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SUSTAINING HERITAGE FOODSCAPES: SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS AND RELATIONAL WELL-BEING IN BANGKOK'S YAOWARAT DISTRICT

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Abstract

This qualitative ethnographic study investigates how food tourism reshapes the socio-cultural landscape, everyday practices, and relational well-being within Bangkok's Yaowarat Street Food District. While Yaowarat is globally recognized for its iconic culinary heritage, the localized, lived impacts of this touristic prominence on host communities remain heavily underexplored. Drawing on year-long fieldwork, 15 in-depth qualitative interviews, 5 focus groups, and 2 dialogue workshops, this research examines the complex negotiations between residents and vendors amid rapid, tourism-driven global change. The findings reveal four primary dynamics: the reconfiguration of temporal and spatial rhythms causing simultaneous pride and fatigue; authenticity enacted as an ongoing, embodied negotiation rather than a fixed cultural attribute; cultural continuity sustained through informal, intergenerational stewardship; and community well-being experienced relationally through spatial familiarity and emotional security. Ultimately, this study argues that sustainable food tourism transcends traditional economic indicators, relying instead on the preservation of everyday rhythms, affective relations, and spatial autonomy. By centering lived experiences within an Asian urban context, this research offers a critical, multidimensional perspective on cultural sustainability and inclusive heritage management in rapidly transforming urban heritage foodscapes.

Keywords: Urban Foodscapes, Cultural Continuity, Relational Well-Being, Socio-Cultural Impacts, Food Tourism

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Introduction

Nestled in the heart of Bangkok, Yaowarat, widely known as Chinatown, is a dense urban district where food, heritage, and everyday life intersect. Shaped by successive waves of Chinese migration, the area has evolved into one of Southeast Asia's most iconic street food destinations, attracting both local and international visitors (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2016). Each evening, Yaowarat's narrow streets transform into vibrant foodscapes animated by inherited culinary techniques and tightly coordinated routines of preparation and exchange. While this visibility has positioned Yaowarat as a symbol of Bangkok's culinary identity, it has also intensified the entanglement between food tourism and everyday community life.

Over the past decade, the global rise of food tourism has elevated street food districts such as Yaowarat from spaces of local sustenance to sites of cultural consumption and destination branding. Existing scholarship has documented the economic potential of food tourism, highlighting its role in urban regeneration, place marketing, and cultural valorization (Ellis et al., 2018; Worrachananun, 2025). In Asian cities, street food is often celebrated as an accessible expression of "authentic" everyday culture, closely tied to national identity and heritage narratives. However, this celebratory framing obscures a more complex reality: food tourism not only showcases culture, but actively reshapes the temporal rhythms, spatial practices, and emotional landscapes of the communities that sustain these foodscapes.

Research on food tourism and urban heritage has largely focused on authenticity, commodification, and economic development (MacCannell, 1973; Zukin, 2016). While offering valuable insights, this scholarship has traditionally privileged representational outcomes and macro-level economic indicators, often leaving the localized, socio-cultural dimensions of tourism-driven change underexplored. This gap is especially salient in heritage foodscapes like Yaowarat, where food is not merely a commercial asset, but a deeply embedded cultural practice shaped by intergenerational knowledge and long-standing social ties. As tourism intensifies, local communities must continually negotiate between inherited culinary identities and external expectations, balancing the pride of global recognition with the fatigue of accelerated urban rhythms. Consequently, critical questions emerge regarding how tourism is navigated as a lived condition; how relational well-being is maintained when spatial familiarity and emotional security come under pressure; and how local actors actively manage these everyday socio-cultural transformations.

Responding to these questions, this qualitative ethnographic study investigates how food tourism reshapes the socio-cultural landscape, everyday practices, and relational well-being within Bangkok's Yaowarat Street Food District. Adopting an immersive approach, the research foregrounds the lived experiences of vendors, residents, and local cultural actors to examine how tourism alters temporal and spatial rhythms, notions of authenticity, cultural continuity, and spatial autonomy. Rather than treating sustainability as a mere managerial or economic outcome, the study approaches it as an embodied process grounded in everyday negotiation, inclusive heritage management, and cultural practice.

By situating Yaowarat within broader debates on urban foodscapes, cultural sustainability, and community well-being, this article offers a critical, multidimensional perspective on inclusive heritage management. It contributes to food tourism and urban studies scholarship in three key ways. First, it advances an empirically grounded understanding of sustainability that centers temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of heritage foodscapes. Second, it offers insight into how authenticity and cultural continuity are actively negotiated within an Asian urban context, complicating binary distinctions between tradition and commodification. Third, it foregrounds relational well-being as a spatial phenomenon shaped not only by economic conditions, but by familiarity, belonging, and emotional attachment to place.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on food tourism, authenticity, urban foodscapes, and community well-being,

followed by a theoretical framework that integrates perspectives on cultural sustainability and relational well-being. The methodology section outlines the ethnographic research design and analytical approach. The findings section presents four interrelated dynamics that emerge from the data and are then discussed in relation to broader theoretical debates. The article concludes by reflecting on implications for sustainable tourism governance, urban policy, and future research on heritage food districts in Asia.

Literature Review

Food Tourism and the Politics of Authenticity

Food tourism has been widely examined as a cultural practice through which destinations construct identity, distinction, and value (Ellis et al., 2018; Okumus, 2020). In this literature, food is often positioned as a medium of “authentic” encounter, allowing tourists to access local culture through taste, performance, and everyday consumption. MacCannell’s (1973) influential concept of staged authenticity has long framed debates around whether tourism inevitably transforms cultural practices into performances tailored to visitor expectations. Subsequent scholarship, however, has problematized such binary distinctions, arguing that authenticity is better understood as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Okumus, 2021).

In Asian urban contexts, street food occupies a particularly complex position within these debates. Studies of food tourism in cities such as Singapore, Penang, and Hong Kong suggest that street food is simultaneously celebrated as heritage and reshaped through processes of branding, regulation, and media visibility (Sae-tang, 2024). While some scholars emphasize the risk of cultural dilution and standardization, others highlight vendors’ agency in negotiating authenticity on their own terms. These debates indicate that authenticity is not simply imposed by tourism, but actively co-produced through interactions between local actors, visitors, and broader institutional forces. Nevertheless, much of this work remains focused on representation and consumption, offering limited insight into how those who sustain these food practices experience such negotiations in everyday life.

Urban Foodscapes and Tourism-Driven Transformation

The concept of the *foodscape* has been increasingly adopted to analyze how food environments are shaped by social relations, power, and spatial organization (Baumann et al., 2015; Godjali & Supramaniam, 2025). Within urban studies, foodscapes are understood as sites where economic activity, cultural meaning, and everyday practice intersect. In heritage districts, these intersections are intensified by tourism, which reconfigures space, time, and patterns of use.

Empirical research across Asian cities demonstrates that tourism-driven transformation of food districts often brings uneven consequences. Rising rents, crowding, and shifts in neighborhood rhythms have been documented alongside economic opportunity and increased visibility. Studies of informal food economies highlight how such changes can disrupt long-standing social networks and informal governance structures, particularly affecting older vendors and long-term residents. While these studies offer valuable insights into structural change, they often privilege macro-level dynamics—such as policy, redevelopment, or market forces—over the micro-level experiences through which these changes are lived and negotiated daily.

Well-being, Cultural Continuity, and Heritage Districts

Recent tourism scholarship has expanded understandings of well-being beyond economic indicators to include emotional, social, and relational dimensions (Smith & Diekmann, 2017). In heritage contexts, well-being is increasingly linked to cultural continuity: the ability of communities to maintain meaningful practices, intergenerational knowledge, and a sense of belonging amid change. Food, as an embodied and sensory practice, plays a central role in this process by anchoring memory, identity, and social connection.

Ethnographic studies in Asian heritage districts suggest that cultural continuity is sustained not only through formal preservation but through everyday acts of resilience, adaptation, and informal stewardship. At the same time, tourism can place these practices under strain by accelerating rhythms of work, compressing social space, or reframing cultural expressions for external audiences. Despite growing recognition of these dynamics, relatively few studies have examined how well-being, cultural continuity, and food tourism intersect in lived experience, particularly within dense urban foodscapes where everyday life and tourism are deeply entangled.

Synthesis and Research Positioning

Taken together, existing literature highlights the significance of food tourism in shaping urban foodscapes, authenticity, and cultural heritage. However, much scholarship privileges representational and economic perspectives, offering limited attention to the lived, socio-cultural dimensions of these transformations. Furthermore, while well-being and cultural sustainability are increasingly acknowledged, they are rarely examined simultaneously as spatial and relational experiences within dense Asian heritage districts. Addressing these gaps, the present study positions Yaowarat as a critical site to examine how food tourism reshapes everyday rhythms, cultural continuity, and relational well-being. By foregrounding lived experience as the point of analytical integration, this study moves beyond static evaluations of economic impact, offering a socially grounded understanding of sustainability as an ongoing, embodied condition embedded within the heritage foodscape.

Research Questions

Grounded in the above literature, the study is guided by three primary research questions:

- 1) How do residents and vendors negotiate the socio-cultural impacts of food tourism on their everyday practices and relational well-being within the Yaowarat heritage foodscape?
- 2) In what ways does this touristic prominence influence cultural continuity, identity practices, and embodied notions of authenticity?
- 3) How do different groups within Yaowarat—vendors, residents, business owners, and local cultural actors—manage spatial autonomy and everyday rhythms amidst rapid tourism-driven change?

Theoretical Framework and Analytical Approach

Rather than approaching food tourism as a discrete economic sector, this study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework that conceptualizes it as a lived socio-cultural process embedded in everyday practices, spatial arrangements, and affective relations. By converging three interlinked lenses—urban foodscapes (Baumann et al., 2015), cultural sustainability (Arnold & Lafreniere, 2017), and relational community well-being (Smith & Diekmann, 2017)—this framework enables a holistic interpretation of tourism-driven change. This integrative approach moves beyond linear trajectories of economic benefit or cultural loss, allowing for the capture of ambivalence: moments in which pride coexists with fatigue and visibility with displacement. Guided by this perspective, the study advances three core expectations: 1) food tourism reconfigures everyday temporal and spatial rhythms in ways that provoke both vulnerability and opportunity; 2) cultural continuity and authenticity emerge through ongoing, intergenerational stewardship, interpreting adaptations as strategic efforts to protect core identities under changing conditions (Mehta, 2025); and 3) community well-being is experienced relationally through spatial familiarity and emotional security. Ultimately, this framework foregrounds everyday lived experience as the critical site through which sustainability in heritage foodscapes is enacted or undermined.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design to examine how food tourism reshapes everyday life, cultural continuity, and community well-being in the Yaowarat Street

Food District. Because these processes are embedded in lived experience, relational practices, and sensory environments, qualitative inquiry is particularly well suited to capturing dimensions of tourism-driven change that extend beyond measurable economic indicators.

The core of the study comprises 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between November 2024 and November 2025. During this period, the researcher engaged in participant observation across multiple zones of Yaowarat, including night-market corridors, long-established vendor clusters, and adjacent residential backstreets. This prolonged engagement enabled close attention to everyday rhythms, informal interactions, and subtle shifts in spatial and temporal practices associated with increasing tourist activity. Field notes documented not only observable practices such as food preparation and customer interaction, but also atmospheric and sensory elements, including sound, smell, crowd density, and spatial negotiation. These observations provided insight into food tourism as a lived and embodied condition rather than a purely economic phenomenon.

To complement ethnographic observation, the study conducted 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants, including long-established vendors, younger-generation successors, long-term residents, cultural intermediaries, and small business operators connected to the local food economy. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 75 years, with variation in gender, migration background, and length of residence considered to capture diverse perspectives. Interviews explored experiences of tourism-related change, perceptions of authenticity and cultural continuity, and understandings of well-being in everyday life. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Collective meaning-making was examined through five focus group discussions, each involving five participants. Groups were organized around shared roles or experiences, such as veteran vendors, newer vendors, and long-term residents, allowing participants to reflect on tourism pressure, intergenerational tensions, and shared interpretations of cultural change. To further explore dialogue across social positions, two mixed-group discussion workshops were conducted, bringing together vendors, residents, and cultural actors. These workshops focused on community well-being, cultural continuity, and perceptions of Yaowarat's future, offering insight into how meanings and concerns are negotiated across stakeholder boundaries.

All data, including interview transcripts, focus group and workshop discussions, and ethnographic field notes, were analyzed using an iterative thematic analysis approach (e.g., following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006)). Initial open coding identified recurring concepts related to tourism pressure, authenticity, cultural transmission, well-being, and spatial practice. Through subsequent refinement, these codes were organized into higher-order themes aligned with the study's theoretical framework. Analytical rigor was supported by reflexive memo writing and triangulation across data sources, enhancing interpretive transparency and credibility.

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines. All participants were provided with clear information about the study and gave voluntary, informed consent prior to participation. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and field notes. Given the immersive nature of the research in a dense urban environment, care was taken to minimize disruption to everyday activities and to protect participants from unintended risk.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity were treated not merely as procedural requirements, but as integral, ongoing analytical practices throughout the research. Given the researcher's partial insider position and cultural familiarity with Yaowarat, continuous critical reflection was required to avoid obscuring taken-for-granted practices or overlooking subtle power dynamics. Reflexive memos documented shifts in interpretation, uncertainty, and positional tension, thereby strengthening the analytical sensitivity to the affective and nuanced dimensions of the lived socio-cultural processes within the foodscape.

Research Results

The findings illustrate how food tourism reshapes the heritage foodscape of Yaowarat through interconnected and often ambivalent experiences. Rather than producing uniformly positive or negative outcomes, tourism-driven change is lived unevenly across social groups, generations, and spatial positions within the district. Drawing on ethnographic observations, qualitative interviews, and dialogic workshops, four empirical themes capture how residents and vendors experience, interpret, and negotiate these socio-cultural transformations to sustain their cultural continuity and relational well-being.

Reshaping Everyday Rhythms: Pride and Pressure within an Accelerated Heritage Foodscape

Across data sources, participants described food tourism as fundamentally altering the temporal rhythms of everyday life. Vendors and residents articulated a dual sense of pride and pressure associated with Yaowarat's growing visibility. For long-standing vendors, international recognition affirmed the cultural value of their culinary labor. As one veteran vendor reflected, "I feel proud when people travel so far just to eat here. It means what my parents taught me still matters" (Vendor, male, 62).

At the same time, increased tourist flows compressed working rhythms and extended labor hours. Vendors described unpredictable surges triggered by social media exposure, requiring constant physical and emotional alertness. An elderly vendor explained, "Before, I could predict the day. Now I never know. When it is busy, it is nonstop, and my body cannot keep up like before" (Vendor, female, 68).

Residents experienced temporal disruption differently. Many reorganized daily routines to avoid peak tourist hours, particularly in the evenings. For older residents, accelerated rhythms translated into partial withdrawal from familiar spaces: "After sunset, I do not go out anymore. It feels like the street belongs to visitors, not us" (Resident, female, 71). These accounts suggest that tourism reshapes not only economic opportunity but the lived experience of time itself, producing generationally uneven capacities to adapt to acceleration.

Negotiating Authenticity: Between Adaptation and Culinary Integrity

Authenticity emerged as a pragmatic and negotiated concern rather than a fixed standard. Vendors distinguished between surface-level adaptations and the preservation of what they described as the "heart" of their food, particularly taste, technique, and lineage. As one vendor noted, "I can change how I serve it, but the taste must stay the same. If the taste changes, then it is not ours anymore" (Vendor, male, 55).

Younger-generation vendors were generally more open to adaptation, framing innovation as necessary for survival without abandoning inherited identity. A second-generation stallholder explained, "If we do not adjust a little, we will not survive. But adjusting does not mean forgetting where the recipe comes from" (Vendor, female, 34). Older vendors expressed ambivalence, acknowledging the need for change while voicing concern about long-term dilution. These negotiations were frequently enacted through embodied practice, as elders informally corrected techniques or seasoning during busy service periods, reinforcing authenticity through everyday work rather than formal rules.

Cultural Continuity under Strain: Informal Stewardship and Intergenerational Care

Despite pressures of commercialization, cultural continuity in Yaowarat was sustained through informal and relational forms of stewardship. Participants emphasized that culinary knowledge was transmitted through proximity, repetition, and correction rather than structured instruction. As one vendor explained, "No one teaches you by sitting down. You learn by standing next to them every day" (Vendor, male, 47).

Ethnographic observation captured moments in which senior vendors guided younger family members through subtle adjustments during peak hours, often without verbal instruction. Participants also linked continuity to sensory environments—smells, sounds, and visual

familiarity—that anchored memory and a sense of belonging. The closure of long-established stalls was therefore experienced as emotional rupture rather than solely economic loss: “When that stall closed, the street felt different. It was quiet in the wrong way” (Resident, male, 66). These accounts suggest that continuity is collectively sustained through shared sensory worlds rather than individual enterprises alone.

Well-being as Relational and Spatial: Feeling at Home in a Tourist District

Participants framed well-being primarily in relational and spatial terms rather than economic ones. Familiarity, predictability, and mutual recognition were described as central to feeling secure within the district. Vendors identified long-term relationships with neighboring stalls and returning customers as emotional anchors amid intensifying change. As one vendor reflected, “Even when it is exhausting, seeing familiar faces reminds me why I am still here” (Vendor, female, 51).

Residents, however, described a contraction of informal social spaces as tourism intensified. Alleys and resting areas, once used for everyday interaction, became crowded or were repurposed, reducing opportunities for social interaction. “We used to sit and talk in the evening. Now there is nowhere to stop,” one resident explained (Resident, female, 64). At the same time, respectful engagement from visitors—such as repeat visits or genuine interest in culinary stories—contributed positively to well-being. As one vendor noted, “Some tourists listen. When they do, it feels good. Like they see us, not just the food” (Vendor, male, 58).

Together, these narratives show that well-being in Yaowarat is dynamically shaped by the balance between recognition and displacement, connection and crowding, rather than by economic benefit alone.

Conclusion and Discussion

Drawing together the empirical themes, this study demonstrates that food tourism within the Yaowarat heritage foodscape operates neither as a uniformly revitalizing force nor as a singular source of disruption. Instead, it unfolds as a negotiated and uneven process deeply embedded in temporal rhythms, spatial practices, and relational life. Interpreted through the integrated framework of urban foodscapes, cultural sustainability, and relational well-being, the following discussion advances a socially grounded, multidimensional understanding of sustainability in heritage food tourism contexts.

The findings reveal that food tourism significantly reconfigures Yaowarat’s urban foodscape by accelerating everyday rhythms and intensifying spatial use. Tourism-driven visibility reorganizes when, where, and how space is occupied, producing differentiated experiences across social groups. While younger vendors often interpret accelerated rhythms as opportunity, older vendors and long-term residents experience temporal compression as physical strain, reduced autonomy, and partial exclusion from familiar spaces. These generationally uneven effects underscore that tourism-led change is not experienced uniformly, even within a single district. Importantly, the temporal dimension of sustainability, communities’ capacity to sustain workable rhythms of labor, rest, and social life, remains under-theorized in food tourism scholarship, which has tended to privilege spatial or economic outcomes.

The findings also complicate conventional debates on authenticity. In Yaowarat, authenticity is not understood as a fixed attribute to be preserved or lost, but as a negotiated and embodied practice embedded in everyday work. Vendors actively differentiate between surface adaptations and what they perceive as the core of culinary identity, including taste, technique, and lineage. Authenticity is thus not imposed externally by tourism markets, but managed internally through relational and intergenerational negotiation. This challenges policy approaches that attempt to codify authenticity through rigid standards, suggesting instead that

sustainability depends on supporting local actors' capacity to negotiate continuity on their own terms.

Cultural continuity in Yaowarat emerges as both fragile and resilient. While rising rents, crowding, and commercialization expose culinary practices to new vulnerabilities, continuity is sustained through informal stewardship, intergenerational mentoring, and the transmission of embodied knowledge. These everyday practices are rarely visible within formal heritage frameworks, yet they form the backbone of living culinary heritage. Continuity is shown to depend not only on the survival of individual businesses, but also on the maintenance of sensory environments, sounds, smells, and rhythms that anchor memory and belonging. The erosion of these environments generates emotional disruption even when economic impacts appear limited.

A central contribution of this study lies in foregrounding relational well-being as a critical dimension of sustainability. Participants consistently defined well-being in terms of familiarity, recognition, and the ability to inhabit space with ease. While tourism-generated income and visibility contributed positively to self-worth, these benefits did not compensate for losses in emotional security, social connection, or spatial autonomy. These findings highlight affective sustainability, the capacity of a place to support pride, attachment, and emotional resilience, as an essential yet often overlooked component of sustainable food tourism.

Taken together, these findings call for a fundamental rethinking of sustainability in heritage food tourism, shifting the focus away from managerial abstractions and growth-oriented metrics toward the lived experiences of host communities. From a governance perspective, sustainable food tourism cannot be achieved through destination branding or visitor management alone. Effective and inclusive urban policy must safeguard temporal sustainability, protect micro-spaces of everyday sociality, and support the informal intergenerational transmission of embodied culinary knowledge. By valuing relational and affective labor alongside economic indicators, decision-makers can better protect the everyday conditions that allow heritage communities to endure amid rapid urban transformation.

Future research could extend this work through comparative studies across diverse Asian urban contexts, longitudinal analyses of generational shifts, or a deeper integration of environmental sustainability concerns within heritage foodscapes. By centering localized, lived experiences, this study argues for models of sustainable food tourism and inclusive heritage management that recognize the slow, relational, and affective labor through which these communities navigate change. Ultimately, sustaining urban heritage foodscapes depends not solely on their economic viability or global visibility, but on protecting the everyday social, spatial, and temporal rhythms that give them life.

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