

“AS TRUE AS MUM’S COOKING”

The mother, her food, and the study of Vietnamese gastronomic identity

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Abstract

In recent years, ‘*chuẩn cơm mẹ nấu*’ (as good/correct/true as mum’s cooking) has become a popular term used widely in Vietnamese communities in Vietnam and elsewhere when talking about not only food but also the state of being correct. In its original form, which derives from a social media phenomenon of being absolutely correct, the term is widely used to confirm how true/correct a thing or statement is in informal daily oral and written context. In relation to food, it has been used as a magical spell in marketing and food writing in different senses to evoke people’s nostalgia to sell their products. Within the context of Vietnamese culture and language, the mother figure and her food have been exploited to perform a heavily socio-cultural gendered duty, which happens to become the aesthetic of food, eating, knowledge, and all other life’s matters to the Vietnamese. In this paper, I explore how this figure of the mothers and their food was formed, has changed, and is now used to form and express a Vietnamese gastronomic identity, where everything must be ‘as mum’s cooking’.

Keywords

Vietnam, mother, cooking, gastronomic identity

Introduction: From an Internet Slang to a Cultural Phenomenon

During my last visit to Vietnam in late 2018, I had observed a growing number of food businesses utilising the terms *mẹ* and *má* (both mean ‘mother’) in their names. Naming a business is a serious business itself in Vietnam. As a locally born and raised southerner of Ho Chi Minh City, commonly known as Sài Gòn, I have been accustomed to the local way of food businesses being named after the founder’s name, nickname, or their kid names. Foreign names came with the blooming of the internet and international tourism. However, during my visit, names like ‘meal/rice cooked by mum Nine’ (*Cơm nhà má Chín*) or ‘delicious food by Mother Piggy’ (*Món ngon mẹ Ĩn*) had overshadowed the rest both on the streets and online.

The figure ‘mother’ was popularly found in food businesses and in daily life’s conversation. The term ‘*chuẩn cơm mẹ nấu (rồi)*’ or CCMNR—[as good/true/correct as mum’s cooking]—had been used frequently, especially by the youths. This term originates in the abbreviation form of an online slang ‘*chuẩn con mẹ nó rồi*’ (also shorten as CCMNR), which can be correctly translated to ‘as correct as of the mother’ and loosely translated (but with a more equivalent attitude) as ‘it’s fucking correct/true’. For some reason, this evolution or derivation still maintains the original meaning and core belief that ‘mothers are always right’. In 2015, a reality culinary competition show was named using the term. The show was still going on in 2020.

Honouring mothers can be found in different cultural and social forms globally. Is there anything special about the Vietnamese which has made this phenomenon phenomenal? Why and how did the term [CCMNR] adhere well in a fast-changing society like Vietnam? What can be read in this phenomenon of ‘mum’s cooking’? What does it mean in researching a wordplay phenomenon in contributing to the study of gastronomy and Vietnam? Due to limited established research and resources in the current Covid-19 pandemic, this paper is exploratory. By using a combination of primary sources (TV shows, cookbooks, literary works, and personal experience) and secondary sources (studies, newspaper, commentary papers), I attempt to answer these questions by

investigating the root of my people’s culture in relation to the mother and her cooking in Vietnam’s 4000 years of history, from the myths of the birth of our nation to the contemporary society where many would sit in front of their large-screen TV every Sunday afternoon to watch the show *As Good As Mum’s Cooking*.

It is important to lay out one gender norm that is at the core of this research. Even now, the Vietnamese in general still pertain to a poignant idea that all women, young and old, are mothers (eventually). All daughters are raised to become wives and mothers. Although many now have discarded this gender ideology, the majority still follow the doctrine. Hence, even though I acknowledge and appreciate gender diversity deeply, individuals’ freedom of choice, and the childbearing difficulty of many, this paper cannot escape the local gender norm and reality to refer to women as mothers interchangeably. This issue is critical and may be resolved in a future where we can finally find new perspectives, norms, and vocabularies for such gender freedom.

Mother Âu Cơ, the Birth of Vietnam, and the Worshipping of Mothers

Perhaps every child in Vietnam knows Mother Âu Cơ and the story of how she gave birth to the Vietnamese. In a shorter version which historian Ngô Sĩ Liên wrote in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (Complete Annals of *Đại Việt*) (2017), the story began with Mother Âu Cơ belonging to a bird fairy tribe and Father Lạc Long Quân as the leader of the dragon tribe. After their marriage, Mother Âu Cơ gave birth to a pouch of a hundred eggs. Each egg later hatched into a son. They then decided to separate to expand the land of the new tribe. Fifty sons followed Father Lạc Long Quân to the coastal area, and the rest followed Mother Âu Cơ to the mountains. Within the group led by Mother Âu Cơ, the first-born son was elected to become the first king (known as the first Hùng King) of the Bách Việt tribe – the origin of the Vietnamese. In this popular myth, the mother appears boldly not as a supporting character to the male counterpart, Father Lạc Long Quân, but as an equal where she even became the centre and played an even more critical role in forming the first tribe of the Vietnamese.

Mother Âu Cơ is not the only mythical mother of Vietnam. There are many more that have earned our respect and worship. *Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu* or the religion/cult of worshipping of Mothers has lasted in Vietnam for over a thousand years and is still strong in many regions (see Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 2011). In this religion, the older version, the Three Palaces, contains three Mother Goddesses (simply known as Mothers) that look over everything in the world: Sky Mother (*Mẫu Thượng Thiên*), Forest and Mountain Mother (*Mẫu Thượng Ngàn*), and Water Mother (*Mẫu Thoải/Thủy*). In the later one, the Four Palaces, Earth Mother (*Mẫu Địa*) is added. The mythological and pantheon rank of the cult is rather complicated and has intertwined with many other religions and ideologies that have come into contact with the Vietnamese in the regions where it is practised. Nonetheless, even when the highest position was later taken by a Chinese Buddhism’s deity—the feminine appearance of Kwanyin (*Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát* or commonly known as *Phật Bà*—Mother Buddha), it has always maintained Mothers at the top ranks of power. The worshipping of Mothers, combined with the myth and worship of Mother Âu Cơ, which started in the Lê dynasty (1428 to 1789) (Nguyễn Việt Dũng, 2020), suggests that the premodern Vietnamese mother figure was never overshadowed by her masculine male partner, the father, in shaping the nation’s ideals. The Mothers worshipping religion has survived and is still practised popularly, and the story of Mother Âu Cơ is now taught to children at a young age nationwide. This stresses the importance of the mother figure within Vietnamese culture, where the feminine and maternal image of the mother has secured her space and place of respect and superiority.

The In-House General, the Food she Cooked, and the Burden She Bore

However, it is inaccurate to claim that all women in premodern Vietnam had claimed gender equality because of the worship of Mother Âu Cơ and the Mothers of elements. Nhung Tuyet Tran (2018) points out that Vietnamese women in the premodern time (1463–1778) perceived themselves differently from the Vietnamese men in the feudal system. Tran (2018) also makes clear that not all women were treated the same. While women of the middle and upper classes had to adhere the Confucian rules of behaviours and responsibilities strictly, women of the more modest

class had somewhat enjoyed a modified version of freedom from these rules (Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang, 1973; Tran, 2018). However, all these women across all classes existed within an intangible bubble: the domestic space.

According to Đạm Phương Nữ Sĩ (or Đạm Phương) (2017), an early twentieth century feminist, women of the feudal past, regardless of classes, had been bound by the domestic space. However, it is crucial to understand that ‘domestic space’ in this sense is not the same as the one popularly known now, where only cleaning, cooking and raising children happen. The ‘domestic space’ of Vietnamese women of the past was extended to economic duty. This included household and business budgeting and operating. In his examination of the marketplace in modern and post-modern Vietnam (mostly of the northern region), Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến (2017) asserts that men had been dismissed from the marketplace in premodern and early modern times or only attended reluctantly. Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến (2017) also claims that Vietnamese women had exclusively handled pre- and early-modern Vietnam’s commerce as he calls the marketplace “the women’ commerce” (*nền thương mại đàn bà*) (p. 135). A similar argument is made by Leshkowich (2014) when examining the current sex-gender role in Bến Thành market, the central and iconic market of Ho Chi Minh city. It seems that the tradition of trading and money handling has been tied to a ‘natural’ ability that is assumed to only belong to women by not only the society practising gender norms but also women themselves. In Leshkowich’s study one clothing shop owner at Bến Thành market spoke about her husband, “He doesn’t sell as well as me. Naturally, it’s because he’s a man.” (2014: 1). Đạm Phương, using a popular expression in Vietnamese, refers to women as “the in-house generals” (*nội tướng*) (2017: 60) who master their domestic management skills to keep the families afloat.

However, this did not let women escape the kitchen. Kitchen work was one of the most important parts of being a woman during these periods (Đạm Phương, 2017). In *Đất Lề Quê Thói* (loosely translated as Country’s Customs), Nhất Thanh (2016), describes traditional Vietnamese women as adhering to a customary Confucian value which includes the four virtues: Work (*Công*), Appealed Visage (*Dung*), Speech (*Ngôn*), Ethics (*Hạnh*). Kitchen and other domestic works belong to the

Work category, the first of all four. In the past, women had been bound to the kitchen and identified by the food they cooked to nourish and please their family daily and on special occasions. Although Đạm Phương criticises the underappreciation of domestic cooking and women’s illiterate status (Đạm Phương, 2017; Nhất Thanh, 2017), which impacted on the recording of recipes during the premodern time, these women had been enjoying the freedom to create their own dishes and flavours locally and seasonally. I contend that motherly cooking creativity resulted in the birth of our diversified gastronomic regions in taste, cooking methods, and other food-related customs. In other words, the mothers are embedded in Vietnam’s mythical and religious ideology and are in charge of creating our gastronomic identity(ies).

The Local Feminism and a Futuristic View of Home Cooking

Đạm Phương (2017) criticises the lack of recipes and other gastronomic records by and for women. Influenced by both the Confucian traditions and French colonialism, with others during the colonial and postcolonial periods (Tran, 2012), Đạm Phương (2017) called for formal records and education of cooking and other domestic works for young women in the early twentieth century in the hope that it would help them to become dutiful wives, mothers, and citizens.

In 1914 Vietnam’s first cookbook, *Sách Dạy Nấu Ăn Theo Phép An-nam – và có phụ thêm đồ Quảng-đông và Cao-man* (Cooking the An-nam ways – with the addition of some Cantonese and Cambodian dishes) (Lê Hữu Công, 1914) was published in Sài Gòn (now Ho Chi Minh city). Reciting and reflecting on this cookbook, Đoàn Lê Giang (2018) points out that its target audience was middle and upper classes’ female teenagers who, at some point, would need to master cookery to enter adulthood by becoming wives and mothers, or to become the in-house generals.

This book is published to teach [female] children who have not mastered cooking yet [but were able to purchase this book]. When you have reached adulthood, you must independently be the masters of your own kitchen. Your parents cannot be your full-time helpers anymore (para.16).

It seems clear that in the early twentieth century, women were still bound in their domestic space, trained to make themselves better wives and mothers, especially in cooking. Formal education was also advocated by local feminists like Đạm Phương (2017) and Lê Hữu Công (1914). The connection between women, wives, and mothers to their kitchen and cooking had been appreciated, formalised, and strengthened by this local feminist movement.

Where Have All the Fathers Gone?

Men had adhered to a set of duties that were class-based in a similar way to how class impacted on women. Nhất Thanh (2017) points out that men within the Confucian feudal society had enjoyed freedom of movement. However, they must also perform responsibilities to both households and the nation. Men were working in agriculture, crafts, education, and government but trading belonged to women’s “domestic space” (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến, 2017; Nhất Thanh, 2017). They had also been the primary and only source of military and civil defence forces, especially those of lower-class status. As men were hardly home during these periods, women were burdened with extra duties to their households and local communities, such as protecting the dikes during floods or serving other community works within the village. This setting has been maintained throughout the twentieth century when Vietnam experienced war after war and a decade of post-war simultaneous reform agenda (1976–1986) (Tran, 2012). In 1986 when the government decided to open the country, there came a new age of renovation and globalisation (see Taylor, 2013; Goscha, 2016; Kierman, 2017).

The Heroes, the Chefs, and the Domestic Helpers

In the modern and contemporary period where new gender norms are now a mixture between Confucianism and Western ideology (Tran, 2012), food has become a new territory for men in general and fathers, in particular, to venture into with a broad range of approaches by themselves and society.

During wartime, men were praised as heroes who had fallen to protect our country from outsiders and inside conflicts. As discussed earlier, this left most women at home in charge of not only their households but the local and national communities’ trades and livelihood. Food had become a feminine and motherly space for this reason as well as other ideological thoughts that set food and cooking as feminine, trivial and ‘unmanly’ (Đạm Phương, 2017). It was not only about the food that our mothers cooked at home but also the food businesses that they were running at the marketplace to keep their families afloat. Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến (2017) points out that according to the records made by French colonisers in the mid-late nineteenth century, the majority of the marketplace’s public in the northern and middle regions was women. Men were mostly excluded from this space by their choices and social gender expectations (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến, 2017). However, if a man was found in the market, he was either following his wife/mother for some portering work or joining the market with a masculine vendor (i.e. blacksmith or hardware trade) (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến, 2017). Women once ran most, if not all, food vendors.

Noticeably, there were food vendors, even popular ones, operated by both women and men by the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, there is no official record or evaluation of such an issue. However, evidence can be found in many well-known or even celebrated literary works composed during this time (see Thạch Lam, 2015; Vương Hồng Sển, 2017; Nam Cao, 2018). These literary works assert that by the beginning of the twentieth century, food and cooking were no longer confined by women’s territory. Men had not only joined the kitchen space but also thrived. As no record had been found showing men in the household kitchen except as food vendor cooks, women were believed to remain as the source of home cooking with questionable pressure both by the society and themselves, including some critical local feminists like Đạm Phương (2017), and Lê Hữu Công (1914).

In the contemporary period, male chefs have been seen more following the popularity of many international and local cooking shows like *Yan Can Cook* (Yamada, 1982), *Iron Chef* (Koga and Matsuo, 1993), *Hell’s Kitchen* (Smith et al., 2005), and *MasterChef* (Roddam, 1990; Roddam and

Silver, 2005). Men have risen as professionals who have performed their expected (masculine) gender norms clearly through their professionalism in cooking and their foods. This is not to say that gender equality and diversity are not found in contemporary home cooking; however, it has taken a different turn and perspective.

The modern Vietnamese cooking men are portrayed as either professional chefs or domestic helpers who aid their wives and mothers in their daily food preparation routine. Unlike their professional counterpart, the domestic helpers are not asked to cook fantastic meals or replace their female partners in domestic cooking. They only play a support role delegated with miscellaneous kitchen tasks such as washing vegetables and dishes. These activities are not considered unmanly anymore but have been promoted by the media as acts of care and romance to women (see Báo Gia Đình & Xã Hội, 2020; Cafebiz, 2020). Thus, even though the professional kitchen has fallen into men’s domain, the domestic kitchen has remained chiefly within women’s authority. Some believe that this new domestic space confined women; others see that this is their traditional and creative space of femininity and motherhood as once asserted by Đạm Phương (2017). Fathers now may be cooking, but most homecooked foods still seem to remain true to their gastronomic identity of ‘mum’s cooking’.

The Reality Show and the Reality: Mum’s Cooking and Gastronomic Identity-Formation

As food is still ‘as good as mum’s cooking’, in 2015 a reality TV show adopted the term to become its name as *Chuẩn Cơm Mẹ Nấu* (As Mum’s Cooking) (Bùi Thu Thủy, 2015), which is still going on at the point of this study in 2020. ‘As mum’s cooking’ is a Vietnamese reality show adapted from the original Spanish one ‘My mum cooks better than yours’ (*Mi Madre Cocina Mejor Que La Tuya*) (Mandarina España Comunicación, 2014). Whereas the original culinary battle format stays the same, the name has evoked something different. Not ‘mum’s cooking’ is better, but all mums’ cooking is superior and righteous in its own ways. However, is it true though?

At this point, I would like to invite readers to visit my short autoethnography to employ my own experience to explore this delicious motherly phenomenon. I grew up in a 'foodie' family. My mother cooked delicious home meals and I had to come home every day from school to enjoy lunch to get back to school half an hour later. My father also cooked. He considered himself superior in preparing feasts, both Vietnamese food and other fusion dishes at the time. He hardly cooked on a daily basis but at some sorts of celebrations, a birthday or death anniversary.

As a child at school, I learned that 'women's responsibility' was to cook and to manage the household, which was why we called them the in-house generals who had authority over such domestic matters. Cooking, in the domestic sense, was meant for girls only. Many were surprised and gave compliments when I cooked back then. However, complimenting a cooking boy was not about encouraging one who broke the norm for his own and society's sake but about becoming a professional and aiding a future wife and family. This gender doctrine, without a doubt, had imprinted the 'traditional' gender ideology of what to expect from a biological boy or girl to perform their gender accordingly.

When I started as a chef a decade ago, I had already been fed with my mother's cooking skills and techniques. Surprisingly, my father, who seemed to enjoy cooking for sport, had little effect on how I had known food. Reflecting on this issue, I believe that is because of how he had performed his masculinity in cooking and the kitchen: vocal, demanding, and uncontrolled temper. He was a home version of Gordon Ramsay, which scared the little me away from his cooking time. In contrast, my mother and grandmother had always been patient with my sisters and me as we hung around the kitchen table when they were sautéing vegetables or making soup.

As a professional chef, I was trained and have experience with different cooking techniques. However, surprisingly enough, when it comes to cooking at home, I have found myself taking refuge with my mother's home-cook techniques and recipes countless times. Interestingly, flatting with other Vietnamese from time to time, I have also found that we all cook one dish differently using

our own mothers' technique. One might have learned it from their mother the way I did, hanging around the kitchen. Others have telephoned their mums as they cook. Regardless of the results, all of our ways are authentic. They are authentic to the one that uses them. They are authentic to their mothers and probably their mother's mothers who had passed it down to them without even knowing the unique trait. I have learned in food studies that there is hardly any wrong way to cook, especially when it comes to home meals. Our 'always-right' mother's cooking is what has formed our ways of perceiving, understanding, performing, and educating food to ourselves and others. In other words, it is our identities, or our flavours, different in detail but united by our mother's food. As the name of the reality television show attests, it is not 'my mum cooks better than yours', but all mother's cooking is superior, authentic, and righteous in their own ways.

Conclusion: Towards a Study of a (Possible) Contemporary Gastronomic Identity of Vietnam

In an attempt to understand a contemporary phenomenon of wordplay in the Vietnamese language which has turned into a popular cultural expression of mothers and food, this study has laid the foundation for further academic and cultural inquiries. It has asked the question of why 'mum's cooking' has become so important to the Vietnamese to the point that the fast-changing wordplay of CCMNR or "*Chuẩn Con Mẹ Nó Rồi*" (loosely translated as 'damn right') now underpins the new expression of "*Chuẩn Cơm Mẹ Nấu Rồi*" (as correct/true/good as mum's cooking). The new expression has manifested in society in many ways that have highlighted the importance of homecooked food by mothers, which this study argues to be the core and formation of a (possible) Vietnamese gastronomic identity. This study has tried to trace the history of the mother figure in Vietnam's mystical stories of nation-building, ancient religion, and in the premodern, early modern and contemporary times. The legacy of the mothers and their food in Vietnamese culture and society have played an important role in the wordplay phenomenon but also the formation of our gastronomic identity beyond the popularity of certain national foods and pride like *phở* (beef noodle) or *bánh mì* (Vietnamese baguette).

However, at the point of this study, there has been limited robust and thorough local (Vietnam) or international resources on the issues of gender and food, which calls for further research to be done. These future studies can help extend the understanding of Vietnamese food, nation, gender norms, and gastronomic identity. I believe that to the Vietnamese most of these topics are being taken for granted as people have assumed them as part of our ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ without thorough understanding and examination.

Studies of Vietnam are thriving. However, it is mostly of issues like historical events, war trauma, and economy. I believe a gastronomic branch will benefit this growth for gastronomy, not only the study of food, the trivial, basic, but most important element of humans’ life but the relationships between it and other matters in life through history and today (Santich, 2007).

Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

An earlier version of this paper was presented under the name “As mom’s cooking: the taste of home and the formation of Vietnamese identity” at The 23rd Symposium of Australian Gastronomy (2020).

This study has kept the Vietnamese name of authors and others in their original form, except those who have already published in English and followed the English convention. This is done to aid readers in further research as many Vietnamese share the same or similar names, which should be appropriately acknowledged and with respect in its original form when possible.

Translation in this study was done by me, the author, unless stated otherwise.

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