

FOOD, MODERNITY, AND IDENTITY IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

by
Magdalene Bitter-Suermann

A Thesis Submitted to
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Honours in Anthropology

April, 2014, Halifax Nova Scotia

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Approved: Dr. Rylan Higgins
Chairperson

Approved: Dr. Eric Henry

Approved: Dr. Marty Zelenietz

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IV

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ABSTRACT

Food, Modernity, and Identity in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

by Magdalene Bitter-Suermann

This thesis examines the role of food in the construction and performance of middle class identity for young women living in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It will frame this subject within the larger context of urban food security in Vietnam, which informs many household consumption habits and illustrates growing socioeconomic inequality. Using ethnographic methods, this research focuses on the experiences and beliefs of five university-aged women, examining the ways that they use food to differentiate themselves from their parents, as a form of cultural capital, and as a connection to foreign cultures.

April 19, 2014.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page.....	I
Signature Page.....	II
Acknowledgements.....	III
Certificates of Ethnical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans.....	VI
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Foodways, the Middle Class, an Gender.....	2
Chapter 2: Methods.....	5
Chapter 3: Foodways in Urban Vietnam	8
3.1 Cultural Understandings of Food Safety.....	8
3.2 Đổi Mới and Marketization.....	13
3.3 Social Class and Food Insecurity.....	13
3.4 Trust and the Media.....	17
Chapter 4: Profiles of Five Vietnamese Women.....	19
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	26
6.1: Eating Out for the New Generation of Women.....	26
6.2: Cultural Capital and Class Distinction.....	32
6.3: Bridging National Borders with Food.....	38
Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks	42
References Cited.....	43

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, like many contemporary Southeast Asian cities is in a period of rapid urbanization, globalization, and development. Since the 1980s Vietnam has shifted from a relatively closed society to fully participating in the global market. This shift has brought with it an increase in wealth, an emerging middle class, and the exchange of global culture, media, information, and food (Higgs 2003:75). With these changes also comes increasing socioeconomic inequality, as illustrated in growing food insecurity for the urban poor.

Food, a commodity of daily importance and concern in Vietnam, can be used to measure and understand many of these dynamics as it is “one of the most obvious changes in everyday experiences” (Thomas & Nguyen 2004:141). Over the past 30 years the quantity of food available in Vietnam, paired with higher incomes, has redefined food and eating for the younger generation. Young women in Ho Chi Minh City embody this change more so than any other group, as they are the predominant consumers of global popular culture through music, fashion, print media, and the internet (2004:141-142). This thesis will explore how food can be used to understand the construction and performance of middle-class identity for these young women, within the climate of prevailing fear surrounding urban food security in Vietnam.

1.1 FOODWAYS, THE MIDDLE CLASS, AND GENDER

I first travelled to Ho Chi Minh City in April of 2012 as one of three undergraduate researchers exploring the state of urban food security through the study of foodways. This research project spanned two summer semesters and was carried out with the aid of Vietnamese social science students who worked as translators and cultural interpreters, while also gaining permission to research from local government offices. Through this project I became familiar with the struggles of both low and middle income families in Ho Chi Minh City to obtain safe, affordable, and nutritious food. Rapid inflation of the costs of food, a growing disconnect between producer and consumer, and little government regulation of food production and imports left many feeling unable to control the quality of what they ate.

There were also clear differences between the ways that those of different socioeconomic status dealt with these issues. The higher incomes of middle class families allowed them access to foreign food brands, supermarkets instead of open-air markets, and restaurants that could not be accessed by the working class.¹ Rather than spending more money for the assurance of quality and safety, the working class—construction and factory workers, xe ôm (motorcycle taxi) drivers, and those in other low-income positions—typically had to rely on their own skills for discerning safe from unsafe while haggling to lower costs. Each group utilized various strategies when attempting to regain control in this frustrating situation, however it became apparent that middle-income families in particular held complex beliefs surrounding food and eating that extended beyond concerns of safety, price, and nutrition.

Some middle-income participants believed that food in Ho Chi Minh City was unsafe because of ‘unhygienic’ traditional eating and buying practices such as eating with chopsticks and sharing rice bowls, as well as shopping at open-air food markets and street-side food vendors. Some relied on foreign food restaurants such as Kentucky Fried Chicken (Gà rán Kentucky) for safe food under the assumption that their food would be regulated by an outside source, in this case an American company. All of these beliefs seemed to stem from a common desire for Vietnam to modernize its food practices, largely through the adoption of Western styles of eating and food distribution. Information coming from print and televised media, advertising, music, movies, and the internet, have all played a role in changing the way the middle class think about and consume food.

The adaptation of foreign eating practices to Vietnam by the middle class is not solely a contemporary phenomenon. Peters documents similar dynamics under French colonial rule in the early 1900’s (2012:181). Through her work she shows the rise of French products marketed to the Vietnamese, particularly sweetened condensed milk, through a series of newspaper advertisements such as the one described here:

Two Vietnamese women meet on the street: one carries baskets and a bamboo pole, the other has a plump child. the first admires the baby's health and weight, and the other replies that she gives him La Petite Fermiere milk every day. The condensed milk is presumably key to the child's future health and fortune. His mother sports a neatly knotted head covering and has clearly internalized middle-class values of neatness, ambition, good health, and modern products. The ad suggests her son will imbibe those same bourgeois values along with his milk. (2012:193)

Peters also describes the adoption of French foreign goods not only as the key to health, modernity, and upward mobility for the middle class, but also as a bridge between the French and Vietnamese communities (2012:198).

This newspaper advertisement has many parallels in Vietnam today. Food has become increasingly important to the emerging urban middle class. The consumption of food is used to both display class status and by those aspiring to the middle class (Drummond 2012:88). It is a way of bridging national borders, and participating in a global consumer culture.

Food in Vietnam also has a complex relationship to gender. Counihan explains that men and women frequently distinguish themselves by the roles they play in food production. In an urban environment removed from this production, men and women redefine gender and power by what food they eat and how it is consumed (1998:7). In this context, foodways in Ho Chi Minh City are indicative of Vietnam's rapid urbanization and increasing alienation from food production. Many of the women interviewed over the course of this research are only one or two generations removed from Vietnam's agrarian roots, and are members of a generation that is redefining gender through food and consumption. Women in Vietnam are tasked with walking a line between modernity and traditional femininity, partly represented through what they eat (Nguyen 2004:134).

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Beginning in April of 2012 I began collecting data on foodways in urban Vietnam alongside 3 other Canadian researchers. This project spanned two summer semesters ending in July of 2013. Over this time I collected approximately 300 semi-structured household surveys exploring topics of food safety, health, price, and beliefs about food in Ho Chi Minh City for low and middle-income families. Participants were recruited door to door in city districts where permission had been obtained from local government offices. Although the interviews were intended to investigate the state of urban food security in Vietnam, they also uncovered many other underlying beliefs about food. Two prevalent themes concerned the adoption of ‘modern’ food processes as a means of protection from unsafe food, as well as the difference in beliefs about food according to social class.²

Over the course of the Foodways project researchers also translated food-related newspaper articles from Tuổi Trẻ newspaper, a prominent outlet in Vietnam. Since this time I have also been monitoring Thanh Niên news online in English as a means of understanding the way that food is talked about in the media while keeping up to date with new government policies and advertisements. All newspaper articles used as examples will be from these sources unless stated otherwise. During this project Canadian students also worked as participant observers in various markets and at food vendors in Ho Chi Minh City, although I will not directly cite these experiences they have greatly influenced my understanding of food systems in Ho Chi Minh City.

Building on the data already listed, this thesis will primarily focus on data collected from April to July 2013 as part of my independent research exploring the performance of middle class identity through food for young women in Ho Chi Minh City. Over these four months I collected data through participant observation, many informal interviews and conversations, meals with their friends and families, and five in-depth interviews intending to flesh out the themes that had already developed over the course of this research. The women who participated in this research were all in university or recently graduated, and their access to this education is what marked them as members of the middle class.

The “middle class” in this writing is both an economic and a social distinction. Liechty describes the middle class as not only cutting between poor and rich, but also through tradition and modernity (2003:61). This will be shown through the accounts of these participants. These women economically fit the model of middle class through their access to university education and the financial position of their families. They also self-identified as members of the middle class when asked. None of their mothers had university educations, and they were often the first women in their families to have degrees. They were each women that I had previously met in Ho Chi Minh City who displayed interest in participating in this project, agreed to meet frequently over the course of my stay in Vietnam, and were proficient in English so that I would not require a translator.

I did not follow an interview protocol for the interviews themselves, aiming to keep them comfortable and informal, however each of the interviews intended to explore

subjects such as food buying and consumption habits, the similarities and differences between these habits and those of their parents, as well as the foodways of their hometowns. Social gatherings, eating out with friends, self-image, gender, televised and print media, and general beliefs about changing life in Ho Chi Minh City were all touched on during these interviews. Pseudonyms were chosen to maintain the anonymity of participants.

CHAPTER 3: FOODWAYS IN URBAN VIETNAM

3.1 CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF FOOD SAFETY

There were a variety of prevalent fears concerning food safety in Ho Chi Minh City that informed daily consumption habits, as uncovered by the “Foodways in Urban Vietnam” project. Although the middle class had more options for avoiding unsafe food, it is still important to understand these underlying beliefs along with some of their origins, and the ways that families and individuals coped with the uncertainty this caused on a daily basis.

When household survey participants were asked “Is the food in Ho Chi Minh City safe?” The usual response was “No,” or alternatively “It is safe for me because I have strategies for choosing safe food, but it is not safe for everyone else.” Upon further prompting there were three categories that the majority of definitions of “unsafe” fell under: food that was expired and was still being sold; food that contained pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, or other toxins deemed harmful by participants; and food that was prepared in unsanitary conditions. With each of these categories came unique consumption practices and beliefs that families and individuals adhered to.

Expired or otherwise spoiled food products, especially meat such as pork, were mentioned frequently in interviews and in the media³. Translated Vietnamese news articles frequently reported on problems with transportation of meat into the city, such as inadequate temperatures during transportation, as well as dishonest transporters attempting to sell spoiled food for a profit. These articles were often brought up by

interviewees, who were also hearing such stories during televised news broadcasts. This flood of information had led many to draw their own conclusions about where and how this food was being sold. One common reasoning among participants was that someone must be buying this food in order for the cycle to continue. Since the average shopper was expected to have strategies for avoiding spoiled products, such as buying from familiar vendors or otherwise spotting low quality food, people selling prepared meals from roadside stalls were often blamed for cooking with cheap and low quality products to increase profits. This was representative of the low opinion and mistrust many expressed towards vendors in the city.

This mistrust of street-side vendors extended to sellers in open-air markets as well, leading to a variety of strategies for avoiding spoiled food products. Buying exclusively from familiar and trusted sellers was a common practice, as well as avoiding sellers altogether by shopping at the supermarket if the family could afford to do so. One instance where these preferences were reversed, however, was in the widespread belief that fish in outdoor markets was safer than in supermarkets, despite other pollutants and health concerns, because it was typically kept alive in small bowls of water until sold instead of on ice. This was one of many contradictory beliefs surrounding food safety. On one hand, there was a consensus that market food was more likely to be polluted by toxic substances than the supermarket, while on the other consumers were willing to ignore this in the case of fish, to protect themselves from spoiled food products. Other strategies included only buying from markets in the mornings when meat had been recently

transported into the city, and only buying meat originating from nearby provinces or family members.

One of the most recurrent fears expressed by those interviewed beyond spoiled products was a fear of the poisonous substances that food in Ho Chi Minh City contained. Word of mouth stories not only quoted news sources, but also highly exaggerated or misrepresented these stories compared to the articles that they were referencing. These fears involved a wide range of chemicals and pollutants such as pesticides that were said to be causing cancer in the population, and growth hormones that could make an animal grow exceptionally fast but were poisonous to eat. Fertilizers and other chemicals used on crops to make a seed grow to a full plant in just a few days, and preservatives that kept produce beautiful on the outside for weeks after the inside had completely rotted were a few of the many stories told by participants from different income levels and districts.

Participants expressed a growing concern for the “poisons” introduced at different stages of food production, and were largely forced to speculate about what food was the safest to eat, as avoiding all of these toxins was a challenging task. These fears were largely concerning food products being imported from countries such as China, but were amplified by the knowledge that these practices were also being used by food producers within Vietnam.

Some consumption habits surrounding these beliefs were shaped by the idea that polluted or poisonous food products could be spotted and avoided. Some buyers focused their energy on the origins of food, either asking food sellers directly or otherwise tricking sellers into disclosing this information. Others had their own methods for judging the

origins and safety of these products. These methods included only choosing produce containing insects, reasoning that it means less pesticides were used in its production. Another common method was to check whether food has deteriorated in the sun after being at the market all day. If it had not, that vendor would be avoided in the future because their food contained too many preservatives. Similarly, lean meat was avoided because it was thought to have been genetically modified or contain “poisons” used in its production, and fattier meat was seen as safer and more desirable. The rule of thumb is that if something looked too “perfect,” it should be avoided.

Lastly, and largely contributing to the mistrust of food vendors in Ho Chi Minh City, was a fear of the conditions that food had been cooked and stored in. In some cases this was expressed through a dismissal of traditional Vietnamese eating practices like the use of rice bowls and chopsticks, believing that even these were spreading bacteria and illnesses. This could be seen in the desire to move away from eating and drinking at street vendors, favouring indoor restaurants. The belief that this is what “civilized” countries do was growing, and a change in consumption habits as well as descriptions of street-side food vendors as “dirty” or “for poor people only” illustrated this shift. Those interviewed expressed a large preference for preparing food in the home, using fresh food bought daily from the market or supermarket, and washing all produce thoroughly to avoid these conditions. Despite fears concerning open-air markets and traditional Vietnamese practices, markets, chopsticks, rice bowls and street-side food vendors were still the most common ways of buying and eating food in Ho Chi Minh City.

These definitions of food safety are important when understanding the ways participants viewed health and nutrition. Responses indicated that for many, safe food was synonymous with healthy food. At first this presented itself as an issue with translation. Some of our original research questions about health became merged with questions about safety as translators expressed a difficulty in differentiating these two ideas to interviewees. After this shift, however, interviewees continued to tell us that because of their concerns surrounding food safety, there was little time left to contemplate how consumption habits related to health, and the absence of harmful substances was often enough to deem food healthy. This resulted in avoiding the bad as a strategy for remaining healthy.

Though the reasoning behind the preceding consumption habits vary, many participants expressed a desire to at least regain a small amount of power in an otherwise powerless situation. They acknowledged that practices such as preparing food at home did not change the conditions that the food has been farmed in, but said that they controlled what they could and tried not to think about what they could not. One middle-aged drink seller told us that she did not know what food was safe or not, and that she could not know what the farmers had used to grow it. She focused on general concerns such as whether the food was fresh. She told us “If I am lucky, I will only eat good food, and if it is bad, that is just my destiny.” This attitude appeared to be increasingly common among low and middle income families in Ho Chi Minh City.

3.2 ĐỔI MỚI AND MARKETIZATION

Đổi Mới (Renovation) is the name given to a series of market reforms introduced by the Vietnamese government beginning in 1986, and resulting in economic liberalization in Vietnam. Werner argues that Đổi Mới was not solely an economic restructuring but also a social process (2002:29). It can be understood as an attempt to achieve modernity through marketization in Vietnam, in contrast to modernization through the socialist model (2002:39).

The Đổi Mới reforms saw Vietnam's entrance into to global market and a growing trade and diplomatic relationship with the West. An increase in private commodity production as well as the State's renewed involvement in the economy saw Vietnam's incorporation into the global capitalist system. The developing relationship between Vietnam and the West also marked the increased exchange of culture, information, and ideas. Foreign imports into the Vietnamese market such as motorbikes began at this time, and marked changes in social mobility and stratification in Vietnam (Truitt 2008:3). There was a rise in personal wealth for the emerging middle-class, and citizens were given the opportunity to pursue private entrepreneurship, while also enjoying access to 'mass consumption' in urban areas (Leshkovich 2012:98).

With the resulting increase in standards of living also came growing class inequality and materialism. Vietnamese citizens and especially members of the middle class had to find a compromise between socialist ideals of economic equality, and growing class differences marked by consumption (Leshkovich 2012:98-99).

Leshkovich sees class construction in Vietnam as in part understanding ownership, and

‘imbuing’ this ownership and its corresponding class designations with moral characterizations (2011:279). One means of doing this was to rationalize and “render moral” middle class spending habits in comparison to the upper class. This was done by focusing on worth ethic, as opposed to that of the ‘corrupt’ upper class that had taken bribes or cheated their way into power (2012:98-100). This is an important and continuing distinction between social classes in Vietnam, as while the middle class marked its membership partially through consumption and economic wealth, they were not ‘rich’ and did not necessarily aspire to be members of the ‘immoral’ upper class.

Đổi Mới saw not only a change in standards of living, but in part paved the road for the growing modernization of food distribution channels in the 1990s (Cadihon *et. al* 2006:33). In 1993 Minimart opened as the first supermarket in Ho Chi Minh City, and its success brought with it many new corporations interested in selling food in Vietnam. Although supermarkets have been growing in popularity since this time, as of 2006 they still only comprised 2% of vegetable distribution in South Vietnam compared to open-air markets and other traditional distribution channels (2006: 33-35).

All women interviewed during this research were born after 1986, and therefore were members of a very different society than the one that their parents had grown up in. Changing standards of living, marketization, global cultural influence, changes in class, and consumption, have all played a role in shaping their beliefs about food and eating.

3.3 SOCIAL CLASS AND FOOD INSECURITY

Household survey data indicated that the socioeconomic group that participants belonged to often defined their beliefs about food safety and their access to safe food. Often responses assessed food safety issues for others rather than personal fears and struggles. For example, middle-income participants frequently mentioned the plight of the working class to find safe food while avoiding considering the topic as it applied to them personally. It appeared that participants took comfort in their abilities to protect themselves from unsafe food, relying on higher household incomes or personal buying strategies to do so.

Middle-income interviewees claimed to possess extensive knowledge about food safety in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as a serious concern about food safety for low-income individuals. These participants would often say that because of their stable incomes they were able to shop at the supermarket, buy ‘certified’⁴ safe food, and avoid street vendors altogether, while those with lower incomes were described as helpless in the face of rising food prices and questionable safety. A man who runs a food stall in a predominantly middle class neighbourhood explained to me that it is the choice of the buyer whether they buy from trusted sellers and the supermarket or not. However, low income individuals can only afford low prices and therefore low quality food was sold in the neighbourhoods where the “workers” lived. He quoted a newspaper article that he had read, saying that there was more poisonous and dangerous food in areas where incomes were low.

Low-income respondents somewhat contradicted these sentiments. Although often remarking on the difficulties of meeting rising food costs, their pride in their own abilities for finding safe food despite rising prices sometimes prevented them from disclosing their personal struggles with food safety. This is not to say that concerns about food safety were not expressed, but rather they addressed them by telling stories about people in other districts, or even their neighbours, friends, and extended family who struggled with issues of food safety. More commonly a preoccupation with food prices drove these interviews, with interviewees frequently telling us about their abilities to successfully negotiate food prices, or otherwise expressing their concerns that eventually rising costs would prevent them from providing healthy food for their families. These interviews were conducted at the household level, and therefore those interviewed typically already had families of their own. The young women interviewed later in this thesis did not share the same fears concerning food safety and price, as they were only required to consider their own health, and did not have to buy food or cook for a family.

Accessibility of markets and supermarkets created another divide between low and middle-income households. Proximity to markets deemed “safe” by participants positively influenced their views regarding citywide food safety. The majority of participants believed that supermarkets were usually the safer choice when buying food, and they described food as “certified” and “regulated” by officials. Participants who did not necessarily agree with this at least believed that they would have a company to complain to directly if they became sick from eating bad food. Those with low incomes who typically had longer work days or who did shift work were not able to shop during

business hours and were restricted to shopping at markets, greatly diminishing their options when buying food. Supermarkets were also located far away from many low-income neighbourhoods preventing access for those who did not have the time or means to travel far from home. Price differences between markets and supermarkets created the largest divide in accessibility, barring many low-income households from the option of buying food from the supermarket.

3.4 TRUST AND THE MEDIA

Although the fears expressed by participants concerning food safety were compelling, there were often contradictions and ambiguities when it came to the origins of this knowledge. News or anecdotal experiences were usually central to concerns about the safety of food, but often these stories were misunderstood or taken out of context. Beliefs about Chinese food products and food vendors are especially important examples of this. It was commonly stated by participants that Chinese food products took a long time to spoil, grew faster, and looked more “beautiful” or “perfect” than Vietnamese food products. One interviewee told us that according to a news article she had read, Chinese producers put pills in their meat products to keep the Vietnamese population sick and weak. Some more frequently told stories about Chinese food products said that vegetables could grow from a seed to a harvestable size in just a few days. Animals such as pigs, cows, and fish, were also said to grow faster than those in Vietnam. Participants claimed that producers in China did not care about the health of the Vietnamese, or any harmful effects that chemicals used in production may have on consumers. Although these stories

were said to originate from the media, the news stories that we collected and translated over this time showed that stories about unsafe food scares from China and other foreign countries did not outnumber stories about unsafe Vietnamese food. Fears of Chinese food were possibly magnified by Vietnam's turbulent past with China.

When asked about these issues, participants commonly claimed that this was not the cause of their distrust, but rather that they knew from the media and from experience that Chinese food was unsafe. One particular interviewee told us that when someone in the community got sick it was because they had eaten Chinese food. When asked how she knew this, she told us that everyone knew it, it was simply the truth. Food vendors were similarly treated as scapegoats for a broad range of illnesses. One grandmother recounted to us that when her grandson was four years old he used to "freak out" after eating from food vendors, so the family made a shift to eating only food at home.

Although Chinese and street food could very well be the cause of some of these illnesses, it is hard to find verifiable evidence to support these claims. In place of heavy regulations to protect consumers from harmful food products, the media had taken to policing and reporting on these issues themselves. The constant presence of food scares in print media alone is truly alarming. News companies frequently reported on fresh food, vegetables, meat, packaged, restaurant, and street food. Consumers were not given any safe and secure alternatives to these foods. Reports suggested that nothing was safe.

CHAPTER 4: PROFILES OF FIVE VIETNAMESE WOMEN

I have known many of these women for the entirety of my time in Ho Chi Minh City. In the following chapters I will be drawing from participant observation, informal and casual conversations, eating out and at home with their families, as well as formal interviews conducted in July of 2013. This section will be followed by a more detailed analysis of some of the major themes present in the interviews conducted with details from these interviews and parallels from household survey data.

THUY ANH

Thuy Anh was a 20 year old woman native to District 1, the upper-class business centre of Ho Chi Minh City. District 1 is comprised of an ever growing number of shining skyscrapers containing the offices of international banks, air conditioned pedways, wealthy hotel chains, and foreign food restaurants. Large multi-lane streets lined with newly paved sidewalks and carefully planned gardens lead to a tourist dominated core. Here, amid the glass walls of new office buildings are the remnants of French colonial architecture. On any given day you can see young couples in tuxedos and flowing white dresses having their engagement photos taken in front of the Notre-Dame Basilica (Nhà thờ Đức Bà Sài Gòn) or the surrounding gardens, while women in business attire grab coffee on their lunch breaks nearby. These women stand in stark contrast to those of the same age travelling to District 1 daily from low-income districts to work as food vendors, gardeners, and street cleaners. Often they are migrant workers from rural Vietnam seeking

employment to support their families by catering to the business class. In this way District 1 aptly illustrates the dichotomy between rich and poor in Ho Chi Minh City.

This was the setting that Thuy Anh grew up in. Few families had the resources to settle in District 1 permanently, but Thuy Anh's family was in the process of tearing down and rebuilding their house from the ground up to add another level. She was a student at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities and took advanced English and French classes at the local language school. Whenever we were in her neighbourhood she would remark on the rapidly changing cityscape around her. She did not focus on the social implications of Ho Chi Minh City's ever expanding beautification projects, rather she lamented the French houses falling into disrepair under the inconsistent care of the Vietnamese government in favour of new developments. While buildings like the sparkling glass TV tower were usually pridefully pointed out to me by locals as symbols of the country's successful move towards modernization, Thuy Anh was preoccupied with romantic notions of European sophistication and beauty that she feared were being forgotten. This extended to many areas of her life; she loved French films and music, read European novels translated into English or Vietnamese in her free time, and believed in upholding proper European etiquette when eating in public. Furthermore, her aunt was a French Vietnamese woman who taught etiquette for a living to the newly wealthy or those aspiring to successful careers in the business world.

Although Thuy Anh was critical of the notion that her family and environment had greatly influenced her beliefs about food and eating, she was vigilant in pointing out the improper manners of those around us in restaurants and cafes. She was sensitive to people

who she thought represented Vietnam's 'uncultured' past—mainly the urban poor—and saw Ho Chi Minh City's true modernization as marked by social behaviour; behaving properly and 'cultured' while eating in public, men and women sharing food related work such as cooking and shopping equally, and the adoption of foreign cuisine and eating practices.

TRAN

Tran was an undergraduate student leader with strong ties to both the international student community at her university and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. She described her involvement in the Youth Union as aiding in educating her peers and the general public about the communist ideology to strengthen the community and nation. This placed her in a unique position among her peers as she had become somewhat of an ambassador for Vietnam to both foreigners and members of the international Vietnamese community (Việt Kiều) through her work. One of the results of this was her seemingly unending knowledge of 'traditional' Vietnamese customs, food, pass times, and historic destinations in Ho Chi Minh City. When out in the city she automatically assumed the role of tour guide, explaining the history of each building and district. Because she habitually explained the basics of Vietnamese culture to new foreign students, she inadvertently provided an excellent comparison between the idealized, traditional, Vietnamese culture and the rapidly changing youth culture in Ho Chi Minh City that she was a part of.

Tran's parents owned the largest Vietnamese food restaurant in her district, a wealthy and quiet community far removed from the city centre and its heavy traffic. As

she grew up working in the restaurant she developed a passion for cooking, although it was rare that she found the time to cook between her responsibilities with school and work. Instead, like many young people in Ho Chi Minh City she preferred to pick up something to eat from her motorbike at one of the many food stands near her university, or staying late with friends in one of the central districts to eat fast food for supper. Tran, in her desire to expose me to everything Vietnamese also introduced me to drinking coffee in the parks of District 1, where at night hundreds of young people congregated to sit on newspapers on the sidewalk and drink Vietnamese iced coffee (cà phê sữa đá) while listening to music and socializing.

LINH

Linh was a 25 year old woman who grew up in a rural community outside of Đà Lạt in the central highlands of Vietnam, her parents were both farmers and so she maintained the closest relationship to Vietnam's agricultural roots out of all of the women interviewed. Her family were devout catholics and many of her siblings had pursued careers in the church as an alternative to farming. Linh had considered becoming a nun before deciding on a degree in the social sciences with the intent of studying religion. This decision led her to Ho Chi Minh City for school, where she is enrolled in a master's program as of 2013. On the day that she moved to the city for the first time her parents bought a small refrigerator in Đà Lạt and paid for its transportation by a family friend in the back of a bus to her new apartment so that she would have the ability to eat fresh, safe food while in school. This was reflective of the pervasive fear of unsafe expired food

being transported to, and prepared in, Ho Chi Minh City. This fear informed many daily decisions about food and eating for people like Linh's parents.

Linh was constantly reminded of her parent's fear, mostly through bi-weekly phone calls from her mother reminding her not to buy a certain type of meat that has recently been recalled in the local news, or otherwise to inquire about her health and nutrition. Linh had a great respect for the opinions of her parents, and felt connected to traditional Vietnamese dishes through them, however she had adopted very different eating habits since moving to Ho Chi Minh City. She frequently stated that she did not care about her health or safety when it came to eating. She viewed herself as career driven and led a busy school-focused lifestyle. Food had two purposes; basic sustenance and energy, and as a way of connecting with her equally busy friends. The latter occupied the majority of our conversations concerning food.

NHUNG

Nhung was a 24 year old recent university graduate who was planning to pursue another degree program in the near future. Nhung and her sisters all spoke fluent English, despite having never befriended someone from outside of Vietnam before we were introduced on my first trip to Ho Chi Minh City. She learned English by watching Hollywood movies and listening to American music in her spare time, as well as joining conversation classes through her university.

During the course of this research she became engaged to her long term boyfriend and was married after my return to Canada. She held two marriage ceremonies; one for

her family in Ho Chi Minh City where she wore a white wedding dress, and the other in the hometown of her husband where she wore an áo dài, the traditional national dress.

She moved out of her family's home when she attended university, renting a room near one of its outlying campuses. Her mother is divorced, something that she speaks of with great respect as she recognizes the social and financial pressures that her mother faced when making this decision. Her parent's relationship greatly impacted the way that she viewed her own, and she claimed to have a more "realistic" view of marriage than the idealized notions held by many of her friends.

She was extremely interested in other cultures and people, and frequently indulged in the seemingly never ending supply of foreign food restaurants in Ho Chi Minh City. She was frequently on the hunt for new cafes, especially those that hosted musicians playing jazz or classical music at night. Many of our meetings took place in these settings, each informal interview was conducted in the cafe that was her latest discovery.

NGUYEN

Nguyen grew up in Bà Rịa–Vũng Tàu Province in Southern Vietnam as the only child of two food vendors outside of the capital city of Vũng Tàu. Although she was an only child, she lived with her extended family—her grandmother, aunts, and many cousins. When she spoke of her childhood in her hometown she frequently emphasized the poverty of her family and the different lifestyle that she led after moving to Ho Chi Minh City.

Nguyen moved to Ho Chi Minh City with her family at the age of 11, where her mother and father continued selling food out of their home in their new neighbourhood. She became enthralled with American culture, surrounding herself with expatriate friends and foreign exchange students at the university that she eventually attended, as well as developing a taste for American food, music, and movies. She listened to rock music, and frequently criticized Vietnam's obsession with pop music like One Direction and Justin Bieber, while still consuming her fair share of pop culture vices such as albums from "American Idol" finalists.

Nguyen was also quick to use her social connections to find free food whenever she was running low on money. Rather than eat at home when her resources were scarce, she would frequently convince her foreigner acquaintances or wealthy Vietnamese friends to take her out to fast food restaurants or bars, and was sure to ask them to bring her back presents whenever they were travelling abroad or around Vietnam. She explained to me that this was because she was amazed when she found out that foreigners exchanged presents for almost every occasion such as birthdays and Christmas. As she had grown up poor, she very early received gifts from her parents and therefore made up for it now through gifts from her large social network. She often describes her decisions about food similarly, justifying her spending as making up for a childhood where she was unable to eat out or enjoy different foods.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1: EATING OUT FOR THE NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN

Many state agendas, including Đổi Mới, come with their own gendered ideals (Tran 2002:41). Images of the strong woman of the communist revolution have given way to several new characterizations of women in the post-Đổi Mới world. Tran states that “one is the harsh portrait of the materialistic, manipulative, graceless daughter-in-law who only thinks about making money, and is sexual and immoral” (2002:49) While the other “is the compelling spectacle of groups of chattering upper-class school girls, youth mobility and modernity all captured in national vitality and pride” (2002:49-50). The women interviewed do not neatly fit into these categories, though they may possess some characteristics of each. Rather, they must consider whether others view them in this way as they navigate changing gender roles in Vietnam. While women in previous generations also had the opportunities to be entrepreneurs and leaders, Leshkovich notes that often their focus was still inward on family welfare and they identified first as wives and mothers (2006:278). The women interviewed did not hold these roles, and focused on their careers independent of their families.

Rydstrom and Drummond (2004:158) explain the State’s continued involvement in shaping beliefs about gender through social mobilization campaigns in Vietnam that can be seen in magazines, newspapers, and billboards. These campaigns have changed to serve different purposes throughout the history of the communist party, primarily focusing on the family as the central unit for a strong nation. This State interest in

maintaining the traditional Vietnamese family has increased in recent years in part to combat growing foreign influences in Vietnam (2004:166). At the core of these campaigns is the branding of Vietnamese women as nurturers and caregivers in the home, an expectation that was emphasized by the families of the women interviewed.

This continued branding of women as nurturers was especially relevant when considering each participant's views concerning cooking for and taking care of families of their own. These women had to frequently negotiate between multiple and sometimes contradictory identities, finding a middle ground between traditional and modern femininity. On one hand they had to avoid Tran's categorization of the selfish, materialistic, post-Đổi Mới woman, while on the other they had to make sacrifices in order to achieve their education and career ambitions, sometimes appearing selfish or careless to their families. These conflicting images were largely the problem of middle class women, as the gap between the middle and working class grew. Usually workers coming from rural Vietnam did not have the same access to the internet, advertisers, and products that had begun to define consumption for the middle class in urban Vietnam (Thomas 2004:146). They also did not possess the means to break into the formal economy from informal sectors working jobs such as self-employed vendors, and therefore few achieved upward mobility (Jerneck 2010:114)

One common concern surrounding food consumption in Ho Chi Minh City for all of the women interviewed was the amount of time they allocated to preparing and eating food. Eating out helped to connect them with their friends, and was a way to quickly refuel between classes or after work. As it served many roles at once it was an effective

time-saving strategy in their day-to-day lives. At the same time, each woman recognized that their preference for eating outside of the home was contrary to the way they had been raised, all by mothers or grandmothers who were responsible for the majority of food buying and cooking in their homes. They were also influenced by the overarching expectations placed on them as women and nurturers by the State and perpetuated by their families and peers. They often associated their own disinterest in these responsibilities in favour of fast-paced lives outside of the home with growing gender equality in Vietnam and new modern definitions of femininity.

These women also did not share in the same fears expressed by participants in household survey data. While they were careful to only eat from vendors that they trusted and restaurants that had good reputations or were regulated by large corporations, they frequently stated that they did not have time to care about the safety of what they were eating. Especially considering they were not cooking for themselves, they did not have the same buying strategies as the older women interviewed during household surveys. They were not responsible for feeding families of their own, and usually dismissed personal health and nutrition as unimportant.

Each woman interviewed was a university student or graduate and saw themselves as very career-driven in comparison to their mothers, none of whom were university educated or who had full time work outside of the home. While some of these women still lived with their families and had the benefit of having some meals prepared at home, Linh, Nhung, and Nguyen lived on their own, and so this section will focus primarily on their experiences. They had all adopted eating patterns that were significantly different

than the older generation of women, especially compared to their own mothers. They saw a shift from cooking at home to eating out as markers of their fast-paced urban lifestyles.

Nguyen:

My mother always cooked for my family, every day we ate supper at our home. I was not allowed to spend any of our money on food outside of the house because it was too expensive and we were very poor. Now I do not cook for myself like my mother did because it is easier to go out. I am a modern Vietnamese woman [laughs]; I go to university all day, I have an internship, and I do not have time to always cook even though it is cheaper. I do not think it is important for a woman to cook for her family in my generation either, but I think many people do think this, my family does. Even if I get married my husband and I will both cook, it will not be my job.

My mother does not understand because she did not have to go to school, she thinks that at the end of the day you are done working and have time for other things, but life in Ho Chi Minh City is very busy. I do not want to spend all of my time cooking, I would rather try new things and enjoy myself with friends.

(Interview July 2013)

Nguyen illustrates two common distinctions made by each of these women.

Firstly, she is not interested in taking on the role that her mother played in feeding a family, nor does she spend time cooking for herself. This is similar to Thomas' depiction of young women interviewed who lived in Hanoi. She notes that they openly stated that they did not wish for the lives that their mothers had led, and were rejecting traditional family values and sacrifices (2004:14). It is important to remember that the production, preparation, and consumption of food for the traditional Vietnamese family serves "to reflect and maintain proper social relations" (Avieli 2012:42) and therefore each woman's decision to eat primarily outside of the home also changes their familial relationships.

Nguyen also sees this shift as in part connected to her busy lifestyle. Nguyen is the first person in her family to go to university, and therefore complains often that her family

do not understand the time commitment of her school work and internship. She often tells me that her mother disapproves of the money she spends on eating out, but brushes this off as an outdated view from the older generation. She described this past generation as “untrained workers;” labourers, farmers and housewives, as opposed to working in modern professional environments. As her parents sell food out of their house for a living, food and home were always connected for Nguyen’s family. Now in her adult life eating is something that most often happens in the public sphere.

Linh and Nhung provide further perspectives on this topic:

Linh:

I think about what is easiest, because if I cook for an hour and eat for 15 minutes I feel bad. I think it’s wrong to spend that much time cooking. I don’t care or think about my health so I just eat whatever I want. If I am very busy from tutoring or teaching, I come home at the end of the day late and just look around [on the street in her neighbourhood] and can have any food I want so I just eat that.

My family are farmers so they did not have the same options that I do, they just come home and eat very simple meals together. I think families in Vietnam are expected to come together for a meal, that a happy family has all of its meals at home, and they expect that in Ho Chi Minh City too. It is difficult for my generation to do this, but there are many more options to eat out here than there are in my hometown.

If I did have a family and children maybe we would eat more at home, the expectation is for a woman to cook for her husband and take care of her children, but I do not think it is important. Housework does not matter for a family so if I was married I would make my husband do the same things that I do - but my friends say because of this I will never get married in Vietnam. Studying social sciences has made me question religion and gender and things, so I think I am very aware of this stuff, and I would not have a family that just focused on meals because it is not important.

(Interview July 2013)

Nhung:

I am getting married soon so my family jokes a lot that I will have to be a housewife. They are very surprised that I am getting married at all because I do

not take care of my skin and I do not look very fashionable, so they are surprised that I will have a husband. My sisters tell me that I will have to cook for him and take care of him to keep him happy but they are just joking and are very happy for me.

It is different for me than for my mother or sisters because I am building a career and going to do a graduate program, so my husband will support me. I can not spend time at home because we are very busy and both want to have careers, so we do not cook, we prefer to go out and eat sushi and drink coffee because it is special and delicious.

My mother always cooked for my family and it is very important to her. She also takes care of the children of my sister. She is divorced from my father and so she has to work very hard to take care of our family and feed everyone. I am very thankful to have a mother who works so hard, but I do not think I could be happy with her life because it is very difficult.

(Interview July 2013)

Nguyen, Linh and Nhung are all aware of the continuing expectations placed on women to prepare food in the home, while also expressing changing expectations for their own future relationships and careers. As illustrated above, all three women associated cooking at home with something that was required of their mothers, and therefore not desirable. King describes the growing young middle class in Vietnam as more or less conforming with global characteristics; commitment to education, career aspirations, possession of cultural capital, and an orientation to consumption and to accessing information (2008:783). The decisions each of these women place on eating out in part mark their membership to the middle class in Ho Chi Minh City.

Their decisions about eating out were both practical and symbolic. On one hand eating out served the practical purpose of adapting to the limited time that came with their education and career aspirations. On the other, it was a way of distancing themselves from

gender practices that they viewed as outdated while also marking their membership to a new and modern generation of women.

5.2: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND CLASS DISTINCTION

While saving time by eating out was important for the young women I interviewed, they placed a greater emphasis on the overall social experience and feeling that eating out gave them, as well as their interest in participating in Western culture through consuming fast food and foreign dishes. They also focused on the image that they were expected to maintain in public, and were quick to criticize the inappropriate behaviour of others, displaying their unconscious knowledge of ‘proper’ class and gender behaviour.

Cultural capital is a term first coined by Bourdieu that refers to the non-economic ways that individuals can achieve social mobility. In his approach to class, he sees all individuals as holding a position in social space according to their social, economic, and cultural capital. These positions can be associated with corresponding tastes, behaviours, and consumption habits. (1984). In the context of this thesis I will be considering food as a form of cultural capital. Food such as high-end coffee brands, foreign foods, and fast foods are all tastes attributed to the middle and upper classes in Vietnam. Each woman’s knowledge of how to eat and act when eating out provide further distinctions between social classes.

Bourdieu remarks that three of the items commonly used for class distinction are food, culture, and presentation (1984:31). Beyond food itself, these women

also commonly referred to ‘proper’ manners and behaviour expected of them within restaurants and cafes, as well as the expectations placed on their overall appearances or presentation.

In Vietnam, consumption is increasingly becoming a form of cultural capital for those aspiring to and belonging to the middle class. Drummond and Marshall note that for the middle class, leisure activities are tied to consumption, whether through shopping or eating (2012:85). This illustrates the continued economic divide between the middle and working classes, as access to leisure through consumption requires a greater disposable income. This, paired with the specific behaviours and presentations that make up a person’s cultural capital, again illustrate that class status in Vietnam is more complex than economic disparity.

Nhung:

I love coffee and I love spending time in coffee shops because they are stylish and they are places that I can go to feel special and listen to good music. It is also hard because when I am in coffee shops in Vietnam and not drinking on the street, everyone notices you when you go in. I think the waiters and everyone in the shop spend time looking at you and what you are wearing and talking about you. If you have the right purse, if you have nice shoes, the way you have your hair, everything about how you look is important when you go into places like these. Sometimes I do not think that I am fashionable enough because other women wear more designer clothes than I do when they are out, but I know how to behave properly and I have good manners so it is OK.

[Do you notice these things about others?] Yes, when others come in I can tell if they belong there or not, you can tell by what they are wearing and how they act and sit, if they are sitting up straight or not, and what they are talking about. I think there is a lot of pressure on women to behave properly in coffee shops and restaurants because they are supposed to be different than drinking coffee on the street [at street-side coffee vendors] where there are more poor people and it is not as clean and less special.

July 2013

Nhung was acutely aware of the social expectations placed on her when in coffee shops and restaurants in Vietnam. We met for coffee frequently over the course of this research, and although she often referred to herself as ‘not girly’ and ‘unfashionable,’ she was still quick to point out the way those around her were dressed and how they were behaving. She also recognized the important distinction between indoor and outdoor coffee shops, the former is too expensive for low income individuals who are restricted to street-side coffee.

Harms describes a series of government beautification projects in Ho Chi Minh City whose aims were to “clean up” the streets by removing all street-side cafes in favour of more expensive indoor coffee shops. One interesting finding was that the State’s narrative of ‘civilizing’ public spaces gained widespread support regardless of socioeconomic status, and was seen as an exciting move towards a ‘modern’ city environment (2009:184-185). This demonstrates one of many popular narratives that surrounded modernization in Ho Chi Minh City, where even those who were negatively affected by this change seemed to believe it was for the greater good.

Nhung also expressed several key observations concerning cultural capital. She could distinguish who belonged in these restaurants based on how they looked and how they acted. While she acknowledged that she sometimes did not conform to the fashion standards of other women, this was because as a recent graduate she did not make enough money to buy designer brands. She made up for this with the way she behaved in public.

Thuy Anh:

[What types of etiquette does your aunt teach? Do you follow the same etiquette in public?]

She teaches mostly staff of international companies and newly rich people who want to show the others that they have "les bonnes manières." She teaches them things like how to communicate while eating, what to wear, which subjects to chat about. There are some slight differences between men and women's manners but in general, etiquette is actually about behaving gently, properly.

Generally I think I follow proper etiquette, but less when I'm very hungry. I find it a bit irritating if people from my table are talking about less pleasant things while eating or making too many noises. I believe that people should try to behave properly to be polite.

(Interview July 2013)

Thuy Anh further supported the concept of food as cultural capital in Vietnam by explaining her aunt's work teaching etiquette. Her aunt taught those who did not already possess the knowledge of 'proper' behaviour, primarily those who were expected to interact with people of higher social status, or those from the international business community. Teaching people who were 'newly wealthy' showed that a knowledge of proper behaviour when eating had a clear relationship to socioeconomic class, and that there was a set of identifiable behaviours that individuals were expected to adhere to according to their class status. Thuy Anh identified some of these behaviours, namely behaving politely and holding appropriate conversations.

During my meetings with Thuy Anh her favourite foods to eat were cupcakes and Italian sodas at a local cafe in District 1. This cafe played American pop music and had recreations of famous Vietnamese paintings with cupcakes conspicuously added to each scene. It was also where we discussed many of the 'proper behaviours' listed in greater detail.

Thuy Anh was regularly the most vocal of all participants concerning the improper behaviour exhibited by others when we were out. Often upon sitting down, Thuy Anh would not only point out the way people were dressed around us, or roll her eyes at overheard conversations, but she would also bring up the poor manners she had witnessed throughout the day. One example of this was when she described a woman she had seen earlier in the day at a food stand who was eating her meat “the American way” by slicing it into small pieces on her plate before eating. She told me that someone more ‘civilized’ would know to eat meat “in the French way” by only cutting one piece at a time before taking a bite. In this way she drew a clear line between herself and someone of different social status based on the way that person was eating and their understanding of foreign eating practices. Thuy Anh had never travelled outside of Vietnam, rather she was informed by movies, books, and her aunt.

For Thuy Anh, as with Nhung, designer clothes and other obvious markers of material wealth were out of her reach as she did not possess enough disposable income to spend in this way. She frequently expressed that she was “not girly” compared to other women her age, and preferred that her money be spent on food, entertainment, and books. While she was still aware of and vocal about other women’s appearances, she primarily focused on their behaviour and the way that they carried themselves as ways of identifying their socioeconomic status. Thuy Anh and Nhung in this way both showed that membership to the middle class was not only marked economically, but also socially. While consumption was one means of achieving or performing class status, it was also limited for these women who did not possess the incomes of members of the upper class.

Instead they often differentiate themselves from the working class through their actions, and in this case through the way that they act while eating food.

Tran:

I think if you eat at restaurants you are fashionable to other people. I mean that when I go to eat food at Lotteria [A Japanese fast food restaurant] or somewhere, it is a place for young people and it is beautiful and there is good music, and being in a place like that is special and means that you are fashionable too.

(Interview July 2013)

Linh:

My friends and I go out to KFC once a month or for noodles once a week, I don't eat KFC because it is delicious, I don't think it's that good but it is very special and different, so we eat it to feel special and to feel important. I think that it is very expensive for some people but very easy for students, I think that a lot of people in Vietnam can't eat at places like KFC, but it is very popular now because it makes people feel special, it makes us feel like we are going out and having fun and eating different foods other than Vietnamese food.

I eat very traditionally except when we go out, or for special coffee like right now in a cafe, it's very popular for everyone to do. I really enjoy being in cafes because it makes me feel good to be social in places like these.

(Interview July 2013)

Nguyen:

I have many friends who take me out to eat American food. It makes me feel special because it is not something I could do when I was little, and now that I am an adult I want to do it often. I know that workers in Vietnam can't go out to eat, because it is expensive and they are poor and have to work too long in the day. People who are farmers or who are construction workers can't go out with friends during the day, but I can for lunch or supper and I can eat whatever I want because I am not a worker.

(Interview July 2013)

Tran, Linh, and Nguyen also express that eating out is a way for them to feel special, important, and fashionable, while also appearing this way to others. As Nguyen and Linh expressed, eating fast food and American food is not a luxury afforded to everyone in Vietnam. Their access to these brands marked their class status.

5.3: BRIDGING NATIONAL BORDERS WITH FOOD

One of the symbols of modernity in Vietnam cited by the participants in this research was Vietnam's increasing participation in a 'global' consumer culture. That is to say, the adaptation of foreign products including food to Vietnam. Drummond states that in Vietnam "tradition is hybridized with modernity, outside influences are not just accepted uncritically but transformed and indigenized into new ways of life and culture" (2003:14). Foreign foods are being adapted to Vietnamese society, and also serve as a means for the young women in this research to connect with other countries and cultures.

Tran:

In Vietnam it is very cool to eat at these restaurants because young people enjoy trying new things and there are many options to choose from, it is very exciting especially for students. I am very interested in American and Australian culture, and I think many people in Vietnam who are interested in these cultures like to eat food from those countries because it is one of our only connections to them, because it is very expensive and difficult to leave Vietnam.

(Interview July 2013)

Primarily I would like to highlight Tran's explanation of food as a connection to other countries. As described earlier in this thesis, the middle class in Vietnam is marked by an increase in material wealth, but also often do not have the incomes necessary to travel outside of the country as tourists. Food then becomes another way to participate in these foreign cultures for the young women interviewed, who otherwise would not be able to have this experience.

Linh:

I think my generation is very impacted by globalization. I think we are influenced a lot by people from other countries or by studying other countries. In Vietnam there are many university programs that focus on learning about other places. Those majors might study other asian countries like Korea, China, or Japan, or Australia, or America and English Literature. Because of this I think those students are very critical of Vietnam.

They think that Vietnam is a very bad place with lots of problems compared to the way other people live. They say that in other countries people aren't scammed by food sellers, or people don't raise the prices unfairly to make more money, they say that food is safer and more accessible for people. My friend from Thailand says that people in Vietnam are very mean and impatient. We in Vietnam are in contact with a lot of these people, especially young Vietnamese people because we all want to leave Vietnam and see the world and live in other places. I think because of this we think differently than the older generation who aren't educated about places outside of Vietnam, so they don't understand a lot of problems or they don't care about doing different things.

I think with food we just hear about other countries so often and are more globally aware and connected and in contact with others, so we change the way we eat because of that and have different opinions: like we think the government doesn't support its people or care about food safety, and we also really like food from other cultures because we want to feel more global and connected, so for example my friends who study about Korea always eat Korean food and prepare Korean food because they think it's really exciting and delicious and much better than food in Vietnam

(Interview July 2013)

Food for Linh was also a way of participating in global culture in a way that was unique to her generation. Vietnam's increasingly global outlook meant that young people were not only aware of and interested in other cultures, but were also looking at problems within Vietnam compared to other countries. The older generation of citizens were not afforded the same outlook for a variety of possible reasons.

The State's narratives pre-Đổi mới focused heavily on wartime ideals of national unity, with an inward focus on Vietnamese society as opposed to an outward, global, focus. It is important to note that an estimated 60 per cent of the Vietnamese population

was under 30 as of the year 2000, and this number has been increasing since this time (Drummond 2000:2378-9). This means that a large portion of the population, including Linh, do not remember the nationalistic and ideological experience of the communist state during the American war in Vietnam (2000:2379). Linh's generation is also seeing greater interaction with individuals from other countries, as Ho Chi Minh City continues to grow as a tourist destination and centre for business in Southeast Asia.

Vietnamese youth are also increasingly consuming East Asian popular culture. Because Vietnam's entertainment industry is not as developed as South Korea's, many of its movies, music, and fashions are appropriated to Vietnam (Thomas 2002:190). South Korea and Japan are two of the largest economic investors in Vietnam, and are sometimes viewed as models for new technologies and modernity to Vietnamese citizens (2002:190-191). This may be one other reason why Korean and Japanese foods are gaining popularity in Vietnam, as the women interviewed frequently state that eating a country's food is one way of participating in and feeling connected to its culture.

Thuy Anh:

I think Vietnamese young people are now influenced by what they think is happening in other countries like the U.S. The trend of eating in restaurants with friends to enjoy foreign cuisines, eating at food-courts which could be found in many malls in Vietnam is getting more and more popular. I think it is because they want to experience what they think is cool since they think it is the trend of European countries and America. Experiencing new things are always exciting. It also makes you feel fashionable in some aspects I think.

(Interview July 2013)

Nguyen:

I do not want to live in Vietnam and someday I hope to be in the United States, because of this I like eating American food because it makes me feel

connected to the U.S. I do not like eating Vietnamese food even though it is what I grew up eating because it is boring, when I do eat Vietnamese food at home it is with a knife and fork, because that's the way Americans eat. I say that I am like a banana - yellow on the outside and white on the inside, because I act and talk like an American and not like a Vietnamese.

(Interview July 2013)

Finally, Thuy Anh and Nguyen also express the desire to experience other countries through eating. As mentioned by Peters, food during French colonialism was frequently used to understand and participate in French culture. Similarly, and especially for Nguyen, eating American food is how she can feel connected to the United States. The act of eating American food brings her one step closer to her eventual goal of leaving Vietnam, and is used as a way to distance herself from Vietnamese identity.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Food in Ho Chi Minh City, as throughout the world, holds significance beyond basic sustenance. Vietnam's current struggles with food safety, inflation, and access, may influence the ways that individuals think about food daily, but do not necessarily limit its other social and cultural functions.

As demonstrated through this thesis, food for young women in Vietnam illustrates generational changes between their own lifestyles and values and those of their mother's generation. Deciding to eat outside of the home serves the practical purpose of saving them time to devote to their busy career and school-focused lives. It also displays their discomfort with the expectations placed on them as women to someday do the majority of food-related work for families of their own.

Furthermore, for these women food is a form of cultural capital. What, where, and how they eat, and the way that they behave in restaurants and cafes, including dress and topics of conversation, are all ways that they mark their membership to the middle class. Their knowledge of proper behaviour help to distinguish them from working class individuals.

Finally, food bridges national borders and allows the young women in this research to participate in other cultures. Without the ability to travel outside of Vietnam at this point in their lives, food is sometimes one of the closest connections they have to those living in other countries.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Open-air markets are still the predominant channel for food distribution in Vietnam. While I call them “open-air” they still typically exist within a structure with a roof, but do not have refrigeration and are not controlled by one governing corporation.

² 'Modern' was defined by participants in a variety of ways, in this instance it is used to describe the abandonment of eating practices attributed to traditional Vietnamese society, namely chopsticks, rice bowls, and open-air markets in favour of Western standards, utensils, and supermarkets.

³ Many of the newspaper articles cited in this thesis were orally translated into English by Vietnamese students. Because of this, there is no hard copy of the specific articles cited. In this instance I am citing my research notes.

⁴ There was no clear reliable government certification process for food safety at the time that this research was conducted. Well-known Vietnamese food brands and imported food from Europe, Australia, and the United States were most commonly what participants described when asked to explain what they meant by “certified” food.



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