

TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE CUISINE - A VIVID EXPRESSION OF THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Within the close relationship between humans and nature, the Vietnamese people's ways of interacting with the natural environment have created distinctive cultural values. Among these, traditional Vietnamese cuisine plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of the nation. The cultural identity embodied in traditional cuisine serves as a vivid expression of the Vietnamese people's relationship with the natural environment.

Keyword: *Culinary culture, traditional cuisine, natural environment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cuisine is one of the most vivid and profound expressions of Vietnamese national culture. Each dish, cooking method and dining style reflects the history, living environment, soul and cultural identity of the Vietnamese people. It vividly represents the cultural way Vietnamese people interact with the natural environment, shown through their use of natural resources in food preparation and their adaptation of dishes to suit the country's weather and climate conditions. This article focuses on analyzing the liveliness of the Vietnamese people's interaction with the natural environment through the concepts and characteristics of traditional Vietnamese culinary culture.

2. CONTENT

2.1. The Vietnamese Concept of Cuisine

According to cultural researcher Phan Ngoc, traditional Vietnamese cuisine is "a synthesis of eating, cooking and dining habits that have developed throughout history, deeply imprinted with the mindset of wet-rice agriculture." It represents the crystallization of history, geography, climate and the national spirit, clearly reflecting the Vietnamese lifestyle that values emotions, delicacy and harmony. Cuisine not only satisfies the need for sustenance but also embodies the Vietnamese philosophy of life, which values balance, community and gratitude toward nature. It has been formed and passed down through generations, becoming an important part

of national culture, shaping a unique cultural identity and nurturing both the body and soul of the Vietnamese people over time. The influence of the wet-rice agricultural mindset and the way Vietnamese people interact with the natural environment are reflected in their culinary philosophy, shown through the following aspects:

First, cuisine is associated with the philosophy of life. For Vietnamese people, eating and drinking are not merely biological activities but also express cultural and philosophical values. Each dish, eating style and dining habit reflects how the Vietnamese perceive the world, human relationships and the connection between individuals and the community, as well as between humans and nature.

This philosophy emphasizes harmony in accordance with the principles of yin and yang and the five elements. The Vietnamese believe that a good meal must achieve balance among different tastes and sensations, between clarity and richness, softness and crispness and between raw and cooked foods. For example, when eating seafood, which is considered "cool," people often combine it with "warm" ingredients such as ginger, garlic or chili to maintain balance. This is not only a matter of taste but also a way to regulate the body, reflecting both an adaptive response to nature and the link between cuisine and traditional medicine.

Another important philosophy is the appreciation of affection and moral values. Unlike many

cultures where eating is viewed as an individual act, the Vietnamese place great emphasis on emotional connection and sharing during meals. The family meal is a space that connects generations, where people eat together, talk, teach and preserve traditions. A meal is not only a time to eat but also a way to express family love, respect and filial piety.

A further guiding idea is living in harmony with nature. Vietnamese people favor seasonal foods, choosing cooling dishes in the summer and warming dishes in the winter. With a deep understanding of seasonal patterns, climate and soil, they have learned to live in balance with nature, using what the environment provides to adapt to it. This philosophy of harmony with nature helps maintain health and creates balance in both material and spiritual life.

Second, cuisine is associated with community. For the Vietnamese, eating and drinking are not simply individual acts for survival but are social and cultural phenomena rich in meaning. Shared meals are a distinctive feature of Vietnamese spiritual life, where values of sharing, togetherness, respect for hierarchy and family ethics are naturally expressed through daily meals, communal feasts and festivals.

Vietnamese people regard family meals as a bond between the household and the community. The image of family members gathering around a tray of food symbolizes unity and reflects the emotional and community-oriented lifestyle of the Vietnamese. Unlike Western dining, where each person has an individual plate, Vietnamese people share food from a common tray, offering food to one another. "Sweet soup and fragrant rice, the whole family eats together; the blessing lasts for generations." Meals bring family members together after a day's work, offering time for parents to teach manners, for grandparents to tell stories and for traditions to be passed down. Meals nurture not only the body but also family relationships, creating strong bonds between generations.

In each meal, the practice of inviting others to eat is a community-oriented ritual that shows respect, affection and humility. The Vietnamese saying "A greeting is worth more than a feast" reflects the importance of politeness and harmony. Before eating, people customarily invite elders and family members to join the meal. A simple phrase such as

"Please, grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, let's eat" demonstrates respect and warmth within the family or community. This small gesture embodies the Vietnamese way of living together, valuing hierarchy, etiquette and harmony in social interaction. Unlike some Western cultures that emphasize individualism, Vietnamese dining culture is a social process where individuals learn how to live within a community, follow social norms and strengthen collective bonds.

Third, cuisine is associated with customs and beliefs. For the Vietnamese, food goes beyond physical nourishment; it reflects spiritual beliefs and collective views on life. Eating is a form of communication that connects individuals with the community and not only with the living but also with ancestors and deities. The Vietnamese believe that "worship brings blessings and observance brings peace," so meals during festivals, New Year celebrations and ancestral anniversaries serve as bridges linking family members, neighbors and generations. Offering trays of food symbolize the connection between the living and the spiritual world.

In life-cycle rituals, food holds symbolic meanings that reflect Vietnamese views on life and death. In weddings, offerings such as betel leaves, areca nuts, green rice cakes and husband-and-wife cakes are not only food items but also symbols of love, faithfulness and harmony. In funerals, dishes like rice balls, boiled eggs and porridge express sympathy and remembrance for the deceased. These examples show that food functions as a language through which people convey beliefs about life, death and the link between the human and spiritual worlds.

In traditional festivals and folk beliefs, during the Lunar New Year, Chung Cake and Tet Cake symbolize heaven and earth and are indispensable offerings on the ancestral altar. During the Cold Food Festival on the third day of the third lunar month, people prepare Troi Cake and Chay Cake to honor their ancestors and express gratitude to their roots. At communal house and village festivals, offering trays to deities are prepared according to strict customs, often including boiled chicken, sticky rice, rice wine and sweet soup. These dishes are considered sacred; they are not simply for eating but serve as offerings for peace and blessings.

In spiritual beliefs, Vietnamese people often have specific choices and taboos related to food during festivals or important occasions in order to attract good fortune and avoid misfortune. For example, during Tet, people avoid certain foods such as squid, which is believed to bring bad luck or duck, associated with separation. On the other hand, they choose foods with positive meanings such as pickled onions, chicken and bamboo shoot soup. In many regions, sticky rice and boiled chicken are offered when building a new house or opening a new business to pray for good luck. These practices reflect the belief that food can influence fate, health and human well-being.

These beliefs affirm the role of cuisine as an important cultural element that reflects national identity. Eating is therefore elevated to the level of culinary culture, where Vietnamese people express core values such as morality, harmony, hospitality and community spirit. Traditional Vietnamese culinary culture has developed unique and enduring characteristics over time, reflecting both natural and social conditions while expressing the depth of Vietnamese philosophy of life. These characteristics are not only found in dishes, cooking methods or tastes but also in the way Vietnamese people perceive organize and behave in their eating practices, thereby shaping the distinctive identity of Vietnamese culinary culture within the treasure of world culture.

2.2. Cultural Characteristics of Vietnamese Cuisine

The cultural characteristics of Vietnamese cuisine are reflected in its ingredients. One of the most distinctive features of traditional Vietnamese cuisine lies in the selection and use of ingredients. Vietnam is located in a tropical monsoon region with fertile soil and a diverse ecosystem, which provides an abundant source of culinary materials. From rice, vegetables and herbal spices to ingredients from rivers, the sea and farmlands, all contribute to creating the unique and rich flavor identity of traditional Vietnamese cuisine.

Vietnam has long been known as the “civilization of wet rice.” The Vietnamese regard the rice grain as the “pearl of heaven,” and it has always been the primary ingredient in their cuisine. Rice is not only the staple food but also the foundation of countless traditional dishes such as steamed rice, sticky rice, Chung cake, Tet cake, Cuon Cake and noodles. In addition to rice, Vietnamese people

have used corn, sweet potatoes and cassava as alternative food sources, especially during difficult historical periods. This demonstrates flexibility and adaptability in the Vietnamese approach to food ingredients.

Following grains, green vegetables, roots and fresh herbs are essential elements that represent the Vietnamese preference for a “green diet.” A traditional meal typically includes rice, vegetables and fish and rarely lacks soup or boiled greens. Vietnamese people have a custom of using aromatic herbs such as basil, cilantro, perilla, Vietnamese balm and fish mint not only to enhance flavor but also to maintain yin-yang balance within the body.

Vietnamese people consume less red meat than Westerners, preferring pork, chicken and duck, which are commonly prepared as boiled, braised or roasted dishes. These meats are not only popular but also carry ceremonial significance in ancestral worship and wedding rituals. Thanks to an extensive river system and a long coastline, fish and seafood are familiar ingredients, used in many dishes. Fish sauce, a specialty made from fermented fish, is considered the “soul” of Vietnamese cuisine.

The Vietnamese highly value seasonings such as onion, garlic, ginger, pepper, chili, lime and fermented rice. These herbal ingredients not only create distinctive flavors but are also associated with traditional medicine, serving both culinary and health purposes. Their use reflects not only the ability to make use of natural resources but also to adapt to the tropical monsoon climate. Moreover, seasonings vary across regions, contributing to the unique cultural identity of each area.

Thus, in terms of ingredients, Vietnamese cuisine reflects both the richness of nature and the people’s flexibility in adapting to it. The Vietnamese both utilize and respond to natural conditions such as weather and climate. These ingredients have become the soul of traditional Vietnamese cuisine, setting it apart from other culinary cultures in the region and the world.

The cultural characteristics of Vietnamese cuisine are also reflected in its methods of preparation. If ingredients are considered the “raw materials,” then cooking methods represent the Vietnamese people’s creative art in transforming diverse natural products into dishes that embody the

nation's soul and identity. In traditional Vietnamese cuisine, cooking methods express delicacy, skillfulness and a philosophy of harmony. Vietnamese cooking is not as elaborate as Chinese cuisine and does not rely heavily on butter or frying as in Western cuisine; instead, it emphasizes lightness, balance and the preservation of the natural flavors of ingredients.

The cooking techniques in Vietnam are rich, diverse and refined to the level of artistry. Each method is associated with natural conditions, available ingredients and traditional tastes, aiming to retain the original flavor while ensuring nutritional value. Vietnamese cooking also focuses on simplicity and efficiency, saving time yet maintaining freshness and subtlety. In addition, many preparation methods allow food to be preserved for long periods while still ensuring safety and quality.

A unique feature of traditional Vietnamese cooking is the combination of various ingredients in a single dish. Each dish is a delicate harmony of multiple elements, creating the distinctive character of Vietnamese culinary culture. It can be said that cooking methods are the soul of Vietnamese cuisine, fully reflecting the national character and way of life - simple yet refined, rustic yet elegant, close to nature yet deeply philosophical in expressing the Vietnamese outlook on life.

The cultural characteristics of Vietnamese cuisine are also expressed through the use of spices. Spices are an essential element of Vietnamese cooking. They are not only used to enhance the flavor of dishes but also reflect the Vietnamese philosophy of life and aesthetic sense through the harmony of aroma, taste and color. The flavors of salty, sweet, sour, spicy and bitter are skillfully combined to suit each dish, making Vietnamese cuisine more appealing and diverse. The variety of regional cultures has led to a perfect blend between natural and processed seasonings.

In addition, spices help preserve food and prevent spoilage in Vietnam's tropical monsoon climate. Seasonings such as fish sauce, salt, pepper, cinnamon and star anise are often used in braised or stewed dishes to enhance flavor and extend shelf life.

Spices in Vietnamese cuisine are not only flavor enhancers but also carry deep cultural, traditional and spiritual meanings. Each spice plays a specific

role in creating harmony and balance within dishes, while also expressing the lifestyle and identity of the Vietnamese people. The diversity of Vietnamese spices reflects the sophistication, meticulousness and creativity in food preparation, contributing to the distinctive identity of Vietnamese culinary culture and representing a way of adapting to the natural environment.

The cultural characteristics of Vietnamese cuisine are also reflected in eating practices. For the Vietnamese, eating is not merely the act of enjoying food but an art that connects people with one another and with nature. Concepts of communication, etiquette, interaction between diners and dishes and respect for ingredients all contribute to the unique identity of Vietnamese culinary culture.

One of the most distinctive features of Vietnamese dining is the habit of eating together. This is clearly seen in family meals, Lunar New Year feasts and communal festival banquets. During meals, all dishes are placed on a shared tray, creating a warm and intimate atmosphere. This habit stems from the strong sense of family values, viewing mealtime as an opportunity for family members to gather, share joy and sorrow and strengthen emotional bonds.

The sophistication of Vietnamese eating customs is also shown in the use of utensils. Traditionally, Vietnamese people use only one eating tool—the pair of chopsticks. The practice of using chopsticks is not only practical but also reflects a philosophy of life. A pair of chopsticks symbolizes marital harmony, as expressed in the saying “husband and wife are like a pair of chopsticks.” A bundle of chopsticks represents unity and the spirit of community.

Another characteristic of Vietnamese eating habits is the practice of eating slowly and chewing thoroughly. This not only aids digestion but also expresses respect for the food and for health. Eating slowly allows diners to fully appreciate the flavors of each dish and to feel the affection and care embodied in the meal.

These characteristics of Vietnamese cuisine reveal the refinement in eating manners, the harmony in cooking and the deep sense of community in the culture of dining. Traditional Vietnamese cuisine is a multifaceted cultural whole that integrates material and spiritual values, tradition and creativity, individuality and collectivity, humanity

and nature. This is what defines the distinctive identity of traditional Vietnamese cuisine.

3. CONCLUSION

Research on traditional Vietnamese cuisine provides a deeper understanding of the nation's cultural identity and the culinary values of the Vietnamese people. These values have been shaped and refined over thousands of years of history and also represent spiritual depth and the art of human interaction with nature, the community and oneself. Traditional Vietnamese cuisine is a vivid reflection of the cultural relationship between people and the natural environment. It is a valuable heritage that should be preserved and promoted in the present and for future generations.

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