Hainanese Chicken Rice and Culinary Identity of Food in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Hainanese chicken rice is a popular dish in many countries, especially in Southeast Asia, due to its delicious taste, convenient eating style, and easy adaptability to the eating cultures of consumers in each country. This dish originated from the Hainanese people of China and then spread to many countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand through migration and settlement. As a result, Hainanese chicken rice has developed differently in terms of taste, cooking methods, seasoning, and side dishes according to each area. This academic article discusses the popularity of Hainanese chicken rice in Southeast Asia and compares differences to study the adaptation of recipes, tastes, and cooking methods in each country. To study the identity of food and cultural integration in Southeast Asia. The study employed literature review and document analysis based on academic articles, research studies, and other relevant secondary sources. The findings reveal that Hainanese chicken rice remains popular because it is easy to eat at reasonable prices. It also reflects that Hainanese chicken rice is an example of food that travels across cultures through the process of migration and cultural exchange until it was modified in accordance with the context of each country and gradually became a part of the food identity of many countries in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, it is adaptable to the different cultural contexts of each country. This popularity reflects the transmission of culinary wisdom from generation to generation, as well as the cultural integration found throughout Southeast Asia.

Keyword: Hainanese chicken rice, Southeast Asia, Food Culture, Culinary Identity, Cultural Integration

ข้าวมันไก่ไหหลำกับการสร้างอัตลักษณ์อาหารในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

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บทคัดย่อ

ข้าวมันไก่ไหหลำเป็นอาหารที่ได้รับความนิยมในหลายประเทศ โดยเฉพาะในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ เนื่องจากเป็นเมนูที่มีรสชาติอร่อย รับประทานง่าย และสามารถปรับเปลี่ยนให้สอดคล้องกับวัฒนธรรมการบริโภคของแต่ละประเทศได้อย่างหลากหลาย เดิมมีต้นกำเนิดมาจากชาวไหหลำของประเทศจีน ก่อนจะแพร่หลายเข้าสู่ประเทศต่าง ๆ เช่น สิงคโปร์ มาเลเซีย และประเทศไทย ผ่านการอพยพและการตั้งถิ่นฐานของชาวไหหลำ ทำให้ข้าวมันไก่ได้รับการพัฒนาในรูปแบบที่แตกต่างกัน ทั้งด้านรสชาติ วิธีการปรุง และเครื่องเคียงตามเอกลักษณ์ของแต่ละพื้นที่ บทความวิชาการนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความนิยมของข้าวมันไก่ไหหลำในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ เปรียบเทียบความแตกต่างเพื่อศึกษาการปรับตัวของสูตรอาหาร รสชาติ และวิธีการปรุงในแต่ละประเทศ รวมถึงเพื่อศึกษาอัตลักษณ์อาหารและการผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรมในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ โดยใช้การทบทวนวรรณกรรมและการวิเคราะห์เอกสารจากบทความวิชาการ งานวิจัย และแหล่งข้อมูลทุติยภูมิที่เกี่ยวข้อง ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ข้าวมันไก่ไหหลำยังคงได้รับความนิยมอย่างต่อเนื่อง เนื่องจากเป็นอาหารที่รับประทานง่าย ราคาเหมาะสม อีกทั้งยังสะท้อนให้เห็นว่า ข้าวมันไก่ไหหลำเป็นตัวอย่างของอาหารที่เดินทางข้ามวัฒนธรรมผ่านกระบวนการอพยพและการแลกเปลี่ยนทางวัฒนธรรม จนเกิดการปรับเปลี่ยนให้สอดคล้องกับบริบทของแต่ละประเทศและค่อย ๆ กลายเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของอัตลักษณ์อาหารของหลายประเทศในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ และสามารถปรับเปลี่ยนรูปแบบให้เข้ากับบริบททางวัฒนธรรมของแต่ละประเทศได้ นอกจากนี้ยังสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงการถ่ายทอดภูมิปัญญาด้านอาหารจากรุ่นสู่รุ่น ตลอดจนการผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรมในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้อย่างชัดเจน

คำสำคัญ: ข้าวมันไก่ไหหลำ เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ วัฒนธรรมอาหาร อัตลักษณ์อาหาร การผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรม

1. Introduction

Hainanese chicken rice is a popular food in Southeast Asia in many countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Each country has different cooking methods and flavors according to its own local culture, despite sharing the same origin. Nowadays, chicken rice is not an ordinary food, but it has become a dish that is accepted by the global food industry. Many restaurants in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have received Michelin stars and Michelin Bib Gourmand, making Hainanese chicken rice more internationally famous. As a result, chicken rice is not only street food but also fine dining cuisine. At present, chicken rice continues to evolve in terms of ingredients, cooking techniques, and presentation so that it can elevate street food to Michelin-level restaurants and fine dining (Aroimak, 2025) [1]. This comparison reflects the change that causes the identity that a type of food can travel across cultures and has been modified to become a part of food identity in many countries.

From the adaptation to the culture, Hainanese chicken rice can be popular in Southeast Asia. However, there are still differences in terms of various factors that cause popularity to be different in each country. This academic article therefore aims to examine the factors contributing to the popularity of Hainanese chicken rice and compare its different recipes across Southeast Asian countries.

2. Methodology

This academic article employed a literature review and document analysis to examine Hainanese chicken rice and the construction of food identity in Southeast Asia. The analysis focused on Hainanese chicken rice, food culture, food identity creation, and Hainanese migration. It also reflected an adaptation of recipes in each country in Southeast Asia. The collected data were analyzed, compared, and synthesized to explain how Hainanese chicken rice has evolved across cultures and gradually become part of the culinary identity of Southeast Asia.

Data was collected from academic journal articles, research articles, books, websites, and other relevant secondary sources. The search was conducted using keywords such as Hainanese chicken rice, food culture, food identity, and culinary wisdom. After collecting information, articles that are relevant to the issues studied have been selected. The reliability of information and consistency with the purpose of the article were considered. Then, the data were analyzed and compared to each issue to get the concept and knowledge of Hainanese chicken rice and create a food identity in Southeast Asia.

3. Literature Review

The popularity of Hainanese Chicken Rice in Southeast Asia can be explained through several theoretical perspectives related to food culture and culinary heritage.

3.1 Culinary Wisdom

Culinary wisdom refers to knowledge, skill, and experience related to food that are shared and transmitted across generations. Lewruangsura and Khemkunasai [2] explained that culinary wisdom involves not only preserving and transmitting traditional cooking knowledge from one generation to the next but also adapting, modifying, and refining culinary practices to suit changing social and cultural contexts. Foods are not just meant to be consumed in order to sustain life and to provide energy for the body and for work; however, they also reflect a community's way of life, cultural values, and identity. One of the examples of culinary wisdom is Hainanese chicken rice. It has been preserved through the transmission of cooking knowledge from one generation to the next. This knowledge was mostly shared between family members as well as within the community. Even though some parts of the cooking process as well as some of the ingredients have been modified in order to adapt to different situations, the cultural value of the dish has remained intact and continued to be an important part of the culinary heritage of the Hainanese.

3.2 Cultural Significance of Hainanese Chicken Rice

According to TailoredRead [3], Hainanese chicken rice is a food that contains much cultural value and demonstrates great culinary techniques. In Singapore, Hainanese chicken rice is one of the national

dishes of the country. As the dish is a combination of Chinese, Hainanese, Malay, and Singaporean food, it reflects the story of the group of people that have migrated to Southeast Asia and adapted to the new country and culture. Hainanese chicken rice embodies the philosophy of simple cooking yet careful attention to details. For example, the chicken in this type of food is carefully poached until it has a tender texture. When it comes to the cooking of rice, it is cooked with chicken stock, and the dipping sauce is prepared to enhance the overall flavor of the dish. Although the ingredients used are simple, careful preparation is needed to contribute to its distinctive taste. Not only can Hainanese chicken rice be served and appreciated by people of different cultures in various parts of the world, but also it can be modified according to the taste and preferences of the people in different countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Thus, this simple dish can link the history and culture of the people of Southeast Asia and also their eating habits.

3.3 Cultural adaptation of food

Wang and Yarapirom [4] explained that cultural adaptation of food is the process in which food is modified when entering the context of a new culture. This process results from people's adaptation to a different cultural environment. Such changes may occur in terms of raw materials, cooking methods, taste, and consumption patterns to be consistent with the culture, values, and lifestyle of people in the new society. In addition, immigrants often maintain traditional cooking methods but choose to use locally available raw materials or combine them with new cooking styles, resulting in food that reflects both traditional culture and the culture of the destination society. Based on this concept, Sermchuwitkul et al. (2024) [5] examined the adaptation of Thai chicken rice in Thailand. It is important to note that when Hainan people immigrated to settle in Thailand, they brought their food consumption culture with them. With the settlement over a long time, Chinese food culture combined with Thai food culture created a unique chicken rice dish. The dish, which originates from Hainan Province, traditionally involves stirring the rice with chicken oil before cooking. However, in Thailand, it has been modified to cook the rice directly, reducing the process and saving time in cooking. Additionally, the dipping sauce has been developed to include a mixture of bean curd, ginger, chili, and various seasonings to match the tastes of Thai consumers. As a result, Hainan chicken rice has become a food that retains its original identity while clearly reflecting the adaptation to the cultural context of Thailand.

3.4 Cultural identity of food

Brasier [6] explained that food is a representation of culture and becomes an important part of cultural identity. To illustrate, recipes are passed down from generation to generation in taste, smell, and culinary practices that are linked to ancestral heritage. This reflects the cultural identity, values, and traditions of a community. In addition, culture is not innate but is learned through social interaction. It consists of the shared beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices of a community, including food consumption, which serves as an important expression of cultural identity. Similarly, Kittler et al. [7] stated that “Eating is a daily reaffirmation of [one's] cultural identity.” This confirms that the influence of food consumption is tied to a person's identity because the patterns of choosing food, taste, and eating are influenced by the

ethnic cultural foundations and beliefs of each person. Furthermore, eating in everyday life helps maintain and express cultural identity as well. In this regard, Almerico (2014) [8] pointed out that food serves as a medium for transmitting culture from generation to generation within the family. For example, eating together fosters memories, feelings of bonding, and a sense of belonging to the family. Food consumed during childhood often carries emotional value and becomes a symbol that connects individuals with their cultural roots. Additionally, cultural identity is reflected through a clear example, which can be found in Chinese food culture. Chamnian et al. [9] highlighted that Chinese food is distinguished by a variety of ingredients, cooking methods, and tastes. In addition, with the continuous development and innovation in food styles, Chinese food culture has spread through migration across different periods, and the popularity of Chinese cuisine can be seen in many countries, including Thailand. Meesantan and Sadama [10] stated that the migration of Hainanese people into Southeast Asia played a significant role in spreading food culture due to their recognized cooking skills and trusted positions as head chefs.

4. Academic Analysis

4.1 Factors Contributing to the Popularity of Hainanese Chicken Rice

The widespread popularity of Hainanese chicken rice is the result of multiple historical, cultural, and culinary factors. Over time, the dish has evolved from a traditional Hainanese food into a well-known culinary icon in several Southeast Asian countries. This section analyzes the key factors contributing to its popularity by examining its history, evolution, and current significance.

4.1.1 History and Origin

Chicken rice is not just ordinary food but a food with a long history that reflects people's journey. It represents the blending of cultures and the adaptation of culinary practices to different regions. Starting from Hainan Province, China, it traveled to Southeast Asia and is a highly popular food in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. The main uniqueness of chicken rice is simplicity but meticulousness in every step. Until making dipping sauce with the perfect taste as well [1].

However, the history of Hainanese chicken rice is not without controversy. A dispute known as the “Chicken Rice Battle” emerged between Singapore and Malaysia, with both countries claiming strong cultural ties to the dish and asserting ownership of its original recipe. While Thailand has largely remained outside this debate, Thai-style chicken rice has developed its own distinctive characteristics through local adaptations [11]. To explain this phenomenon, Ng Yen Yen (2009), the Minister of Tourism of Malaysia, said that “we cannot let other countries steal our food anymore” and claimed that Hainanese chicken rice belongs to Malaysia. Accordingly, his statement gained attention in Singapore, where Hainanese chicken rice is widely regarded as a national dish. As a result, there is a conflict between Singapore and Malaysia, who need to claim its heritage. The debate between these two countries is even linked to national identity, as they were once part of the same federation between 1963 and 1965. After separation, they have tried to establish their own cultural identity, and Hainanese chicken rice has become their national culinary heritage. To illustrate, Malaysia argued that the “Nam Heong”chicken rice restaurant in Kuala Lumpur was established in 1930, predating Singapore’s “Swee Kee” restaurant, which opened in 1949. Nevertheless, Singapore has

been more successful in promoting Hainanese chicken rice internationally through tourism, media, and popular culture. Despite these competing claims, historical evidence suggests that the dish originated from Hainan Province in southern China, where it is known as “Hainan Ji Fan” (海南鸡饭) [11].

4.1.2 The Evolution of Hainanese Chicken Rice to the Present Day

The journey of Hainanese chicken rice began in China and later spread to Southeast Asia during the 19th and 20th centuries, when Hainanese migrants settled in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Although they relocated, many Hainanese people preserved their culinary traditions and recreated familiar flavors from their homeland. As a result, chicken rice gradually became known and popular within Chinese diaspora communities and later expanded into mainstream local cuisines in the region [1-2, 12].

In Thailand, Hainanese chicken rice was introduced through early Chinese communities, particularly in Bangkok areas such as the Samsen district and communities around Prasat Phongsaram Temple. Over time, it became widely accessible across the country. Thai-style adaptations include oily rice instead of plain rice, spicy dipping sauces, and variations such as fried or grilled chicken, making the dish more aligned with Thai flavor preferences [12].

In Singapore, Hainanese chicken rice developed into a national dish. It was adapted to local tastes by serving it with chili sauce, soy sauce, and aromatic rice cooked in chicken broth. The dish is widely recognized for its standardized presentation and strong cultural identity (Tada, 2024) [12].

In Malaysia, chicken rice also became popular but evolved differently. It is commonly served with plain rice or rice cooked with light seasoning, and roasted chicken is often preferred instead of boiled chicken, reflecting local taste preferences [13].

In the present day, Hainanese chicken rice is widely available in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, sold in street food stalls, restaurants, and shopping malls. It has become a popular everyday meal due to its affordability, convenience, and taste. In addition, the dish has gained further popularity through online platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, where it is frequently reviewed and shared, reinforcing its status as a culturally significant and widely consumed food in the region [12].

4.1.3 The Popularity of Hainanese Chicken Rice

Chicken rice is a popular dish today. In particular, chicken rice businesses highlight the importance of their ingredients: rice, chicken, soup, and sauce. The more attention each shop pays to detail, the more they attract customers. For example, Toh-Kim Thainanese chicken rice, the fifteenth chain restaurant of the Iberry Group, has brought greater attention to this specialty. At the same time, Muek Mun Kai Chicken Rice experienced long queues, with people lining up before the shop opened. Once a struggling business, it is now highly successful, earning 3 million baht per month. LINE MAN Wongnai said that in 2024 Toh-Kim Thainanese chicken ice has been upgraded to premium, and at the same time there are a lot of new openings of chicken rice specialties. In the last year, it was found that orders for confirmed chicken rice on the platform increased 23% when compared to the previous year [14].

To further explain its popularity, Hainanese chicken rice has remained one of the most frequently ordered dishes in Thailand, with sales exceeding 1.5 million dishes. Its popularity can be attributed not only

to its distinctive taste and affordability but also to the influence of media and popular culture. An example is “Gundam Effect,” which emerged after the anime Mobile Suit Gundam GQuuuuuuX featured a brief scene involving chicken rice. Even though the scene was very short, it made many viewers interested in chicken rice. After that, people started talking about it all over social media, posting reviews, sharing photos, and going to try chicken rice themselves, so sales really went up. It shows how anime and pop culture can make people interested in certain foods, including Hainanese chicken rice [15].

4.2 Comparison of Hainanese Chicken Rice Recipes Across Southeast Asian Countries

Hainanese chicken rice not only reflects the culinary wisdom and cultural significance of Hainanese cuisine but also demonstrates the cultural adaptation and identity associated with this dish. As discussed in the literature review, culinary traditions are continuously adapted to suit different cultural contexts while preserving their essential characteristics. Furthermore, food identity is constructed through this adaptation process, as communities modify traditional dishes to reflect their own cultural values, tastes, and eating practices. Accordingly, when Hainan people immigrated to Southeast Asia, chicken rice originated from China, but when entering Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, this type of food has modified raw materials and how to make dipping sauces and flavors in accordance with the culture in their country. Therefore, these three countries were chosen as case studies because they are countries where a large number of Hainanese people have immigrated to settle and developed chicken rice to be unique, which reflects the food identity of each country.

4.2.1 The Different Styles of Hainanese Chicken Rice in Each Country

Hainanese chicken rice originated in Hainan, China, and later became popular in several Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Although the dish shares a common origin, each country has developed its own distinctive variation. The most outstanding difference can be explained in terms of different sauces and types of chicken. In each country, what makes Hainanese chicken rice different is also the eating culture in different countries. [16].

In Thailand, the taste of Hainanese chicken tastes sweet with tender chicken, and a distinctive dipping sauce, which is similar to Thai seafood sauce. However, it is typically redder in color and combines sour, sweet, and salty flavors. It is also enhanced with ingredients such as ginger and vegetables, which contribute to its aromatic taste. When served together with the chicken and rice, the sauce creates a distinctive flavor profile that makes Thai-style Hainanese chicken different from other countries.

In Singapore, Hainanese chicken is served with three different sauces. First, there is pickled chili sauce, which has a sour, salty, and slightly spicy taste. Next is ginger sauce, which is salty and fragrant with sesame oil. The third is a style of soybean paste sauce. In Singapore, soy sauce and sugar are stewed together to create a sweet and salty flavor. There is also a sweet sauce with a sweet and sour taste, or sometimes a sweet and salty taste. Finally, the indispensable element is the chicken itself, which is very tender [17].

In Malaysia chicken rice was clearly different; in Kuala Lumpur, people will bake chicken, and this one can make the new generation like baked chicken more than boiled chicken. They will have a different

way, which is to dip the chicken in garlic chili sauce and put ginger and a little onion. After that, pour black soy sauce. This is the reason why chicken rice was very famous among Malaysian people [13].

4.2.2 Characteristics of Chicken and Components

Chicken rice in different countries shows clear variations in cooking methods, ingredients, and taste profiles. Although the dish shares a common origin in Hainanese cuisine, it has developed distinct characteristics in China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. [18].

The original Hainanese chicken rice focuses on simplicity and natural flavor. The chicken is typically poached with ginger and garlic to preserve its tenderness and juiciness. The rice is cooked using chicken broth, resulting in a light aroma and mild taste. The accompanying dipping sauce is usually simple and not heavily seasoned [18].

In Thailand, chicken rice has been adapted to local preferences. It commonly uses boiled or roasted chicken, and the rice is often slightly oily and flavorful. Thai-style dipping sauces are typically more intense and spicier, and some variations include unique house-made sauces and clear soup served alongside the dish.

In Singapore, the dish has evolved into a more refined version. The chicken is often prepared using techniques such as ice bathing after cooking to tighten the skin and improve texture. The rice is stir-fried with chicken fat, garlic, and butter or oil, giving it a richer and more fragrant flavor. A variety of sauces is also provided, including chili sauce, ginger paste, and soy-based or sesame oil-based sauces. [18].

In Malaysia, Hainanese chicken rice is notably different, especially in the preparation of the chicken. Roasted chicken is commonly used instead of poached chicken, and the flavor is enhanced with spices such as soy sauce, honey, and seasoning blends, resulting in a stronger and more aromatic taste. The dish is often served with chili sauce and ginger-based dipping sauce [13].

Overall, although Hainanese chicken rice originates from the same culinary tradition, each country has developed its own distinctive version based on local ingredients and taste preferences

4.2.3 Ingredients and Cooking Process

Hainanese chicken rice in different countries shares a common foundation, consisting of chicken, rice cooked with chicken fat or broth, and dipping sauces that enhance flavor. However, each country has developed distinct variations based on local ingredients and taste preferences [18].

In China, the original version emphasizes simplicity and natural taste. The chicken is usually poached to maintain its tenderness, while the rice has a light aroma from chicken broth. The dipping sauce is mild and not heavily seasoned, reflecting a focus on preserving the original flavor of the ingredients [18].

In Thailand, chicken rice is adapted to local preferences for bold flavors. The dipping sauces are typically more complex, combining sweet, sour, salty, and spicy elements. Fermented bean-based sauces are also commonly used, making the flavor more intense and distinctive, which aligns with Thai culinary preferences [18].

As for Singaporean chicken rice, in contrast, it involves more refined cooking techniques. The chicken is often prepared to achieve a smooth texture and firm skin, while the rice is cooked using chicken

oil, garlic, and ginger to enhance its fragrance. A wider variety of dipping sauces is also provided, contributing to a richer overall flavor experience [18].

The Malaysian style of Hainanese chicken rice shows a different taste, as the dish tends to have a stronger and more aromatic profile. Roasted or grilled chicken is commonly used instead of poached chicken, resulting in a crispier texture and more intense flavor. Spices and seasonings are more prominent, giving the dish a richer taste compared to the original version [13].

4.2.4 Eating Culture

Originally, Hainanese people only ate chicken rice for breakfast, so there is no chicken rice sold in street food shops at night. They normally cook this recipe for one-time eating in the morning. This becomes their routine to wake up very early to boil chicken and cook rice from 3 a.m. The chicken is hanging in the cabinet. Another eating culture of Hainan people is that they will boil chicken to only 80-90 percent since the remaining red blood shows the freshness of the chicken. Wenchang chicken is typically eaten in a style called “Bai Qie” (白切), which is known in Thai as “Pae Sa.” This refers to chopping the chicken into pieces and eating it with dipping sauce [19, 20].

Unlike in Thailand, Hainanese chicken rice eating culture has been adjusted to match the taste of Thai people. As a result, the dish becomes popular since everyone can easily find it in every region. The combination of food culture from China and Thailand makes its diverse menu so that Thai people can consume it all day, including breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Chicken rice can also be adapted to the authentic Thai style, and it remains a dish that continues to attract people. Over time, Thai-style Hainanese chicken rice has become a favorite dish for many people. [21, 22].

Singapore's eating culture is diverse, with Chinese people forming the largest ethnic group. As a result, Chinese cuisine significantly influences Singaporean food, and "Singapore Chicken Rice" is considered a national dish. This dish is inspired by Hainanese Chicken Rice, but its flavor differs from the original due to the blending of various cultures in Singapore. The spices and cooking methods are also adapted, incorporating Indian and Malaysian styles, particularly in meat dishes. According to Chef Liang, the executive chef at Amara Bangkok hotel, the sauces and food culture of Hainanese and Teochew Chinese vary depending on the level of sophistication and refinement of each [23, 24].

In Malaysia, chickens are a fundamental component of the eating culture, as they are described as the ‘king of meat.’ As Malaysia is comprised of three major ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, the food culture is also reflective of their cultures. Thus, despite the different perspectives the chicken rice manifests in the food culture of Malaysia, it could also symbolize a sense of harmony between the different races and highlight their cultural diversity through the different cooking methods. To explain, different communities in Malaysia have their own ways of preparing and consuming chicken dishes. For example, Chinese and Indian tend to have distinct preferences depending on personal taste and daily mood, which can be spicy-flavored chicken or dishes cooked with delicate herbs. In addition, the younger generation today eats roasted or baked chicken with a lot of flavors as opposed to the older generation, who prefer boiled chicken, as it is more traditional. Moreover, the dish is served on many occasions and events, such

as school functions, and during times of religious festivities like Ramadan. Therefore, it reveals how chicken dishes in Malaysia have grown and evolved through the multicultural society. Hence, chicken rice is not just another means of daily food consumption but also a symbol for the people of Malaysia and even to people all around the world on the Malaysian culture and how the Malaysians bond together as one in eating chicken and how it is recognized as an important part of the Malaysian food culture [13].

4.2.5 Cultural Adaptation of Food

Regarding the cultural adaptation of food, the findings demonstrate that Hainanese chicken rice reflects this concept. Although the dish originated from the same Hainanese culinary tradition, its ingredients, cooking methods, dipping sauces, and eating practices have been modified to suit local tastes, available resources, and cultural preferences. Consequently, Hainan chicken rice continues to be popular and highlights that cultural adaptation is important for the persistence and spread of traditional food in different cultures [4].

4.2.6 Cultural Identity of Food

In terms of the cultural identity of food, the adaptations of Hainanese chicken rice have shaped food identities in many countries, including Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. While Hainanese chicken rice shares a common origin, each country has developed its own distinct culinary identity through different preparation techniques, flavors, and eating cultures. As a result, it represents both a shared Hainanese culinary heritage and a distinct cultural identity in each Southeast Asian country [9].

5. Discussion

This analysis found that Hainanese chicken rice had managed to sustain its popularity in Southeast Asia not only because of the taste, price, and distribution of the dish but also because of its flexibility to be adapted by different cultures without sacrificing its original identity. It is consistent with the observation by Mong the Fisherman (2024) [11] that the dish had been adapted in many countries and accommodated to the local taste and eating culture. Thus, there is also evidence of culinary wisdom practiced by the community in the process of preserving and transmitting food practices from generation to generation and across different cultures. Today, Hainanese chicken rice remains popular not only in its country of origin but also in many other countries, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore.

In addition, Hainanese chicken rice can also be viewed as a cultural symbol since it is a medium of identity, memory, and social relations. This idea is supported by the film Rice Rhapsody, by Kenneth Bi, starring Sylvia Chang, which tells the story of the family of the owner of the chicken rice shop in Singapore by using "Hainanese chicken rice" as a symbol that connects the whole family, memories, and identity of Hainanese Singaporeans (Online, M., 2015) [23]. Thus, apart from being a popular dish in many countries, food in general and Hainanese chicken rice in particular can highlight the role that food plays in maintaining a cultural identity within a multicultural society.

6. Conclusion

Hainanese chicken rice originated in Hainan, China, and then later was introduced to Southeast Asia through the migration of Hainanese. After that, it becomes popular in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Although Hainanese chicken rice shares a common core, each country has adapted its own recipe to suit local tastes and eating cultures. As a result, there are differences in terms of ingredients, cooking methods, and dipping sauces. However, the core characteristics and cultural identity of Hainanese chicken rice remain. Today, Hainanese chicken rice remains popular throughout Southeast Asia due to its distinctive taste, affordability, accessibility, and ability to adapt to the culinary preferences of different countries.

7. Suggestion

This academic article demonstrates the history, popularity, and evolution of Hainanese chicken rice in Southeast Asia, highlighting its food culture, cultural identity, and culinary heritage that have been preserved and passed down from generation to generation. The findings of this article can be used as a reference in the study of food culture and food heritage of the region. Therefore, future studies may focus on the issues related to factors that influence the evolution of Hainanese chicken rice in different Southeast Asian countries to gain comprehensive knowledge and clearly explain the differences in food cultural adaptation in each context.

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