

A Culinary Analysis on Signs of Acculturation and National Identity in Vietnam

Introduction

Food, like other mundane objects, is often overlooked by historians, and yet it has a unique history that survives to the present. Culinary traditions are sometimes rooted in geographical and climatic terms such as soil type, rate of rainfall, ground water chemicals, selection of native species, and average temperature, etc. However, cultural and social influences on food and eating habits are more dynamic, multivocal, and somehow less tangible, and one should not underestimate their significance. Like any other cultural branch, certain culinary practice originates from a group of people doing collective things. Such practice are often shared within geographical region due to access to the same ingredients and cooking facilities. When regional cooking habits establish, a social norm starts to form. Therefore, culture evolves around geographic conditions, but everything else forms based on the socio-cultural normality.

In a contemporary mindset, cultural traditions can also be artificial conventions. Global commercialization has relocated and redistributed agricultural products to all around the world: the western world relies so heavily on coffee beans and cocoa as part of their cultural identities; Tomato, as a specie indigenous to Central America, has been indisputably “Italianized”; In terms of colonialism and war heritage, *Budae-jjigae* was invented during the Korean War using US army surplus food but now becomes known as the Korean hot pot...

Vietnam, as a country that was once invaded by many foreign powers, had been free and started to thrive. There is ambiguity and contradiction between old colonial vestige and modern nationalism emphasizing on independence and resistance, reflected on various domains and

forms. This paper addresses Vietnam's existing culture-blending circumstances and the consequential struggling for national identity by deconstructing three specific dishes, analyzing their significance both in history and nowadays.

Food and National Identity

The notion that nation is the embodiment of ideology is not validated unless the practice of nationalism can be seen and manipulated on a daily basis. To concretize that, cultural anthropologist, Nir Avieli, states that many scholars focus on the "cultural praxis of national identity formation" (Lofgran quoted in Avieli, 2005, p. 169), and food is one of the most suitable subjects to connect "the theoretical conceptualized nation as an imagined entity and the daily practices that produce and reproduce it" (Avieli, 2005, p. 169).

What's unique to culinary art is its "material practice and lived experience" (Aloso, 1994, p. 382). Cooking is a highly personalized action that's practiced so differently by different households, yet the societal framework exists in a way that it allows leeway for individual creativity to thrive. Such framework "allows the idea of a cultural community to emerge... and a sense of nationality is constructed that links individuals to a particular cultural tradition" (Palmer quoted in Avieli, 2005, p. 169). Unlike other expressions of nationalism such as hanging flags and singing the national anthem, the alimentary process is a more subtle but strong subfield of constructing nationalism.

Banh Tet: Vietnamese New Year Rice Cakes

Tet, or lunar new year in Vietnamese, is the most celebrated festival across the country. Similar to other cultures that share the tradition of lunar new year, this time of the year bears tremendous significance in its symbolic meanings: ending the past year with gratefulness and hoping the best for the next year. Festive food, therefore, plays the essential role in bringing people together and enhancing relationships among family members. The nature of food is a collective experience: cooking, eating, and digesting the iconic new year dish that presents its universal significance to all *Kinh* people.

The Vietnamese New Year Festival (*Tet Nguyen Dan*) celebrates the “original sunlight” or “the arrival of dawn” (Huu and Cohen quoted in Avieli, 170). This takes place around late January or early February, when the night is the longest and darkest of the year according to lunar calendar. In Vietnam, the festival is celebrated in between “the autumn rice harvest and the spring rice planting, ‘when the granaries are at the year’s fullest’ ” (Huu and Cohen quoted in Avieli, 2005, p. 170). During this time of the year, all farmers take a break and enjoy the whole year’s hard work with families and friends. The indication of Vietnam being an agricultural country is crucial in determining the significance of new year rice cakes and the abundance of gratitude this dish is loaded with.

Banh Tet, “sticky-rice loaves stuffed with green beans and fatty pork, wrapped in bamboo leaves, and boiled overnight” (Avieli, 2005, p.167) is the iconic and arguably the most representative course of Vietnamese *Tet*. The preparation of *Banh Tet* is not extremely difficult, yet many families in urban areas nowadays still prefer to buy them in store. To make *Banh Tet*, one needs to soak sticky rice and mung beans in water the night prior. Then to press the soaked

rice into wooden molds, and stuff them with the soaked mung beans and pork with lard. To keep the rice cake in place, bamboo leaves will be wrapped around the cake and fastened with bamboo splinters (Avieli, 2005, p. 172). *Banh Tet* are mostly in rectangular and cylindrical shapes, following Chinese *Ying-Yang Theory* “天圓地方” (round for heaven and square for the earth). As lunar new year, the dish also presents its clear Chinese background. Avieli indicates that instead of *nuoc ma* (fish sauce), *Banh Tet* is supposed to be served along soy sauce with chili, which is a dip unique to the southern part of China.

Despite its initial Chinese influence, *Banh Tet* is indisputably legitimized as Vietnamese after witnessing the country's history and living along its destiny. One distinctive feature of *Banh Tet* is that they are preserved and people were able to carry them around during the nation's countless wartime. When the troops of King Quang Trang (Nguyen Hue) won the war against invading Chinese Manchu troops, the soldiers were able to survive because *Banh Tet* kept well in various harsh environments and provided them enough nutritional value. Festival rice cakes, or in their common version, *Banh Chung*, symbolizes endurance and defense along with the victorious and heroic moments in Vietnamese history. They represent a spirit that refuses to surrender to foreign powers and a strong sense of belonging under their nation (Avieli, 2005, p. 178). Other than symbolizing defense and pride, as combat rations, *Banh Tet* also represents significance to internal Vietnam. According to Avieli and his conversation with the Hoianese scholar Dung, *Banh Tet* in Hoi An is in cylindrical form because it was easier in that way to be carried around. When eating the cylindrical rice cake (thinking it as the shape of a ham sausage), one is able to cut very thin slices using the bamboo splinter at the same time keep the rest of the cake wrapped in bamboo leaves moist and fresh (Avieli, 2005, p. 172). This method of saving

food helped the people tremendously when moving and expanding their land down south. The cylindrical *Banh Tet* not only represents regional diversity but also reflects the nation's territorial establishment from north to south by the brave predecessors who blazed a path.

Food is the back support when it comes to nation, due to its ability to feed people who are the basic units of society and country. The legend says that the sixth Hung King invented the rice cake in order to feed his people, indicating the state's political power prosperity. Each year, Vietnamese Tet takes place in the middle of winter, from one farming cycle to another. In another word, it comes "at a time when unpredictable weather threatens the stored crops, the future harvests, and the health and well being of the people" (Avieli, 2005, p. 173). This idea of preservation and nurture is also present in other *Tet* food such as candied fruits and dried coconut flesh we had in various households during studio visits. As a way of expressing concern toward agricultural unpredictability and having forethought for the entire family, *Banh Tet* is almost sublimed to the prerequisite of having a happy family and a prosperous country.

If the material condition supports a nation to physically live and grow, then the spiritual and symbolic condition reinforces a nation's ideology. The essential ingredient for *Banh Tet* is sticky rice (*gao nep*), an agricultural product that used to dominate Vietnam's land for a long time before plain white rice (*gao te*) was introduced. Native to the country, sticky rice paints the image of an authentic Vietnamese society prior to China's invasion. The distinction between the two types of rice is mentioned so often that the term "*nep-te*" is invented to describe extremes such as good and bad or right and wrong (Nguyen quoted in Avieli, 2005, p. 175), distinguishing itself from foreign influences by expressing cultural pride. The nature of sticky rice's consistency

further indicates unity and togetherness, embedding nationalism by embodying it into daily products.

Therefore, Vietnamese *Banh Tet* epitomizes various aspects of the country's conditions throughout history and reinforces the idea of a nation. It provides grounds and context when the Vietnam struggles to define traditional values within the circulation of outside influences by being a materialized national identity that is distinctive and unique to Vietnam.

***Pho*: A Cultural Melting Pot**

Pho, arguably the most well-known dish of Vietnamese cuisine, has indisputably become many people's comfort food: warm and hearty soup stewed for hours using beef and herbs, smooth and slippery noodles with chewiness, fragrant greens that bring lightness to the bowl, etc. The steaming hot aroma is almost haunting on a damp cold winter morning. It is so representative that people can easily find *pho* in any Vietnamese restaurants overseas. However, being a signature dish in Vietnamese culture, *pho* also has a complicated and entangled relationship with foreign influences.

Although the dish is only about one hundred years old, one cannot ascertain the official origin of *pho*. Scholars have speculated it evolved from dishes that come from all over the place: the wholesome beef hot pot served communally in a Mongolian dinner table; “粉” (*fen*), Chinese rice noodles served similarly in meat soup found in Yunnan and Guangxi province; as a way of using up beef scraps, the soup was invented after the arrival of French colonialists in the early 20th century; lastly, some even argue the soup originated from the ethnic Polynesians (Greeley, 2002, p. 80). Among all four, the Chinese influence and the French establishment are the two

most tenable guesses, due to the country's large number of Chinese population and Vietnam's sensitive colonized period by the French.

Pho stemmed from the city of Hanoi and North Vietnam about a hundred years ago. Geographically neighboring to China, there were many Chinese immigrants and merchants in the area, bringing cooking culture and tradition with them. According to scholar Erica Peters, the large number of Cantonese vendors offered a variety of different noodle soups on the streets of Hanoi, "some with wheat noodles (mien), and some with rice noodles" (Peters, 2010, p. 160). In early 1900s, a writing by Hilda Arnold pointed out the Chineseness in *pho*, "Au Nord-Vietnam, on apprecie beaucoup le pho, sorte de soupe chinoise mais avec des nouilles de riz" (Peters, 2010, p. 160). Etymologically, Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Ngoc Bich believes that *pho* came from Chinese word *fen*, which means rice noodles. He describes "as Chinese street vendors hawked their soup around town, they would call out '*fe.....n*', the first part which sounded something like *pho* to the Vietnamese ear" (Greeley, 2002, p. 80). The name of the soup was later finalized as *phở* or *phở bac*, meaning "beef noodle soup" (Greeley, 2002, p. 80).

Furthermore, the main ingredient in *pho* was brought by the French during early colonization, making the dish a mixture of three cultures. Rarely seen in both Vietnamese and Chinese cooking pattern, beef was introduced and broadly used in 20th century Vietnam by the French people. Peters wrote that "French consumption of beef left the bones and other scraps available for the soup pot", and later got sold to Chinese and Vietnamese street vendors (Peters, 2010, p. 160). The invention of *pho* was an improvisation of local hawkers and a derivative of the time. The French found this dish resembling some features of *pot au feu*, the French beef and vegetable stew (Greeley, 2002, p. 80), bringing familiarity on a foreign land. As the demand for

pho went higher, the numbers of street pho vendors “increased with the rapid onset of colonial urbanization” (Peters, 2010, p. 160).

As an outcome of the colonial era, *pho* was later politicized in multiple aspects during the country’s most difficult political periods. During wartime, a Vietnamese journalist Nguyen Tuan observed that people were not having meat in their pho, implying the poor economical and political situation that the country was undergoing. The journal was problematic to the government at that time by various means, and was taken down soon after publishing (Peters, 2010, p. 161). The image of *pho* could potentially be received as a representation of the French bourgeoisie style: a bowl of luxury served with large selection of fresh herbs and beef products. Pho paints an imagined lifeway comes from another culture far away.

Today, the political annotation of *pho* has almost lost its power as it becomes arguably the signature food of authentic Vietnamese cuisine. The dish has come a long way being created, deconstructed, and altered. Skimming off its historical and political dimension, the biggest enchantment of *pho* is probably its ability to trigger a person’s nostalgia. *Pho* has been the common memory of the current generation and in this way, it is undoubtedly Vietnamese. At the end of the day, who gets to define authenticity? Regardless how *pho* absorbed foreign culture, its comforting aroma has significantly constructed the eating culture and definition of Vietnamese food in contemporary Vietnam.

Hainan? Vs. Hoi An Chicken Rice

Hainan Chicken Rice or *Wenchang Chicken Rice* originally stemmed from Hainan province in south China. The most authentic *Hainan chicken rice* requires a specific type of

chicken named “Wenchang”, which is only native to the Hainan area. This dish had traveled as Hainanese people migrated to Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and even to the other side of the globe. Hoi An, as a major port and commercial center in ancient Vietnam, had accepted a large number of Chinese immigrants after the collapse of the Ming Dynasty in the 17th century, among many of them were from Hainan (Butt, 2016, p. 14). Even today, one can still find various Chinese communal houses and pagodas in the old town of Hoi An. The population of Chinese descent still makes up a large portion of the Hoianese, indisputably, cooking patterns that are similar in China are also found here.

In particular, the example of *Hoi An Chicken Rice*, presents an interesting intersection between foreign culture and localization. The dish serves shredded chicken on top of rice cooked with chicken stock, along with local herbs and spices such as Vietnamese coriander and hot pepper (“Hoi An Chicken Rice.”, n.d., para. 1). Traditionally, *Hoi An Chicken Rice* has to go along with a sauce that is made from sautéed chicken giblets and garlic, and with turmeric mixed in the rice. This is very different from the bland and subtle flavor of the original *Hainan Chicken Rice* brought to Hoi An, which serves whole poached chicken with only soy sauce. The seasoning step is incorporated when boiling the chicken by stuffing it with herbs and spices. Hoianese people were able to localize the dish by slightly changing the form and presenting it with native ingredients.

Bui Long Khanh, an artist based in Hoi An, has addressed *Hoi An Chicken Rice* in one of his art work. As a Chinese descent, he makes work that speaks about his identity being a prosperity of an immigrant from the Fujian province in China. His journey started with a coincidental discovery of “a hand painted image on paper of a ‘Quán Cong’ — a great historical

Chinese deity” at his house twenty years ago (Butt, 2016, p. 16). Bui describes the secrecy of his family history as a normality of how the Chinese has lived in Vietnamese society due to the sensitive relationship between the two. The name change of *Hainan Chicken Rice* to *Hoi An Chicken Rice* was arguably resulted from the fear of revealing its original identity and triggering a potential mood. Zoe Butt, a curator and writer based in Saigon, points out that the “stigma against the Chinese” and “the aggression of its northern neighbor remains greatly feared in their determination to challenge Vietnam’s sovereignty” (Butt, 2016, p. 17).

Culinary tradition is “highly cultivated and culturally contingent, entwined with history, heritage, and identity” (Khanh, 2014, para. 1). In the case of *Hoi An Chicken Rice*, the dish is a total epitome of the complicated and dynamic history between China and Vietnam, and an embodiment of resilience and defense. It tells a part of the history that’s barely spoken. After all, food is flexible and multivocal, making it a suitable substance when expressing nationalism.

Conclusion

Banh Tet, *Pho*, and *Hoi An Chicken Rice* are examples of acculturation that has happened in Vietnam throughout history. The most mundane acts reflect the truest reality of how foreign cultures change the locals, because the nature of these actions are all-pervasive that people continue to pass them on unintentionally. As a cultural manifestation, food has the ability to be produced and reproduced by large audience in a daily manner. In this way, the notion of a nation is no longer an imagined entity, but is a tangible practice and universal expression in response to the acculturation, cultural uncertainty and identity confusion during its planetary shifts. Vietnamese people reveals the way they feel about themselves, such as ambivalence, dilemma,

and ambiguity, by adapting and recreating cultural cuisine to reinforce the image of a national identity.

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