. To begin with, the question of how Chinese tourists interpret the cultural significance of traditional Thai street food is addressed through the participants’ perceptions of the food’s distinct flavors and presentation. Chinese tourists frequently described Thai street food as “inexpensive but elegant” and emphasized its bold and spicy flavors, which they found unique compared to the food they were accustomed to in China. Although some noted similarities between Thai and Chinese cuisines, the distinctive use of ingredients like bird’s eye chili stood out, marking Thai street food as a

culturally significant aspect of their visit. This recognition of the food's uniqueness reflects a deeper appreciation of Thai culinary traditions, showing that tourists not only enjoy the food but also perceive it as a vital representation of Thailand's cultural identity.

The second research question, which explores the extent to which eating Thai street food helps Chinese tourists understand local customs and daily life, is also well addressed in the findings. The study reveals that street food provides more than just a culinary experience—it offers a window into Thai everyday life. The interactions between tourists and street vendors were particularly highlighted, with tourists appreciating the friendliness and hospitality of the vendors. This interpersonal dynamic, combined with the informal setting of street food stalls, allowed Chinese tourists to engage with local customs in a more direct and personal manner. For many, the casual and communal nature of eating street food in bustling public spaces fostered a sense of connection to local Thai culture. These encounters with street vendors and the overall experience of street food dining helped the tourists immerse themselves in the daily rhythms of Thai life, offering a richer, more authentic understanding of the culture.

Additionally, the research addresses which specific aspects of the street food environment contribute to a deeper cultural understanding. Several elements, such as the visual presentation of food, the ambiance of the street stalls, and the interactions with vendors, were identified as key factors enhancing the overall experience. The tourists were particularly drawn to the vibrant and visually appealing presentation of the food, which often served as the initial attraction. Moreover, the informal and bustling nature of street food stalls provided a sensory-rich environment that enhanced their understanding of local culture. The tourists' interactions with the vendors, who often went out of their way to communicate in basic English or Mandarin, further contributed to this deeper cultural immersion. These elements combined to create a street food experience that was not just about the food itself but also about engaging with the social and cultural context in which the food was prepared and consumed.

The final research question regarding how Chinese tourists compare the street food culture in Thailand to similar experiences in their home country is also thoroughly explored in the findings. Many participants drew comparisons between the two cultures, noting both similarities and differences in street food offerings. While some dishes were familiar, Thai street food was often described as more adventurous, with unique flavors and ingredients not typically found in China. For example, dishes like fried worms and mango sticky rice were considered exotic and exciting, adding an element of novelty to the experience. These comparisons between Thai and Chinese street food helped the tourists to reflect on their own culinary traditions while gaining a greater appreciation for the diversity of Thai street food. The contrasts in flavor, presentation, and the overall food environment helped shape their perception of Thailand as a distinct cultural entity, further enhancing their understanding of its cultural identity.

In conclusion, the findings offer a comprehensive response to the research questions, demonstrating that Thai street food plays a significant role in both shaping the cultural experiences of Chinese tourists and fostering their immersion in local Thai culture. Through distinct flavors, sensory experiences, vendor interactions, and cultural comparisons, Chinese tourists are able to engage deeply with Thai culture, making street food a vital component of their overall travel experience. This deep engagement helps them not only enjoy the food but

also understand the cultural narratives embedded within it, thereby enriching their understanding of Thailand as a destination.

This study offers an in-depth exploration of the cultural and social significance of Thai street food, specifically from the perspective of Chinese tourists. By organizing the data into two primary constructs—experience and compliance—the research illuminates key factors that shape the street food experience. The experience construct focuses on themes such as distinctiveness, economic value, and service, each providing valuable insights into the sensory appeal and accessibility of Thai street food. Chinese tourists were particularly drawn to the cuisine's unique flavors and visually captivating presentation. Many participants also emphasized the affordability of Thai street food, noting that prices were significantly lower than in China. The clear and transparent pricing further facilitated ease of navigation for tourists (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). Additionally, the service provided by street vendors stood out, as tourists appreciated their friendliness and efforts to bridge communication barriers, which enhanced their overall dining experience (Steyn & Roos, 2019).

The compliance construct, on the other hand, addresses legal and environmental factors that influence street food consumption. Participants expressed concerns about food safety and sanitation, highlighting the need for stricter hygiene regulations (Grace, 2015). The physical arrangement of food stalls, often crowded and chaotic, particularly in urban areas, combined with Thailand's hot and humid climate, occasionally detracted from the dining experience and impacted the quality of the food (Ma et al., 2019).

Additionally, the study examined the similarities and differences between Thai and Chinese street food. Both cuisines were praised for their affordability and flavor, but Thai food stood out for its distinctive spiciness, which contrasts with the numbing heat typical of Chinese cuisine (Kwek & Lee, 2010; Lee et al., 2011). Chinese tourists also appreciated the variety of exotic dishes available in Thailand, many of which are not commonly found in China (Sawmong & Ahadi, 2023).

These findings offer valuable insights into how Chinese tourists perceive and engage with Thai street food, emphasizing the importance of sensory appeal, affordability, and vendor service. The study also identifies areas for improvement, particularly regarding food safety and environmental management, which could further enhance the overall dining experience (Tuglo et al., 2021). Additionally, the comparative analysis of Thai and Chinese street food provides a deeper understanding of cross-cultural culinary preferences, contributing to broader discussions around food tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2023).

The research aligns with existing studies that highlight the sensory appeal of street food as a major attraction for tourists. The distinctive flavors and visual presentation of Thai street food resonate with broader findings in culinary tourism (Ellis et al., 2018). Similarly, the focus on affordability reinforces previous research, which notes that street food offers an inexpensive way for tourists to experience local culture (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Moreover, the role of street vendors in enhancing the dining experience through friendly service and overcoming language barriers is consistent with other studies, further validating the importance of vendor interaction in shaping positive tourist experiences (Sawmong & Ahadi, 2023).

In comparison to previous research, this study brings a new dimension by focusing on cross-cultural comparisons of street food experiences, specifically between Thai and Chinese tourists. While prior research has typically looked at the general appeal of street food for international tourists, this study delves into more specific cultural perceptions, highlighting the unique attributes of Thai cuisine from the perspective of Chinese visitors.

The study's focus on regulatory and environmental factors, such as sanitation, health safety, and urban planning, adds depth to the discussion of street food consumption (Ma et al., 2019; Tuglo et al., 2021). It also contributes to the literature by emphasizing the role of climate in shaping the street food experience, as outdoor dining in hot and humid conditions can affect food quality and comfort (Phulkerd et al., 2023). Additionally, the exploration of exotic street food items as perceived by Chinese tourists introduces a novel aspect to the study, offering insights into the adventurous side of culinary tourism (Shoukat et al., 2023). This area has not been as extensively covered in prior studies, which often focus on more familiar dishes.

Implications for Theory

The theoretical implications of this study are significant, contributing to a deeper understanding of street food culture, its impact on first-time visitors, and its role in fostering cross-cultural communication. The findings expand existing theoretical frameworks in gastronomy tourism, food sociology, and cross-cultural communication. In terms of gastronomic tourism, this study emphasizes the importance of qualitative research methods for exploring visitor motives and experiences with local food. It suggests that quantitative approaches, which often rely on closed-ended questions, may fail to fully capture the complexity of tourists' motivations and subjective experiences (Quan & Wang, 2004; Sánchez-Caizares & López-Guzmán, 2012; Santich, 2004). The research also advances understanding of the underlying drivers of food consumption in tourism, moving beyond behavioral intentions to explore the deeper motivations behind tourists' food choices (Tendani et al., 2023).

The study highlights the necessity for further research into the unique cultural and experiential aspects of local food consumption, encouraging scholars to examine the broader social significance of culinary experiences in tourism. These findings contribute to cross-cultural communication theory by demonstrating how street food can foster meaningful interactions between tourists and locals, promoting mutual appreciation and understanding. Shared dining experiences, particularly with street food, provide an authentic way for visitors to engage with local culture, which can lead to deeper cultural insights and connections. Street food plays a crucial role in bringing together people from different cultural backgrounds, facilitating communication, and enhancing intercultural understanding.

Additionally, the study sheds light on how street food serves as a platform for cultural exchange, providing insights into the dynamics of cross-cultural communication in informal, everyday settings. This has implications for both researchers and practitioners, as it highlights the importance of creating inclusive spaces that encourage cultural interaction through food. The research also underscores the potential of street food to serve as a powerful vehicle for cultural immersion and adventure, allowing tourists to connect with local traditions and engage with residents in meaningful ways.

From a sociological perspective, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and cultural contexts in which food is consumed, particularly in the case of street food. It highlights how the food environment, including the social dynamics of street vendors and their interactions with customers, shapes the overall eating experience. This contributes to the field of food sociology by recognizing the significance of local food practices and traditions, enriching our understanding of food as a social phenomenon.

Furthermore, the study offers valuable insights for food sociologists by exploring the cultural and social dimensions of Thai street food culture. It emphasizes the need to consider local culinary practices in the study of food sociology, recognizing the diverse and complex relationships between food, society, and culture. In doing so, the research expands our knowledge of how street food can reflect broader societal structures and cultural values, providing a richer understanding of food's role in social interactions.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings offer practical guidance for tourism professionals in creating new products and marketing campaigns to attract more tourists by leveraging street food as a key attraction. Street food plays a crucial role in enhancing a destination's economy, as food tourism positively impacts local markets (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Furthermore, government entities can use these findings to introduce environmental regulations related to urban planning, sanitation, and food safety (Fusté-Forné, 2023). Authorities should consider implementing hygiene standards and training programs to improve food handling, sanitation, and overall vendor practices (Ma et al., 2019; Tuglo et al., 2021). Such measures would enhance customer satisfaction and ensure the sustainability of the street food market.

Research has highlighted the potential health risks associated with street food due to improper sanitation and handling (Phulkerd et al., 2023; Sawmong & Ahadi, 2023). Ensuring better access to clean water and improved hygiene facilities, as well as implementing food safety training for vendors, can reduce these risks and maintain the sector's growth. Street food also fosters cultural diversity and community interaction, providing a space where people from various socioeconomic backgrounds can engage and learn from one another (Stevenson, 2014).

Street food reflects the cultural identity of a community and helps preserve regional culinary traditions, thereby boosting local economies (Shaw, 2019; Shoukat et al., 2023). To protect these traditions, governments should support small-scale vendors, raise awareness of street food's cultural significance, and enforce safety regulations (Phulkerd et al., 2023). The sector offers essential employment opportunities, particularly for marginalized groups, and generates substantial tourism revenue (Baker, 2015).

Overall, the study suggests that destinations can use street food to create authentic and immersive tourism experiences (Anggara et al., 2023). By improving culinary skills, hygiene, and customer service, tourism professionals can elevate the street food experience and attract more visitors. Thai street food, in particular, can differentiate a destination and appeal to food enthusiasts by highlighting its unique flavors, ingredients, and vibrant culture (Ellis et al., 2018; Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Implications for Future Research

This study focused on first-time visitors from China, as they have been the largest group of tourists to Thailand in recent years. Consequently, the findings may not apply to visitors from other countries, as their experiences with outdoor dining may differ (Anggara et al., 2023; Putra et al., 2023). Future research should broaden its scope to include a more diverse range of tourists, since street food is enjoyed by visitors from all nationalities. For instance, in 2019, Thailand welcomed 39.8 million foreign tourists, with the top five countries of origin being China, Malaysia, India, Japan, and South Korea (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2020). To ensure results are representative of the broader tourist population, it is essential to examine the opinions and experiences of a wider range of travelers.

While this qualitative study provided valuable insights, its small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Qualitative research often faces criticism for its lack of broad applicability due to small sample sizes and the subjective nature of data collection (Miles et al., 2019). Thus, future research should recruit larger and more diverse samples to better capture the variety of tourist experiences with street food. Additionally, this study focused on specific locations in Bangkok, which means the results may not represent all street food encounters across the city or country. Expanding future research to other regions would improve representativeness and provide a more comprehensive understanding of Thai street food experiences.

Future research could also adopt a comparative approach, exploring differences in street food perceptions among international visitors from various regions, such as Asia and Europe. This would offer a more nuanced understanding of how different cultural groups engage with street food, providing valuable insights for marketing and promotional efforts aimed at diverse tourist demographics. Comparative studies could reveal significant cultural differences in eating habits and attitudes, which would be of interest to scholars in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Finally, this research highlights the need for further development of theoretical frameworks in gastronomic tourism, as existing models like Fields's (2002) require refinement to better reflect contemporary data and trends.

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