

*Article*

## The Development and Influence of the Qing Dynasty's Royal Meal during the Qianlong Period

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**Abstract:** Food culture development reflects a country's growth to a certain extent. Qing Dynasty's royal meals represent this period's food culture. As the Qing Dynasty became stronger than before, it peaked during the Qianlong period. This development reflects the Qing Dynasty's political, economic, and cultural development and occupies an essential position in the history of food culture. However, the development and influence of royal meals during the Qianlong period have yet to be comprehensively analyzed and sorted out. Therefore, this study aims to explore the development process of royal meals during the Qianlong period and the positive and negative effects on politics, economy, and culture. This article adopts qualitative research, including literature survey and analysis methods to classify and organize the literature and historical archives collected from Chinese historical archives and libraries. Through sorts out and analysis of the development of royal meals during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, it found that the development of royal meals during the Qianlong period was accompanied by the development of national strength and the personal preferences of the emperor, and the development of royal meals also brought various influences. This study is of great value for studying ancient Chinese culinary culture and provides a new perspective for studying the social development during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. At the same time, it also reminds us that while vigorously developing the cultural industry, we must consider its impact on society.

**Keywords:** Qing dynasty; emperor Qianlong; royal meal; the Manchu-Han imperial feast; food culture

### Introduction

The Qing Dynasty was the last feudal dynasty in Chinese history, spanning twelve emperors. During the reigns of Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, the Qing Dynasty reached its zenith with expanded farmland, abundant produce, a thriving smallholder economy, and a solid national power that led to unprecedented achievements in traditional Chinese society (Yan, 2023). Emperor Qianlong, born Aisin Gioro Hongli, was the sixth emperor in the history of the Qing Dynasty. The Qianlong reign (1736-1796) marked the zenith of the Qing Dynasty's development, benefiting from the solid governance of the previous three emperors—Shunzhi, Kangxi, and Yongzheng—and due to Qianlong's wisdom and strategy. This period saw further consolidation of the Qing regime, economic prosperity, and vigorous cultural development. Politically, Qianlong learned from past dynasties, implemented measures to alleviate the tyranny of imperial relatives and regional warlordism, emphasized the emperor-minister relationship, strengthened the centralization of power, and stabilized society by quelling rebellions. Economically, Qianlong prioritized agriculture, reduced taxes, and improved irrigation, significantly increasing agricultural productivity. The development of handicraft industries also surpassed previous eras, and he encouraged commercial development and the expansion of

industrial production, fostering early capitalism. In terms of culture, under the vigorous promotion by Emperor Qianlong, the cultural system was perfected, and the cultural industries rapidly developed. In addition to the compilation of *The Si Ku Quan Shu* and the birth of the Peking Opera, the culinary culture, exemplified by the royal meal, was significantly developed, reaching its peak at that time (Aisin-Gioro, 1988). The imperial cuisine of the court was the essence of the culinary culture at that time (2001). This was also due to the economic prosperity, abundant state treasury, social stability, and Emperor Qianlong's personal pursuit of gourmet food during his reign. The flourishing development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period reflected societal progress and impacted the political, economic, and cultural spheres.

Current academic research on the Qing Dynasty during Qianlong's reign primarily focuses on politics, economics, and ideological culture, often neglecting food culture. Studies on Qianlong's culinary practices emphasize royal meals' cooking techniques, ceremonial norms, and their impact on Qianlong's longevity (Xu, 1980). Consequently, there is limited research on the interplay between royal meals and the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural dimensions of the Qianlong era, creating a gap that this study seeks to address. This study aims to trace the development of royal meals during Qianlong's reign and examine its political, economic, and cultural impacts during the Qing Dynasty's peak. By integrating historical archives with previous research, this paper situates royal meals within a broader academic context, highlighting their significance in Qing Dynasty and Chinese food culture. This approach addresses gaps in current scholarship and deepens our understanding of Qing society and cultural development.

## Methodology

This study is qualitative research, using research methods such as literature survey and literature analysis. The literature survey method includes collecting primary and secondary sources. The primary resources are collected at the First Historical Archives of China, which are mainly historical archives from the Qing Dynasty, including official documents of the Qing Dynasty and Qianlong's meal menu (Gao, 2024). Secondary resources have been collected from libraries and online literature repositories, including books, academic journals, and dissertations. The purpose is to explore in depth the development of royal meals during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty and its impact on politics, economy, and culture through the collection, organization, and analysis of rich literature and historical archives.

Before conducting a literature analysis, it is necessary to clarify that the criteria for evaluating research materials in this study are primarily based on the primary resources, supplemented by authoritative journals or well-known scholars' literature materials closely related to this study. Effective classification and analysis can be carried out only after determining the sources, authenticity analysis, and critical thinking of these historical archives, works, and documents. This study carefully evaluates the reliability and limitations of historical archives. On one hand, archives, as primary sources, offer high credibility, but the political context and biases of the recorders may influence their content. On the other hand, secondary sources provide diverse analytical perspectives but may contain biases due to the authors' viewpoints or source origins. Therefore, this study thoroughly assesses these materials' context and potential limitations during the analysis to ensure scientific rigour and reliability in the conclusions. The objective is to comprehensively understand the background and trajectory of imperial cuisine development during Qianlong's reign, its impact on society, and the evolution of Chinese food culture. Additionally, this study compares royal meals during Qianlong's reign with that of the early Qing period, tracing its developmental trajectory to understand better the status and role of royal meals in the Qianlong era.

## The Findings and Discussion

The analysis of historical documents and archives suggests that the development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period was multifaceted, encompassing varieties of food, culinary styles, and dietary structures. This development involved preserving the Manchu food culture while gradually incorporating and assimilating other regional culinary traditions, thus creating a unique royal meal that incorporated Manchu, Shandong, and Jiangnan flavours. This can be proven in *Eating in the Palace* by Aisin Gioro Hao, the wife of Pujie, the younger brother of the last emperor of China, Puyi. Research indicates that the development of the royal meal

during the Qianlong period profoundly impacted the Qing Dynasty's politics, economy, culture, and the broader development of Chinese culinary culture. Specifically, the evolution of the royal meal during this period facilitated the overall advancement of royal cuisine throughout the Qing Dynasty. This period refined the institutional framework of the imperial cuisine, enhanced the culinary skills, enriched the variety of dishes, and improved the dietary structure, elevating the imperial cuisine to its pinnacle. This development not only heightened the status and role of the royal meal in the history of Chinese food culture but also enriched the connotations of Chinese food culture. However, the vigorous development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period also had potential adverse effects. Despite the declining national development in the later years of Qianlong's reign, the extravagant and wasteful practices in the royal meal persisted and intensified, consuming vast amounts of human, material, and financial resources, contributing to the decline of the Qing Dynasty's power.

This study conducts a comparative analysis of royal cuisine from the early Qing period and the Qianlong era. It suggests that while retaining some Manchu characteristics, the royal cuisine during Qianlong's era experienced significant development, positively influencing the royal cuisine and culinary culture, albeit with some negative impacts. This paper delves into the development and impacts of royal cuisine during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. It offers a new historical perspective on the social development during the Qianlong era and enriches the study of Chinese culinary culture. Additionally, this research provides insights into contemporary society's vigorously developing cultural industries, emphasizing that while actively investing in cultural development, it is necessary to consider the expenditures and their potential negative impacts.

### 1. The Evolution of The Royal Meal During The Qianlong Period

The Manchu people established the Qing Dynasty, an ancient ethnic group and descendants of the Jurchen ethnic group. At the same time, the Manchu people were also a hardworking, brave, and wise nation, which formed a unique culinary culture. This study finds that the ancestors of the Manchu people originated in the Changbai Mountain area of northeastern China, and environmental factors also influenced their food culture. They made a living by hunting and often ate meat and wild vegetables from hunting. Wild boars, chickens, ducks, foxes, deer, rabbits, wild mushrooms, vegetables, and fruits were their primary food sources (Wu, 1988). Also, due to the mountainous terrain and abundant flowers and fruits of Changbai Mountain, the excellent geographical conditions are suitable for beekeeping and honey gathering. The Manchu ancestors also enjoyed sweet foods, especially candied fruits made from mountain products and fruits. However, at that time, the food processing level of the Manchu people was still in its early stages, and they continued the more primitive cooking methods of the Jurchen people, such as burning, roasting, and boiling (Wu, 2017). The dietary customs of the Manchu ancestors were mainly influenced by geographical location and climate conditions. Huang's research on the Manchu dietary customs in Northeast China during the Qing Dynasty indicates that the formation of Manchu dietary customs depends on geographical location, climatic conditions, economic development, and human civilization. With the development of productivity and social progress, dietary conditions will also improve daily (2012). Overall, the formation of the diet of the Manchu ancestors was mainly determined by the ecological environment and living customs and had the characteristics of a rough and straightforward diet, frequent consumption of wild game and sweets, and low cooking techniques.

Nurhaci founded the Qing Dynasty and gradually unified the Manchu tribes in Northeast China, establishing the Later Jin in 1619. During his reign, he implemented sound ethnic policies, as documented in *The Secret Chronicles of Manchuria*, which noted his proclamation: "It was decreed that the Manchu and Han people should live together, sharing residences, food, and labour" (1990). This study finds that Nurhaci's policy of peaceful coexistence between the Manchu and Han facilitated the exchange of their culinary cultures. Wu also supports this view in his research on the historical causes of the Manchu-Han Banquet. He believes that Nurhaci's ethnic policy benefited the spread of the Han people's dietary customs and cooking skills, which invisibly led to mutual influence and promotion of Manchu and Han cooking (2010). However, this study suggests that although there was a cultural exchange between the Manchu and Han during this period, the Manchu's hunting and pastoral flavours and their consumption of various games and livestock characterize

the royal meal predominantly. Furthermore, Nurhaci advocated frugality in the royal meal, emphasized simple cooking, and cautioned against excessive drinking. Before entering the Shanhaiguan Pass, the Manchu royal cuisine largely maintained these characteristics. Overall, the royal cuisine of this period retained robust Manchu features. However, Nurhaci's policies, which benefited the people, and his emphasis on frugality laid a foundation for developing the Qing Dynasty's royal meal.

This study finding is that after the Qing army entered the Shanhai Pass, the Qing dynasty's power increasingly consolidated, and the economy gradually developed, giving greater attention to the royal meal. Furthermore, they drew culinary experience from the Han Chinese, which enhanced their dietary standards through diverse cooking techniques and methods, including roasting, grilling, boiling, and steaming. Additionally, dining implements evolved from the rudimentary wooden utensils outside the Pass to ceramic and metal utensils. Although Han Chinese food culture greatly influenced the Qing dynasty after entering the Pass, some dietary habits of the Manchu ancestors from the Northeast were preserved, with ingredients from that region still playing a significant role in the royal cuisine. However, hunting was no longer the primary productive force for obtaining food before the Qing army entered the country. People began to mainly obtain food through animal husbandry and agriculture (Liu & Zhang, 2007).

During the Shunzhi period, shortly after entering the Pass, the palace kitchen staff was predominantly Shandong people from the Ming dynasty and Manchu. Thus, the royal cuisine during this period was similar to before, heavily featuring games and incorporating Shandong flavours. This study argues that, during the Kangxi period, Kangxi's most notable contribution to the development of the royal meal was the creation of the Thousand Elder Banquet, which was not only politically beneficial for governing the country but also a significant feat in the history of Chinese culinary culture. Under the Qianlong Emperor, this banquet evolved into a grander affair. Wu also believes that Kangxi's outstanding contribution to food culture was the reform of the banquet system in the 23rd year of Kangxi's reign (1684), which he regarded as a symbol of the development of food culture in the Qing palace after the Qing army entered the country (2017). This study supports Wu's viewpoint that Kangxi reformed the banquet system and changed the "Manchu banquet" to the "Han banquet", laying the foundation for the emergence of the Manchu Han full banquet and promoting the rapid development of imperial cuisine in the Qing Dynasty. Consequently, after transitioning through the Kangxi and Yongzheng periods, the royal cuisine peaked during the Qianlong period.

The Qianlong period was the zenith of the Qing dynasty, characterized by social stability and economic prosperity. Consequently, Emperor Qianlong placed greater emphasis on cuisine, significantly advancing the development of the royal meal. The finding of this study is that during this period, the most notable development in the royal meal was the diversification of dishes, which became more luxurious and meticulously crafted, both in presentation and taste. A record from *the Imperial Cuisine of the Qing Palace* on the sixteenth day of the first lunar month in the thirtieth year of Qianlong's reign, which includes dishes such as rock sugar stewed bird's nest, bird's nest with red and white duck in southern fresh hot pot, wine stewed meat with tofu, and steamed duck with pork and deer tail (2001), reveals the richness of the royal cuisine during Qianlong's era, in stark contrast to the more straightforward dietary practices under Emperor Kangxi, where per meal only consumed one type of meat. Moreover, the detailed menu records during the Qianlong period were due to the establishment of the first archival department for diets, reflecting the refinement of the royal meal system and indicating that the cuisine had entered a new development phase during this period. In addition to the diversity of dishes in the royal meal, the types, scale, and grandeur of the court banquets during this period also far exceeded those of previous generations, with innovations such as tea banquets and large Mongolian tent banquets emerging during the Qianlong reign. The renowned Thousand Elder Banquet also evolved into an even more grandiose affair during the Qianlong period, with the first banquet under his reign featuring eight hundred tables, far surpassing the scale and solemnity of the initial banquet held during the Kangxi era.

The fusion of northern and southern flavours in imperial cuisine was a significant hallmark of its development to the pinnacle during the Qianlong era. As indicated by the menu mentioned above, Qianlong not only favoured Northeastern flavours but also had a particular fondness for bird's nests and ducks, especially the flavours of the Jiangnan region. He toured the South six times, sampling many of Jiangnan's

delicacies and even bringing Jiangnan chefs back to the palace, among whom Zhang Dongguan became notably prominent. This study suggests that Emperor Qianlong was fond of food in the Jiangnan region of China. During this period, the court cuisine became more diverse due to his preferences, adding a touch of Jiangnan flavour and promoting the development of imperial cuisine. This viewpoint can also be supported by Weng’s research on the diet of the Qing emperors (1999) and Qiu’s research on the menu during Qianlong’s southern tour (2004).

Besides savouring Jiangnan’s cuisine, Qianlong also spread the Manchu-Han Imperial Feast to the southern regions, as documented in *the Yangzhou Painting Boat Record*, which included a complete menu of this feast blending northern and southern flavours: “Temples and markets are turned into grand kitchens to prepare feasts for the hundreds of officials:

- i. The first course included ten premium dishes in jade bowls—bird’s nest with shredded chicken soup, sea cucumber with pork tendons, fresh clam with shredded radish soup, kelp with pork stomach strips soup, abalone with pearl vegetables, clam with shrimp soup, shark fin with crab soup, braised chicken with mushrooms, pulley chicken, braised fish maw with ham, shark skin with chicken broth soup, blood powder soup, first-grade soup and rice bowls.
- ii. The second course included ten delicate white soup dishes—crucian carp tongue stewed with bear’s paw, wine-brewed pig brain, sheep placenta soup, steamed camel hump, pear slices with steamed masked palm civet, steamed deer tail, wild chicken slice soup, wind-dried pork slices, wind-dried lamb slices, rabbit loin with milk glands, first-grade soup and rice bowls.
- iii. The third course included ten delicate white soup dishes—pork stomach, false river shrimp, duck tongue soup, lotus egg with goose palm soup, steamed shad fish with distiller’s grains, pufferfish tofu soup, turtle ham chicken soup, and first-grade soup bowls.
- iv. The fourth course included twenty dishes of hair fish—roasted pig front hip tip, halberd fish, deep-fried pork and lamb, hanging roasted dripped chicken, goose and duck, pigeon meat soup, pork offal, lamb offal, singed pork and lamb, plain boiled pork and lamb, steamed piglets, lambs, chickens, ducks, and geese, white flour buns, mixed baked bread, and plum blossom buns.
- v. The fifth course included twenty foreign dishes, twenty flavours of hot dishes to accompany drinks, twenty small dish plates, ten dried fruit tables, and ten fresh fruit tables.

This so-called Manchu-Han Imperial Feast.” It can be seen that the Manchu and Han banquets integrated the flavours of the north and the south, which marks the royal meal during the Qianlong period, which formed the characteristics of Manchu flavour, Shandong flavour, and Jiangnan flavour. As Dong believes, this is a historical imprint of the mutual integration, mutual learning, and joint development of different food cultures during the prosperous era of Emperor Qianlong (2014).

Table 1. The food flavors in the menu of *Yangzhou Painting Boat Record*

Food Flavour	The Dishes
Manchu Flavour	singed pork and lamb, plain boiled pork and lamb, steamed piglets, lambs, chickens, ducks, and geese, hanging roasted dripped chicken, goose and duck, pigeon meat soup, pork offal, lamb offal, mixed baked bread, plum blossom buns, roasted pig front hip tip, deep-fried pork and lamb, white flour buns.
Shandong Flavour	abalone with pearl vegetables, clam with shrimp soup, shark fin with crab soup, false spotted fish liver, braised chicken with mushrooms, pulley chicken, braised fish maw with ham, blood powder soup, yogurt rabbit jerky, wine brewed pig brain, steamed camel hump, pear slices with steamed masked palm civet, steamed deer tail.
Jiangnan Flavour	crucian carp tongue stewed with bear’s paw, sea cucumber with pork tendons, fresh clam with shredded radish soup, kelp with pork stomach strips soup, sheep placenta soup, duck tongue soup, lotus egg with goose palm soup, false river shrimp, wild chicken slice soup, wind-dried pork slices, wind-dried lamb slices, pork stomach, shark skin with chicken broth soup, bird’s nest with shredded chicken soup, steamed shad fish with distiller’s grains, pufferfish tofu soup, turtle ham chicken soup.

Source: Yangzhou Painting Boat Record (2014)

Moreover, this study finds that during this period, the structure of the royal meal became more scientific and reasonable, which was one of the reasons for Emperor Qianlong’s longevity. Professor Yuan, a researcher at the Palace Museum, also believes that Qianlong’s good health and emphasis on diet and health preservation were the primary reasons for his longevity (1994). Emperor Qianlong preferred vegetarian dishes, and there were chefs specifically for vegetarian cooking in the imperial kitchen. He also emphasized consuming seasonal vegetables, with instructions for the imperial kitchen to adjust the menu according to the season. The selection of ingredients was also increasingly focused on their functional benefits.

For example, as recorded in *the Jiangnan Regular Meal Archive* on the eighth day of the fourth month of the thirtieth year of Qianlong’s reign, which was the Bathing Buddha Festival: “For the morning meal, a variety of dishes: mixed vegetarian dishes, bamboo shoot strips, fried white cabbage with gluten, stewed mushroom with gluten, stewed tofu with bean paste, water bamboo shoots strips; deep-fried wild fruit, red cake, bamboo scroll small steamed bread, side dishes in silver sunflower boxes, side dishes in silver plates, milk rice, vegetarian noodles, fruit porridge, six steamed bread, with additional dishes on two tables and four kinds of stove dishes, set on a folding banquet table. For the evening meal, stewed white cabbage with shiitake and button mushrooms, mushroom stewed with ginseng and tofu, arhat gluten, trichosanthes cucumeroides with tofu, deep-fried fruit bun, Tohoro cake, vegetarian steamed stuffed bun, millet flour steamed buns, chess-shaped tiny steamed buns, silver mallow box with small dishes, four silver dishes, green bean and rice soup, with additional dishes on five tables, two milk dishes, ten steamed bread, and six kinds of stove dishes, set on the table.” It is evident that even during his tours of Jiangnan, Qianlong maintained his habit of consuming vegetarian meals. His diet, which combined coarse grains, refined grains, and some delicately prepared foods, facilitated digestion and absorption and contributed to anti-ageing, physical health, and longevity.

Table 2. Classification of food in the menu of *Jiangnan Regular Meal Archive*

Food Category	The Dishes
Vegetarian Meals	mixed vegetarian dishes, bamboo shoot strips, fried white cabbage with gluten, stewed mushroom with gluten, stewed tofu with bean paste, water bamboo shoots strips, stewed white cabbage with shiitake and button mushrooms, mushroom stewed with ginseng and tofu, arhat gluten, trichosanthes cucumeroides with tofu.
Coarse Grains	millet flour steamed buns, green bean and rice soup.
Refined Grains	vegetarian noodles, fruit porridge, steamed bread, chess-shaped tiny steamed buns, milk rice.
Delicately Prepared Foods	deep-fried wild fruit, red cake, bamboo scroll small steamed bread, small dishes in silver sunflower boxes, side dishes in silver plates, deep-fried fruit bun, Tohoro cake, vegetarian steamed stuffed bun

Source: The longevity and diet of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1994)

Furthermore, Qianlong was particularly fond of bird’s nests and included them in almost every meal. He even ordered the development of various special bird’s nest dishes, such as Hot pot of duck with bird’s nest and autumn pear, Braised chicken with bird’s nest and smooth wild chicken rolls, Hot pot of duck with bird’s nest and apple, Braised chicken with bird’s nest and wild chicken meatballs, Braised Peking duck with bird’s nest, Stewed chicken with bird’s nest, smooth wild chicken, and gluten, Braised chicken with bird’s nest and pickled young chicken, among others. The frequency of eating bird’s nest dishes and the variety of bird’s nest dishes during the Qianlong period not only reflects the critical status of bird’s nest dishes in the royal meal during Qianlong’s era but also demonstrates his emphasis on health preservation.

## 2. The Political Impact of The Development of The Royal Meal During The Qianlong Period

This study argues that the peak development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period positively and negatively impacted various aspects of the Qing Dynasty, including political, economic, and cultural spheres. From a political perspective, the development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period led to a more refined and standardized structure of the Imperial Kitchen, evolving from the initial Tea and Food Offices to

include separate sections for food preparation, tea rooms, and storage, along with subordinate agencies (Liu, 2019), which facilitated the establishment of a more strict and standardized bureaucratic system in the Qing Dynasty.

Additionally, this period saw the creation of a specialized Dietary Archive Office (Yao, 1997), providing more detailed records of the Qing Dynasty's cuisine. The establishment and use of the Dietary Archives Office also offered primary resources for future research on the royal meal and has been beneficial for scholars studying the culinary culture and history of the Qing Dynasty. During the Qianlong period, the increase and expansion in the variety and scale of court banquets served to win hearts and consolidate power. For instance, banquets for royal family members and court officials helped to foster relations among relatives and subordinates (Wu, 1988). Additionally, banquets for close kin and royal clansmen served to maintain Qing rule and strengthen border defence. The increasingly intricate etiquette at various banquets also reinforced the sanctity of imperial authority, aiding in the consolidation of rule. Furthermore, during the Qianlong period, the continued spread and development of the Manchu-Han Imperial Feast helped strengthen the unity between the Manchu and Han ethnic groups, fostering positive development in Qing society.

### 3. The Economic Impact of The Development of The Royal Meal During The Qianlong Period

Economically, the development of the royal meal also influenced the culinary progress in civilian markets and restaurants, leading to a surge in demand for agricultural products both inside and outside the palace. Farmers extensively cultivated grains and vegetables to meet this market demand, increasing crop yields and boosting agricultural development. This study strongly agrees with the viewpoint of the renowned Qing historian Dai Yi: "The main production sector in feudal society was agriculture, and the enormous growth of agricultural productivity was the main indicator of the economic prosperity of the Qianlong era, surpassing the level of previous dynasties" (2008). This also demonstrates the significant ripple effect brought about by the vigorous development of imperial cuisine during the Qianlong period. At the same time, this study also suggests that the progress of imperial cuisine, along with the development of the culinary industry, has provided more employment opportunities for people, which is beneficial for socio-economic development.

### 4. The Cultural Influence of The Development of The Royal Meal During The Qianlong Period

On the cultural front, this is mainly reflected in the prosperous development and progress of food culture. The development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period resulted in a unique food culture at its pinnacle, combining flavours from Manchu, Shandong, and Jiangnan cuisines, characterized by strict ceremonial norms, rich dishes, precious ingredients, and a scientific dietary structure. The flavours of the north and the south are connected, and the variety of dishes is undoubtedly a significant advancement in the Qing Dynasty's food culture. Refining cooking methods and researching dish preparation for royal meals further advanced Chinese food culture. The development and dissemination of the Manchu-Han Imperial Feast during this period also facilitated cultural exchanges between the North and South, deepening mutual understanding and acceptance among ethnic groups. These positive impacts of the royal meal's development contributed to societal progress and prosperous development.

### 5. The Negative Impact of The Development of The Royal Meal During The Qianlong Period

However, the flourishing development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period also had negative impacts. This study finds that due to his recent ascension and relatively modest national strength in the early Qianlong era, Qianlong was comparatively frugal in his dietary habits. For instance, the menu for February 15 in the first year of Qianlong's reign recorded in Daily Food Records shows a modest breakfast served in the Yangxin Hall with seven dishes of vegetables, three types of dim sum, one rice dish with milk, one small dish in a silver mallow box, and two small dishes on silver plates, along with six plates of assorted dim sum. By the middle of Qianlong's reign, with the nation's strength and economic prosperity, his approach to meals became increasingly lavish, focusing on rich, exquisite, and healthful foods, which brought the development of the royal meal to its peak. However, as society began to decline in the later years of the Qianlong era, Qianlong's indulgence in extravagant dining continued unabated (Xu, 1999), causing economic and social harm. The

opulence of the royal meal required extensive use of agricultural and pastoral products and rare ingredients. This concentration of resources pressured the lives of ordinary people.

Moreover, during this period, the population rapidly expanded, exceeding the increase in arable land area, and the per capita possession of arable land rapidly decreased. Nature is seen as a factor influencing the evolution of human civilisation (Ren & Abdullah, 2023). The reduction of land not only hurts the development of food culture but also hinders the progress of a dynasty. Furthermore, during this period, land consolidation was severe, and social wealth was concentrated in a few bureaucratic aristocrats (Dai, 2008), gradually widening the wealth gap between the court and the people and increasing social instability. Maintaining such luxurious royal meals also demanded substantial fiscal expenditures, concentrating financial resources on the imperial meals. Moreover, cultural resources were also focused in the realm of food culture associated with the royal meal, thereby affecting the allocation of financial and cultural resources in other critical national sectors and impeding their development. The above negative impacts brought about by the development of imperial cuisine in the Qing Dynasty contributed to the Qing dynasty's shift from prosperity to decline.

## Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the Qing dynasty's royal meal not only preserved the Manchu preference for wild game but also evolved through Nurhaci's foundational period and subsequent improvements after the Manchus crossed into Han territories. By the Qianlong era, the cuisine had diversified; Qianlong perfected the imperial dining system and integrated flavours from both north and south, reflecting a scientifically structured diet that marked the peak of the Qing royal meal. Therefore, during the Qianlong period, imperial cuisine underwent several developmental stages: from environmental influences shaping the ethnic diet to consolidating strength and promoting cultural dietary practices while assimilating styles from different regions and ethnicities to continually refining cooking techniques, culminating in a unique Qing royal meal style. This process preserved ethnic characteristics while blending and evolving with societal development.

The development of the royal meal during the Qianlong period profoundly impacted various aspects of the Qing dynasty. Politically, it refined the imperial dining system and bolstered the stability of the Qing regime. Economically, it promoted the development of agriculture and the culinary industry, contributing to societal prosperity. Culturally, the evolution of the royal meal marked the pinnacle of Qing dietary culture, facilitating culinary and cultural exchanges between northern and southern regions, which further propelled the development of Chinese food culture. However, the extravagant waste associated with the development of the royal meal during this period also contributed to the decline of the Qing dynasty from its zenith.

This study offers a new perspective for understanding societal development during the Qianlong era and enriches research on Chinese food culture. However, due to the limitations of existing historical materials, it has not yet fully covered all the details of Qing royal meals. In the future, with the release of more historical archives, research can be further deepened, encouraging more scholars to focus on and engage in the study of ancient Chinese culinary culture. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of historical and cultural research in contemporary society, offering insights into the development of modern cultural industries. It emphasises the need to consider various expenditures and their negative impacts while actively investing in cultural construction. Historical research is crucial in meeting and combatting the challenges of the modern world (Williamson, 2015). Therefore, future research could further explore comparisons between Qing royal meals and court cuisines of other dynasties or investigate the role of food culture in modern governance and social dynamics, deepening the understanding of its historical and contemporary significance.

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