Changing food choices in a changing city: Vietnamese youth in contemporary Hanoi

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the changing society and how the urban setting affects how and where people spend their time socializing and eating. The city of Hanoi has undergone changes, which have had an impact on people’s movements, consumption choices and street traders’ livelihood in the city. There are also issues with housing that have arisen, mainly because the city’s expanding growth. The youth of today are living in quite a different social context society than their parents and especially grandparents, due to economic reforms that have rapidly increased the foreign investment and flow of information from the outside world. This has led to some diverging and sometimes conflicting opinions arising from people of different ages possibly having other ideals and values than their parents and grandparents. The state ideals and global influences also affect people’s behaviour and opinions and food choices. I will describe the food scene and changes that have happened to it, due to foreign influences and trade. This study is mainly based on secondary sources, combined with a case study of young people’s eating out food choices based upon my own fieldwork in Hanoi, Vietnam from February to April, 2013. I will situate and contextualize what part food plays for the youths and exploring the difference between street food and fast food and why people would choose one over the other.

Key words: Youth, Food, street food, fast food, public space, globalization, Vietnam, Hanoi.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research on Vietnam has largely focused on issues related to the shift towards a market economy that gradually started to take place in the 1980’s and officially in 1986. Studies of the role of the state and its relation to the civil society have emerged in the last decades. There is also quite much material about agriculture and mainly rice cultivation and a growing interest in issues related to food safety. Issues regarding the space or lack of it, and its use in the quickly growing big cities in Vietnam have been discussed by e.g. David Koh (2008), Lisa Drummond (2008) and Catherine Earl (2010). Research on street traders in the city have showed how the movements of some people in the city can be restricted and affected by state ideas about how cities should look like (e.g. Endres 2013, Turner 2012). Meanwhile, there has not been much written about food choices and about youth and globalization in Vietnam. This thesis will try to complement the recent research mentioned and includes a case study of the eating out choices of the youth and addresses how the choice of place can be related to wider contexts in the society, such as issues of modernity and a generational change.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

Food plays an important part in the society in Vietnam. The country is developing at a fast rate, which is attracting new multinational restaurants and new food influences are being introduced to the country. These processes have been increasingly active in the last 10 years.

I wanted to find out how the overall food setting looks like in Hanoi and what the young population think about the increasing amount of Western-style fast food restaurants and how they compare with the “traditional” food culture. By traditional food culture I mean the most common food eaten in the country, which is considered ‘native’ and have been eaten for over 60 years. While the traditional food is also influenced from abroad, it consists almost only of local ingredients and is produced with old cooking techniques. I had to have another concept of tradition to fit the history of foreign influences to the country. “Non-traditional food” would roughly be considered as the food that have mainly started to appear in Vietnam after the gradual economic reforms Đổi Mới that officially started in 1986. The food is almost exclusively of foreign origin, such as Western-style fast food restaurants and e.g. pasta and pizza.
One of the reasons why I decided to focus on the younger populations opinions is that over half of the population is under 26 years old (Hayton 2010:2). Considering that around half of the population was born after the economic reforms that were introduced in the second half of the 1980s, they are living in quite a different society and economy than their parents and grandparents and therefore it was interesting to see how the different experiences affected people’s opinions. King and Nguyen (2008:5) write about the increasing urban middle class youth and about modernity which has a lot to do with consumption which is very connected to status, image construction and the daily experience of class. Due to the opening of the economy and the introduction of private industry there has been a widening inequality between the people (Hayton 2010:24).

I’m going to look at different actors in the food space, from street traders and markets, to street food restaurants and fast food restaurants and describe their position in the city of Hanoi. The configuration of space in the city, especially the availability of public space affects people’s movements and ways of socialization and consumption (incl. food consumption). The rapidly changing society and economic reforms have led to the opening of more shops, cafés and restaurants and people are more connected with the global world than they were before. The youth’s lives look quite different than their parents or grandparents did and they can find it difficult to communicate with each other as there are different ideas and habits that are valued today than there were before. I will also look at the different players in the food industry to provide a background of the situation in the situation as well as a description of the food that people eat. I will use Bourdieu’s Practice Theory (1972) to try and explain this generational gap. My main research question is to see how, space, price, conceptions of “modernity” have influenced the urban youth’s food choices. The concept of modernity has been much discussed and problematized in anthropology. As for my use of the concept I would agree with the concept of multiple modernities as described by Thomassen (2012):

“Multiple modernities keep unfolding owing to culture contact and the spread of ideas. Multiple modernities can be conceived as the various local ways in which global influences are incorporated and transformed, and how, for example, Western capitalism transforms and is transformed by local societies” (Thomassen 2012:170).

It’s important to point out how multiple modernities can influence each other in multi-directional flows. To make my definition more precise, I would agree with Hall that:

“Essential to the idea of modernity is the idea that everything is destined to be speeded up,
dissolved, displaced, transformed, reshaped” (Hall 1996:17). I would argue that the concept of modernity is more susceptible to transformation and reshaping in the long run, however it shouldn’t be considered as an exact opposite of tradition as they both influence each other. More specifically, how does the Vietnamese ‘traditional influences’, much influenced by Confucianism and their Communism and the foreign, global capitalist influences interact? What role does the state have in those developments? The overall theme of the thesis would be tradition and change and the interplay of them both.

1.2 OUTLINE OF THESIS

After the methods section, I will start with a historic background of the country in chapter 2 and then move on to discussing the city of Hanoi in chapter 3 and I will continue with writing about housing and the informal nature of it and continue with looking at public space and how it affects people’s movements in the city. After this I will have the theory section in chapter 4 and discuss how the changes in society and the increased globalization have affected people and their ideas and consumption habits. In chapter 5, I will look at how the state influences people. In chapter 6 I’ll look at the food culture and food trade move on to a short food history which will explain how some popular dishes or food items emerged and what influenced them. In chapter 7, I’ll focus on street food trade and the informal economy. In chapter 8, I’ll tell about my observations in street food and fast food restaurants. Chapter 9 focuses on the interviews and questionnaire results that I got from my informants, for the case study, regarding their habits and preferences in eating outside home. In chapter 10 I will draw some comparisons with street food and fast food and discuss, based on my informants opinions, how it might look in the future.
2. METHODS

“I believe that we social anthropologists are like the medieval Ptolemaic astronomers; we spend our time trying to fit the facts of the objective world into the framework of a set of concepts which have been developed a priori instead of from observation” (Leach 1961:26)

I think this is a valuable insight from half a century ago. While it can certainly be useful to go to the field having certain theories in mind, it might also be harmful as it can limit your view and you might be looking tenuously for things that fit your theory rather than trying to understand what you saw under its own terms, without having any predetermined connections to other factors. I don’t think it’s always beneficial to have done a considerable amount of research, especially studying theories in beforehand about the phenomenon one is going to research, as that could limit one’s perspective or steer it in a direction, where one might not have gone without that knowledge in beforehand. I believe it’s better to go into a field and observe and analyze and describe the situation as it seems for the observer and interviewer and then later do more research to see what other people have concluded.

My thesis draws primarily on secondary material, namely library research and I have also conducted a case study with interviews and observations to gain knowledge of young people’s opinions about issues mostly relating to fast food and street food. I initially intended to limit my study to fast food restaurants in urban Vietnam, thinking that its existence was bound to lead to quite similar answers as I would get back home, except more excitement as it’s a clearly newer ‘phenomenon’ in Vietnam than in Sweden, but it soon became apparent that the situation was quite different and that I had to develop different questions and to change my framework to focus much more on street food, because many of the fast food restaurants didn’t have so many customers and also because people frequented them more rarely than what I had initially expected.

“The methodological contribution of participant observation is that it provides ethnographers insights into practices and meanings as they unfold. It also allows for obtaining non-elicited data – conversations as they occur, but also activities, embodiments, movements through space, and built environments” (Horst & Miller 2012:55).

I agree with Horst & Miller as I think that participant observation can help to obtain information and to observe nuances that would be more difficult if not impossible to become aware of when merely statically observing a happening. The participant aspect gives information about movements, and its relation to the space, the sense of touch and possibly
speech which add important elements to analysing and hopefully understanding phenomenon better. I also wanted to see how people behave and what they do when in the eating environment, regardless if it was on the street or in the fast food restaurant.

The interviews would give me information of what people think or at least they want to express to me and that combined with the observation could shed light on how people actually behaved and what they did, and whether that corresponded to what they said they do. It has to be remembered that people can say different (and conflicting) things to different people, partly judging on what they think the recipient wants to hear, this happens more likely if it’s someone they are not acquainted with. It’s rarely useful to make a generalization, based on a limited amount of replies.

“trying to distinguish who fits into what identity often obscures the most interesting part of food studies, which is that people can make different food choices within the same day, or even the same meal. When we pin people to cookbooks on their shelves or the menu at their wedding banquet, as if labelling representatives of a national or ethnic identity, we miss an opportunity to think about how food fits into real people’s lives”(Peters 2012:5).

Peters (2012) brings up an important point, as it can be very hard to know why and how often people go to a certain place, if you’re only observing them, as it can happen that this is the only time of the year that they are in the location and people may want to try out other foods, mainly out of curiosity and don’t necessarily have to give any more thought to the process of choosing something. This leads to the importance of also interviewing people about their choices.

2.1 Location/Environment

I was staying in four different hostels in Hanoi, however I stayed the majority of the time in the same one, in the outskirts of the Old Quarter, on the Hang Gá Street. The Old Quarter is a very lively area, with lots of traffic throughout the day and into the evening, through its narrow streets. There was a lot of beeping sounds from the scooters and motorbikes. There are different smells that you experience when you walk, which vary a lot from lovely food dishes, to gas and the notorious pungent smell of the durian fruit by the fruit stands. You can also see people selling various things, ranging from painting frames, to colourful saddle cushions, mannequins, clothes, mirrors and stationary kits.

The Old Quarter has streets named after a certain business, which stems from older days when people working with the same handicraft and profession worked right by each other on
the same street. This is still very visible today, there are many streets or stretches of streets that have many stalls and shops of the same things right beside each other.

2.2 Field

I mainly carried out my interviews in central Hanoi; in cafés, in a park, outside sitting down and while eating street food. I chose public places for my interviews as I felt that it was the most comfortable and easy to access place for the informants and me. I chose Hanoi as a base for my visit, as the city has only a short history of foreign-style fast food restaurants and there are clearly fewer fast food restaurants and chains than in the other major city in the country, in Hồ Chí Minh City. I also visited Hồ Chí Minh City and interviewed six people there and did a few observations there to be able to see how it looked in the other end of the country with more Western fast food restaurants and with a longer history of them. Those results will only play a secondary role, in showing how different the situation is compared to Hanoi, which I will mainly focus on.

2.3 Informants

Age range of the informants was 19 to 30 years, median was 21 years. Mean age was 22 in Hanoi and in Hồ Chí Minh City. I wanted to have a rather balanced amount regarding the gender informants as well as people between the ages of 18-25, which worked out quite well, however two of my informants were 25-30 year olds. There are also a bit more women than men, however it seems that clearly more women than men study languages (as told by three informants) and thus have it easier or are more willing to speak English. For the interviews there were 20 females and 7 males and then I also made a questionnaire which I sent to people who wanted to participate, which was filled by 4 females and 1 male. All of the informants I interviewed in Hanoi were living in the city. A majority of them were born elsewhere, most often up to three hours away from Hanoi and had moved to Hanoi within the last 10 years with their parents, or on their own to study (and sometimes also to work) in the city.

Two people had lived abroad, one in the US for studying for two years; one in Italy; Apart from them few had travelled abroad; one in the US; one in UK; one in Russia; one in Singapore; one in South Korea. Because of this very few had experiences of fast food places in other countries and couldn’t compare them to those in Vietnam.
2.4 Interviews

My 27 interviews were mostly semi-structured, because I didn’t want to lead the interview too much. I always got through the same questions and topics, however the order of them varied from time to time and it often happened that there were different follow-up questions in some interviews, depending on what the informant replied. Many of the interviews developed to resemble a rather free flowing conversation, which I felt was a good thing, as it generally made the informant feel more relaxed and say what she/he wanted. I found informants, through a department colleague, and through a fellow Master student from my class, who had visited Hanoi and through an English website about Hanoi, where it was possible to put up an announcement of asking volunteers for an interview. I also found some informants through a website called Couchsurfing and through my Vietnamese language teacher and some of the informants later asked their friends and so the amount increased.

I used a recorder and a small notebook to write down observations in the interview situation and to write down what people have told me, when the use of a recorder wasn’t possible. I also kept a diary to assist me in keeping track of what I did each day and how I was feeling.

My interviews were mainly carried out in English, except for eight of them which were conducted with the help of the Vietnamese language teacher, working as an interpreter. I also interviewed a person twice, who brought along a few friends and the informant was (if necessary) translating my questions to them, so I was a bit lucky in getting “bonus” group interviews or shorter discussion that I didn’t plan. There was were also a few occasions when there were more people that tagged along somebody I interviewed without me knowing it in beforehand and I got some data from those people, however it was more like comments or few utterings of agreement or disagreement, than a proper discussion or interview.

One small problem I noticed occurring a few times is that the interview became too much like a discussion about differences in culture and the informant asked me questions and I was perhaps a bit too eager to talk about them and myself as well. I think it would’ve been a bit better if those “off-topic” talks could have taken place after the actual interview, but they seemed to blur together and I guess I wasn’t strict enough to interrupt the informant and trying to only stick to the topic. However I was also feeling that it’s good to be a bit open and tell about yourself and your country, as it might (and also did) make the situation more relaxed and comfortable for the informant as well.
Hopefully this openness would help to also make the informant feel freer to talk and tell more about her/his thoughts, as only talking strict “business” as in thesis questions, could also be(come) a bit monotonous and ‘technical’. It was also a bit difficult to find people to interview and the English level of the informants varied greatly, a few told me that they have good English (by e-mail) and when I met them I realized it was actually weak and my questions were met pretty much only by smiles and yes, no and confused faces.

Apart from interviews, observations and participant observation were important methods of collecting data, as it allowed me to experience and see how people act and behave in the fast food restaurant and street environments. I feel like my presence as a researcher, when only observing, was kept quite under the radar, which was my intention, in order to not create unnecessary attention which could lead people to behave in different ways than they normally would. I do have to say that after spending around 40 minutes in the restaurants on my own, I did begin to feel a bit uncomfortable. A few times I observed as I was taking notes and looking around that I’m not used to spend longer times in those kind of venues. My role as an interviewer was dealt with in quite similar ways. Many people seemingly saw me as somebody who wanted to ask some questions, I did not really encounter any suspiciousness about my task. All in all my exoticness as a European, Western person, might’ve helped me in evoking interest for people to participate in an interview or discussion. The power balance in the interviews was quite neutral in general, which I’m very happy about. However, at a few times it felt like people looked up a bit to me, which did not always feel so comfortable at that moment. I think it can be that they were just being nice and courteous and were happy that foreign people (me) were interested to hear what they wanted to say.

I’m pretty sure that being around the same-age as the informants definitely helped and my topic or questions were not private or sensitive. My role in the ‘society’ and city was quite different, even if my informants didn’t mention it, I felt was mainly seen as yet another white, Western, ‘rich’ tourist, which is a ‘role’ I’m not comfortable in, yet I think it’s something which is hard to change during a short visit of just two months with little knowledge of the Vietnamese language.
3. BACKGROUND

I will start with a brief historical background of Vietnam to show how contact with other countries affected the society and politics of the country. The influences of different habits and traditions have also had an impact in shaping the food and developing new dishes which I will discuss more in detail in chapter 6.

3.1 Chinese Confucian impact

About 2000 years ago the area that we now refer to Vietnam was inhabited by the Funanese in the south, by the Chams in the central area and by the Kinh in the North. The Vietnamese culture and language was related to the Thais and the Mon-Khmers who lived by the Red River delta. In the year 111 BC the Chinese took control over the area and remained for 1000 years. There were religious and commercial contacts between India and China due to the sea route, which affected the Vietnamese. However, the Chinese rule had a lasting Confucian impact on the culture and institutions of Vietnam. After the independence from China in AD 939 the Vietnamese moved south into areas that had previously been controlled by two very Indianized states: Champa in the central region and today’s Cambodia in the very south and to the southwest (Brissenden: 2007:486). By the 17th Century, Chinese-influenced Mahayana Buddhism had been assimilated together with the Chinese Confucian and Taoist ethics to the Vietnamese culture (Yen Ho 1995:3).

3.2 Muslim traders

In addition to neighbours, especially the Chinese, traders from far-away countries affected the Kinh culture, especially on coastal areas. There was a vibrant trade zone in the area north from Central Vietnam including the Hainan Island and especially the Tonkin Gulf coast and the area close to the Chinese border and southern coast until the 15th Century, which was popular for Muslim traders, coming the Middle East and from South Asia. This trade affected habits and culture in Vietnam. The traditional white festive cotton gown mostly worn by women in Vietnam is told to been worn the first time by a senior ruler around 1268, and it originates likely from a South and Central Asian custom of wearing white colour for celebrations (Li 2006:91). These Muslim connections have actively been removed from the history written by Confucian historians as the links would be incoherent and add confusion to the creation of an ideological and monoracial national story (ibid: 2006:94). Traders returned with Vietnamese goods. There are evidences of Vietnamese ceramics being exported to
Persia, Turkey and Egypt in the 14th Century, and there were also glazed tiles made for eastern Java in the Hải Dương area, around 58km from Hanoi towards the coastal city of Hải Phòng which is around 45km away. There are still many handicraft traders: dyers, leather shoemakers, carpenters, builders, goldsmiths, wood carvers etc. in the Old Quarter of Hanoi who have discovered to have origins to Hải Dương (Li 2006: 97).

3.3 French colonialism

There were increasing amounts of French Catholic missionaries visiting Vietnam, and by the first half of the 19th century their presence had gained other French interests as well. The French wanted to get involved in trade with China and thought they could do it by entering through Vietnam. The French’s plan didn’t properly work out as there were conflicts with the trade ambitions of England, Russia, Germany and the United States. Despite this, by 1862 the southern part of the country became a French colony, and by 1884 the whole current Vietnam country, which was formed by three separate kingdoms were incorporated into a French colony. During the colonial period the Chinese immigration to Vietnam grew considerably, e.g. there were three times more Chinese in 1911 than there had been in 1880 in the country (Peters 2012:130). The opinions of the French colonialism varied, some of the elite accepted a temporary colonization as they thought it could help the development of economic, political and cultural forms, while others saw the French as the main enemy, which rule should be resisted in all ways, even if it did entail resorting to violence (Peters 2012:132). The French were defeated when the communist DRV started to rule northern Vietnam in 1954. Around 20% of the inhabitants had moved to South Vietnam immediately after the communists took over as many were feared they would be oppressed, e.g. successful Indian and Chinese traders who were named as “capitalists” and “collaborators” (Waibel 2004:35).

3.4 Soviet influence

During the Cold War the Soviet Union wanted to have an influence in Southeast Asia, due to its geopolitically strategic location between the Pacific and Indian Ocean to counter the U.S. influence. A basis for the Soviet-Vietnamese relations was the mutual distrust of China. The Soviet Union helped Vietnam tremendously with providing different kinds of aid: capital investment, commodities, funding big projects and plants, educational exchanges and military equipment. The formal assistance to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (colloquially often mentioned as “North Vietnam”) began in 1955. The majority of agreements were signed before 1965 and the relations between the countries deepened notably in 1965 when the
defence pact was signed (Birgersson 1997:218). Vietnam received aid from China as well, but the amount decreased when the aid from Soviet Union increased. By the end of the War China had stopped sending aid. The Soviet aid increased in 1975 and was very helpful for Vietnam in managing the turbulent times after the reunification. The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1978 made Vietnam a full member of the Soviet bloc (Logan 1995:443). China was threatening Vietnam and supported the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia which attacked Vietnam and claimed land territories. Vietnam attacked back with considerable military assistance from the Soviet Union and overthrew the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot from power. This event increased the friction between China and Vietnam and China and Soviet Union, and Vietnam and the Soviet Union became closer ‘allies’ (Birgersson 1997:219).

3.5 Wartime

The communist Viet Minh nationalists led by Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed the independence of the country in 1945. The recognition of the Viet Minh by the Soviet Union and China in early 1950 was a decisive moment for American officials to act. North Korea had attacked South Korea in 1950 which was noticed by the Americans. In the height of the Cold War the Americans feared that communism would spread further to other countries, such as India and to allies such as Japan and the Philippines. After the Geneva Conference in 1954 Vietnam was temporarily divided. And the U.S. wanted to block the communist expansion to the south by creating an independent government, regime of Ngô Đình Diệm in southern Vietnam. The Viet Minh in the south attacked the U.S. backed regime and the Communists in the North supported it and the U.S. responded by added assistance to the Diem government (Herring 2004:18). That government fell in 1963, which led the American president Johnson to begin bombing North Vietnam in 1965 and combat troops started coming to the South. The devastating war began. North Vietnam received assistance from the Soviet Union and China, who later in 1972 wanted to better their relationship with the U.S and met President Nixon. By 1973 Nixon had withdrawn U.S. military forces, much due to the growing opposition of the War in the U.S. The congress rejected additional aid to South Vietnam, called by Gerald Ford and the U.S. involvement officially stopped when the North Vietnamese took over the presidential palace in Saigon on April the 30th in 1975 (Herring 2004:20).
### 3.6 Post-war period

After the devastating Vietnam War, North and South Vietnam merged together on the 2nd of July 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The War had severely damaged the infrastructure of agriculture which had been the main economic activity. The government tried to fix this by a massive campaign where farms and factories were collectivized. This led to an economic collapse and inflation jumped to hundreds percent, and the reconstruction of the country went slow with many economic problems. Between the late 1970’s and early 1980’s millions of people fled the country in badly built boats which created an international humanitarian crisis.

Something had to be done. In 1986 the old guard government was replaced with a new leadership. Lead by the general secretary Nguyen Van Linh, the government put in place a number of free-market reforms, called Đổi Mới (Renovation), which meant the transition from a planned economy to a “socialist oriented market economy”. This change gradually opened the doors for more foreign investment, more economic deregulation and privatization, where the state’s authority still remained unchallenged. After that the economy and production started to grow quickly. Still to succeed in business, companies rely heavily on the state for licenses, contracts, capital and land (Gainsborough 2010:15)

The reform made globalization and its effects more apparent on the streets of the city and by providing new jobs in multinational companies that have established themselves in Vietnam. “Globalization can be seen like an authorless force-which is powerful and irresistible, but creates a sense to which states have to bend their logic” (Gainsborough 2010:114). The emergence of transnational organizations doesn’t have to mean that the state power is diminishing, those companies are welcomed when the state wants the resources they can offer (Gainsborough 2010:166). The state is seen as not weakening or strengthening but reconfiguring. It’s been said that the Party uses every possible capitalist trick to keep its socialist part of the economy going well (Hayton 2010:17). Even if Vietnam calls itself a socialist state, it has never completely implemented that model as the state didn’t have the capacity to do so and people (i.e. local interests, the population, small province-owned enterprises etc.) have opposed the complete collectivization of social and economic activities. The resistance has grown since the reunification. It can be seen that from 1960, the state has fluctuated between full socialization of production (as well as labour) and adjusting to local and individual interests (Oudin 2002:370).
The state is still very strong in general, and it limits external ideological and cultural inflows. The relationship between public and private is very blurred in Vietnam. It often happens that a public office is used for private gain and it’s rather unclear who is actually benefitting from companies that are supposedly owned by the state (Gainsborough 2010:181).

Some people have argued that there was already a sort of a balance between plan and market economy before the start of the War in North Vietnam. This balance consisted of some local parameters and some foreign variables, e.g. economic assistance in the form of investment and consumer goods. This could explain how the opening and extension of the market activities in the 1980s wasn’t a radical change for the people, as many were already used to such activities, even if they had not been legal or ‘official’ before (Fforde 2009:490). Money transactions spent on the free-market in the early 1970s were of the same size in value as transactions that took place in the network that was controlled by the state. It has been reported that about 35% of the food purchases of an urban worker in 1974-75 actually took place in the free market (ibid: 2009:492).

“there is no single Vietnamese tradition, no single Vietnamese people, and no single Vietnamese peasantry: Vietnamese ‘traditional’ values vary from region to region, even from village to village...the concept of ‘Vietnamese tradition’ itself may be a construct created by power holders to legitimize their control of political authority” (Vasavakul 1995:260).

Summary

Vietnam is quite a recent construct and less than 200 years ago, it was composed of three kingdoms that were later unified and there are still regional differences when it comes to culture and food that have been influenced by e.g. foreign groups of people trading in that area. The Soviet Union has influenced the Vietnam Communist Party with their politics. The influences of the French colonialism have added e.g. coffee, milk, white bread to the food culture. Whereas the Chinese culinary influence have perhaps been more subtle due to more similar ingredients being used there; the pho soup has been argued to be influenced by a southern Chinese soup. Other Southeast Asian and Indian influences are noticed in some dishes, mainly in Central and South Vietnam in the use of curries and more spicy food than in the North.
4. HANOI-CITY IN TRANSITION

I’m going to give a very brief history of the development of the city of Hanoi. Different ideologies during the history of the city have affected the outlook of the built city, which can still be observed today e.g. in the Old Quarter, French Quarter and in some Soviet inspired architecture. After that I will discuss the housing situation and the public space, which all affect peoples’ movements and behaviour in the city. Lack of space in the home or in the public can force people to meet at establishments that expect a purchase for the usage of their space, such as cafés and restaurants.

4.1 History

The city was founded in 1010 and the emperor Ly Thai To relocated the capital to current-day Hanoi. The boundaries of the city were three rivers: Red River in the east, To Lich in the west and north and Kim Nguu in the south. The city consisted of the imperial citadel and the civilian city, which had different quarters for crafts, trades and agriculture. This part of the city has survived to some extent, today it’s referred to as the Old Quarter (Gubry et al. 2010:54). The street pattern stems from the 15th century, back then the trade streets specialized in a certain craft or by selling a particular group of goods (Waibel 2004:31). Even today there are streets where you can see many stalls selling the same type of goods right next to each other, for example: stationery goods, window frames, toys, motorbike accessories etc. Throughout the centuries the properties were continually cut up which led to the rise of tube or tunnel houses, which have a small opening onto the street, but they could be up to 100m long (Waibel 2004:33).

The French also shaped the look of Hanoi. The French Quarter name comes from the French settlers who lived along Rue Paul Bert in the 1880s and French also lived in the Old Quarter. The French colonial rulers upgraded the street network and built new streets in a grid network right below the Hoàn Kiếm Lake as well as a boulevard around the lake. They also took down trade street gates, and administration of the area moved to a higher city level, from having been more autonomous before (Schenk 2005:5). Before the French invasion, there was not much social life in urban public spaces in Vietnam, as the access to areas of the village communal house or the Buddhism temple was restricted by gender and status. The newly built parks were mainly used by the French or people who worked for them and the working class had very limited access to the parks. After the independence of 1954 the use of the parks developed, partly due to the new parks that were built thanks to Hồ Chí Minh and his
encouragement for people to exercise. A bit after that Tai Chi started to become popular in Hanoi and have remained so for older people (To Luong & Steingrube 2013:289).

After 1954 in Hanoi, architects from other socialist countries, led by the Soviet Union helped with designing and constructing projects. The urban development was centrally controlled in Hanoi and closely tied with the country’s five year plans (Logan 1995:445). During 1955-1990 much of the construction activity in Hanoi took place in the suburbs. Providing good quality housing for all citizens was the priority. Due to the large demand in housing, little attention was paid to make the houses look appealing. (ibid: 1995:454). State economic planning considered that it was seen as more important to expand the city than to preserve the Old Quarter and protect its historical monuments, which led to some old historical buildings to deteriorate. The majority of the retail space was transformed to housing areas and given to new inhabitants by the state (Waibel: 2004:35).

By the mid 1980’s it had become increasingly apparent that the centrally economic system wasn’t working well, with an annual inflation of 700% and there was big pressure to liberalize the state controlled economy and the new Đổi Mới (renovation policy) emerged. Soviet observers thought that their aid had become ineffective and it was reduced and when the Soviet bloc fell in 1991, the Soviet influence on the urban development on Vietnam was over. The new conditions set forward by the internationalization of the economy and privatization of property required big changes to Vietnamese law and to the way the cities were planned and administered (Logan 1995:461).

A lot of living space was transformed to commercial space after Đổi Mới,(the economic reforms that started officially in 1986 and gradually introduced many aspects of the market economy to the country) as a result the population actually decreased in the Hoàn Kiếm district between 1989 and 1999 whereas it increased in all the remaining districts of the city. Today more than half million people move through the Old Quarter every day. Because of the rising land prices, many people have built bigger and higher houses in the Old Quarter which have changed the historic character of the district (ibid: 2004:39). A law came into effect in 1997 that provided guidelines for the preservation of the district, including its nature as a commercial and tourist area and a restriction of 3-4 storeys and the preservation and renovation of certain historic marked buildings (ibid:2004:42).

The Vietnamese state expanded the official land area of Hanoi from 920 to 3345 square kilometres on 1st August 2008. This increased the population from about 3.5 to 6.23 million.
The government wants to modernise the country’s capital quickly and to build a metropolis with a larger population than Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, and to be more equal with Hồ Chí Minh City in terms of population size. The city limits are reaching ever further, including peri-urban regions and land areas previously used by more rural people have to give in and move out for private investment that builds apartment towers and offices on their land (Turner and Schoenberger 2012:3). The state is also selling real estate inside the city to private investors which is also affecting the small traders’ marketplace. This is not a completely new phenomenon as it also happened during the socialist transformation period, back then the small traders were told to participate in more productive work (Endres 2013:8).

The historical context of being influenced by the Chinese and Western worlds has led to a know-how, which is based on a controlled subtle management of the relationship between powers and counter-powers as well as between the weak and the strong. This also explains why it can be hard to notice and identify the boundaries between the informal and formal, as stakeholders working in urban projects can relate with both of these worlds at the same time, even if they seem opposed to each other (Gubry et al. 2010:12). There have been many conflicts and much confusion and competition about land claims, which have proved difficult to settle and have made it difficult for the city administrations, especially the City Planning departments, to execute their plans in making the city more liveable, efficient and sustainable (McGee 2009:241). The GDP of Hanoi has increased 11.2 times from 1985 to 2000 (Quang & Kammeier 2002:381). Around 40% of all the 202 private hotels constructed in Hanoi since 1986 have been built in the Old Quarter. Tall buildings that were built with foreign capital have mainly been built on land that used to be public buildings, factories or open space so that resettlement costs could be avoided (ibid: 2002:384). It would help to have a knowledgeable city planning system that would balance the interests of new land users, residents, urban design and the historical identity in planning the city (ibid: 2002:386).
Vietnam is urbanizing at a quick rate: 3.4% per year (World Bank: 2012). There is a notion called “Leapfrogging“, which means that “developing countries” take lessons learned from developed countries to hasten processes of change. Through the notion of leapfrogging, areas with less developed technology or economic infrastructure can move quickly and adopt modern systems without going through the steps in between. This process is demonstrated in many aspects of the society, such as: in culture, economy and policy (Cascio 2004). Leapfrogging combined with fast urbanization can led to many problems, with e.g. traffic, pollution, crime, environmental degradation and housing shortages (To Luong & Steingrube 2013:283).

4.2 Housing

The decreasing amount of state provisioned housing combined with many regulations concerning house construction have proven ineffective when large numbers of people have moved to and closer to the city. This has led to people building illegal extensions and extra rooms to their houses and apartments. People who wanted to build a house after the reunification in 1975 were required to have many different licenses and permits and the state
bureaucracy was very slow to issue them, it could even last years to get them. The state tried to provide housing but it was very ineffective, which led people to build or renovate their own houses or flats ignoring the required licenses. The state was also expecting war reparation payments from the USA after the war in 1975, but never received any and the aid from China and the Soviet Union decreased substantially. The country also suffered in the wars with China and Cambodia in 1978-9 as well as from natural disasters which also strained the country’s finances drastically (Koh 2004:338). There was a big housing shortage and in 1990 the state liberated the housing regime, as it realized that the previous limitations were simply not working as desired (ibid 2004:339).

In the 1990’s it’s estimated that 70-80% of all housing was constructed outside the official channels, i.e. informally, there were so many individuals building that the authorities responsible for the paper works couldn’t keep up (Schenk 2005:55). Many of the houses were built on land that the head of the household or family had acquired after Đôi Mới. As for poorer people who couldn’t afford to buy a piece of land, quite many were constructing illegal extensions that impinge over to public land, which has also narrowed the street space in some places (ibid: 2005:55). In the construction boom in the 1990’s and the land prices were (and are) quite high which led people to build buildings with 3-5 storeys and a narrow façade (very similar to what can be seen in the Old Quarter) (Waibel 2004:37). The housing and land prices in Hanoi have increased dramatically and many low-income families sell their house in the centre and have to move to the outskirts (Quang & Kammeier 2002:383). A shift in the historical view of valuing a house front facing a street as a household resource has occurred. Townhouse type of housing as well as apartments in suburban high rise buildings are seen as more and more attractive, as they are not on the street level, which means that the inhabitants don’t have to face the noise, smells, traffic, garbage and people on the street (Drummond 2012:83).

“Urban planning is not seen as a means of addressing urban social or physical issues or problems but is rather as process of allocation of state resources to meet specified targets”
and “There is no process or mechanism to evaluate the consequences or impact of any form of urban redevelopment” (Quang & Kammeier 2004:376).

This implies that there isn’t really a proper long term planning to meet the needs of the inhabitants and the environment in shaping the city in a sustainable way for the future, rather, a more short-term investment perspective mainly dictated by financial interests, seems to be quite overpowering.
The state ownership of the housing production has increased from 3.9% in 1995 to 36% in 2002. The planning authorities planned to provide housing for a mixed social structure, especially in the state-controlled projects, but there was a huge speculation bubble in the property and real-estate market and an enormous demand for housing, which led to rapidly soaring prices that resulted in a socially discriminatory access to the new urban areas (Waibel: 2006:46)

Erik Harms writes about a neighbourhood that gets destroyed in Hồ Chí Minh City in order to make room for more modern urban housing. The people living in the neighbourhood were getting evicted and received compensations that they most of the time consider too low. However even if the locals are reluctant to move and often complain to the authorities it can often be in vain. (Harms 2012:735). There have been controversial construction projects (often involving selling previously public land to private investors) that have caught the attention of bloggers (some of whom had connections with the Party or a past with it) who have complained about the projects often on more independent websites (rather than state-owned) and gradually caught the attention of a larger public, who have spread the text and/or got involved in the issue of resisting redevelopment plans themselves (if possible) (Wells-Dang 2010:97).

The role of the media is quite mixed in Vietnam. While it’s mostly state-controlled it still has some freedom of movement and can serve the city government, corporate interests and the activists purposes at different times (ibid: 2010:99). On the other hand, the inhabitants may often reluctantly accept the situation as they welcome the new and modern buildings and developments, which they consider as something positive for their city and country and some say it’s worth the risk to move elsewhere, in order for their children and grandchildren to be able to have something modern and beautiful. These developments also create social stratification as the land value keeps on increasing and while a family might be in dispute over a compensation and dealing with the authorities, the land value might increase a lot, which means that when a verdict is reached on their issue and they receive a compensation they can’t afford to move to a certain neighbourhood anymore (Harms 2012:736-46).

4.3 Public space

The use of and meanings attributed to public space has changed in Vietnam in general, and Hanoi in particular, especially since the economic reforms in 1986, which have led to a growing number of cafés, restaurants, bars, shops, malls and use of the streets and sidewalks.
People are increasingly spending time talking, eating, drinking on the streets, sidewalks, in cafés and restaurants. There is also an increasing variety of foreign foods and restaurants available in different forms, ranging from street food stalls to fast food restaurants and fine dining. People like to have different places to go to depending on their mood, appetite and preferences. These relatively new places are often used as an extension of people’s living rooms and many people use them to socialize and hang out with their friends and family. The growing number of people in the cities has also created a need for public and private spaces.

There are three levels of government that administrate the urban areas: national, provincial and the city level. The national government has started to distribute more power to the city level which has given them more power in administering the urban development (McGee 2009:237). The urban spaces are both evident places and ways of promoting “modernization” and internationalization processes, yet also home to identity reactions against such processes (Gubry et al. 2010:8). It’s predicted that the population will grow from 78 million in 2000 to 103 in 2020 and 46 million will live in cities in 2020 compared to 18 million in 2000 and the urbanized land area will increase 7.5 times! from 2000 to 2020 (ibid: 2010:213).

“Urbanisation does not just reflect the imprint of global capital but rather the articulation with global flows in certain urban spaces and social groups and disarticulation in others. Thus, new “global spaces” exist side by side with “local spaces”. Of course, at the level of everyday practice, particularly in consumption practice, there is convergence” (McGee 2009: 234).

As McGee pointed out, it is important to acknowledge that urbanisation can take place in different forms and at a different pace, even in the same city. As cities expand, the Vietnamese government seeks to manage and maintain physical and moral characteristics of urban spaces. The urbanization of the metropoles in Vietnam has led to growing pressure by migration, more environmental problems and higher crime rates, as well as to rising social differentiation regarding education, income, family size and consumption patterns which have formed new class divisions. New recreational and leisure spaces have also emerged e.g. theme parks, water parks, tennis courts, bowling centres and golf courses as well as a new national stadium in Hanoi, in 2003 (Waibel 2006:43). Even if Vietnam remains a one party state, it shares the same problem with other transitional societies like in Eastern Europe where the institutional changes have been a lot slower than the real changes, which have resulted in time lags that have led to a lot of largely unregulated development processes (ibid: 2006:45). The government continues its attempts to remove unwelcome unmodern users of the public space.
It’s not a new phenomenon and it demonstrates its deep-rooted concerns with suitableness, civility and order (Drumond 2012:90).

The urban space in Vietnam has changed with an increasing amount of high rise buildings, most of which have been built in the last 10 years\(^1\). The urban space has also changed since Đổi Mới by the new use of the available space which has happened as a by-product mainly by the economic transformation. People were under close surveillance by their neighbours and employers and mainly moved from home to their work or study places and there was only a limited amount of shops and restaurants to go. Nowadays the street trading, parks and many shops, cafés and restaurants and the internet and blogs have enabled people to meet and gather in ways that are uncontrollable for the police and the party (Thomas 2001:322).

According to a study by Luong with 2143 interviews in Hanoi, 96.3% agreed on positive environmental effects of parks and 93% on the beneficial social effects (Luong 2013:104). As for groups seen in the parks, people up to 30 years is the dominant group, which can partially be explained by the fact that over half of the population of Hanoi are below 30 years (Luong 2013:107). Parks, green spaces, lake shores and public spaces are important because there are few places where people can entertain themselves without needing to pay something. 91% of the park users think that there should be more Urban Green Areas in Hanoi. Some of the people who didn’t agree said that the existing parks should be taken better care of (Luong 2013:110). The main activities that 15-29 year old people did in the park was to meet friends and colleagues (76.8%), to play with entertainment facilities (76.2%), relax (65%) and to exercise (18%) (Luong 2013:91).

The use of some public spaces in Hanoi has changed a lot and people are gathering for different reasons than they were before. Even if there are more public spaces in Hanoi, the public space is still quite limited and there is extensive surveillance and intervention by the state. The interaction with the government is mainly limited to top-down directives like the responsibility to take part in government campaigns. Expressing opinions, complaints or desires from bottom-up has often been ineffective, until there is a crisis (Drummond and Nguyen Thi Lien 2008:178).

Ba Đình Square is a public space that has historically been used for political events. The Ba Đình Square was filled with enthusiastic people when Hồ Chí Minh announced the independence of Vietnam in 1945. As time has passed the use of public spaces have changed.

\(^1\) [http://skyscraperpage.com/cities/?cityID=2217](http://skyscraperpage.com/cities/?cityID=2217) at 30.7.2015.
On the 30th anniversary of the Tet offensive, which was a critical point in the Vietnam War, very few people and no crowds were seen at the Ba Đình Square. Formal state-managed events, like state funerals, May Day celebrations and state anniversaries categorize the Ba Đình Square. The funerals of former Ministers during the last years 20th Century have been largely ignored by the public. The Square is a politically symbolic centre.

However, the Hoàn Kiếm Lake is what most people see as the heart of Hanoi. The two public spaces are fighting over the symbolic space in the capital (Thomas 2001:309).

“Here the imposed everyday vacancy and high security of the formal space of Ba Đình Square marks the tension between a regime threatened by a socially responsive citizenry but needing to harness public support in elaborate parades and rituals” (Thomas 2001:307).

The regime has noticed that fewer people congregate to the Ba Đình Square for political events, which have led them to consider which events people gather for.

An artist singing on a square close to the Hoàn Kiếm Lake (Tommi Helmisaari 26.2.2013).

Currently, however, political spaces are being used for a wider range of activities. Many of these places which were built as political are now more often used in apolitical ways, e.g. people using park space to play badminton, skate on and near a statue of Lenin and people go
jogging in front of the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum on the Ba Đình square, maybe because there is a lot of empty space without no traffic (Thomas 2005:171).

The interests of the people have changed. Religious festivals attract more people every year and disorderly football crowds celebrating the national team’s victory on the streets have also become a concern for the state. Nowadays most events that gather big crowds on public spaces are non-political activities which are often disapproved of by the regime (Thomas: 2001:311).

"what makes a space public – a space in which the cry and demand for the right to the city can be seen and heard – is often not its preordained ‘publicness’. Rather, it is when, to fulfil a pressing need, some group or another takes space and through its actions makes it public” (Mitchell 2003:35).

I think Mitchell raises a good point as e.g. announcing certain squares as ‘public’ yet keeping them under strict surveillance is rather contradictory and doesn’t allow the expression of certain opinions and the spontaneous gathering of people, which should be possible in a public space. Even if people gather more often for not as explicitly political reasons as before, it can happen that their apolitical meetings can be considered political, if for example a big group of people gather together at a square for the same reason, or in the support for a certain cause or event, for example for entertainment or sports.

The state can be quite accommodating as well, in 2002 during the Soccer World Cup, many cafés were full and people simply sat down on the pavement to eat, drink and talk about the games. Even if the government was keeping an eye on the big crowds of people they accepted giant screens to be put up in various places in Hanoi (Thomas: 2005:175). Crowds gathering for the party were seen as a mighty symbol of state power, nowadays the sight of crowds worry the state as they fear that people could turn against the state ideology (Thomas: 2001:310).

Similarly, the death of a young actor in 1996 created an overwhelming public and media response and tens of thousands of people gathered at his wake and funeral which led to huge traffic jams. People’s interest in state events and parties have clearly diminished and spontaneous celebrations and activities have grown a lot. The public spaces are used for a wider range of activities, which also enables people to meet and create new friendships and opinions and people are interested in new forms of entertainment and recreation (Thomas 2001:315).
“This newly emergent public sphere is one in which the urban public is actively engaged in constructing and negotiating new Vietnamese national subjectivities against a regime that has systematically debarred them from political representation” (Thomas: 2001:315).

The assembly of a crowd for public activities requires an approval by the local authorities (Oosterhoff et al: 2014:13). Some circumvent this legislation in holding meetings legally through a third party, in e.g. cafés which means that the responsibility is not on the event organiser, but the café owner. (ibid: 2014:29). Under the pre-reform era in Vietnam, privacy and the private life of celebrities in sensationalist tabloid magazines were not discussed, as those papers did not exist and the access to private spaces and this focus on private lives is a new phenomenon to have emerged after the market-oriented reforms (Earl 2010:91).

The constantly changing nature of the urban city offers more spaces and venues for leisure and commercial activities. Because many live in crowded houses and apartments and due to the lack of large open public spaces, people gather together on pavements and sidewalks and in parks and cafés to socialize. Spontaneous crowds have become more widespread whereas crowds gathering for formal state events have been decreasing tremendously. Many international companies have established themselves in Hanoi after the economic renovation. Some of them are multinational companies, such as fast food restaurants that are often located in easily accessible road junctions.

**Summary**

As seen above, many changes have taken place in the city of Hanoi and in the Vietnamese society, especially during the last 30 years or so. People are gathering at public spaces for different reasons than before and their interest in political ceremonies have decreased, which has worried the state officials. The city of Hanoi has grown at a quick rate and it has been complicated to try and manage the growth and provide housing for everyone. Since the economic reforms private companies are increasingly constructing buildings on public land, forcing people to move out. The city has also changed in the way that there are more leisure activities, shops, restaurants were people can hang out. People face more different opinions and influences to position themselves to, than they did before, which can make it difficult to make a decision and act, as there can be many factors (that are sometimes contradictory) to consider.
5. THEORIZING A SOCIETAL CHANGE

Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice explains how the changing society, ideas and influences have affected people and what affect their choices.

Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice (1972) consists of four key concepts, *capital, field, habitus and doxa*. The interaction of these elements results in a *strategy* or *practice*, i.e. which can be our own unconscious behaviour which is aligned with our interests in trying to achieve our objectives (1972). According to Bourdieu the positions on social fields are relative and determined by the person’s economic and cultural capital compared to other people on the same field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Every field values certain sorts of resources, which Bourdieu, calls capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). There are four kinds of capital: *economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital* (Bourdieu 1986), which people activate, to enter and move around on the social fields. The different sorts of capitals are very closely connected to each other, and they can be converted. Economic capital can most easily be converted to other types of capital than vice-versa, e.g. when buying a painting, economic capital is exchanged to cultural capital. The symbolic capital is not standing on its own, but dependant on other people’s acknowledgement of the capital one possesses on a particular field, which means that on the social field, economic, cultural and social capital is converted to symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1972). As an example, there were very few Western movies imported into North Vietnam in the 1970’s as that kind of “cultural capital” was not held in high regard. Nowadays you can access many more foreign movies easily and there’s a much wider selection of them screening in the cinemas and advertised outside and you could say that seeing a foreign movie today and gaining its cultural capital is valued more than it was back in the 1970’s.

The position someone has on the field is limited by rules which determine the social mobility of the person within the social field. Bourdieu calls this *doxa*. People’s position on the social field is apparent in their class habitus, which leads to the *doxa*, e.g. which tells what kind of knowledge is taken for granted on the field and what limits the people’s (in that field) social behaviour. The habitus is a result of social structures, namely of the social class (doxa) and the internalized ‘rules’ of what they can do on the field. Habitus is also structuring practices and reproducing social fields (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) as when people act in compliance with the structure, the structure is confirmed and reproduced. The primary habitus for children comes from the parents’ ways of thinking, behaving and feeling which are linked
to a position in the social space and is then internalized into the children’s own habitus. The positions people have in society are reflected in the different lifestyles, interests and tastes that exist among the social classes (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu believes that the habitus is durable, lasting, yet not eternal (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:133). It can happen that the habitus is not adapted to changed field conditions, which he calls the hysteresis effect. Hysteresis is defined:

“as a mismatch between habitus and field when a social change occurs. One instance of this mismatch can occur when state policies redefine the type of symbolic capital that is valued, which redefines what gives power in the new social structure” (Hardy 2008:143).

The disruption takes place along the structures of the field, not in habitus, which means that the habitus would trail behind the new field structures, which e.g. means that persons dispositions won’t change as fast as the state policies ideas will (ibid 2008:133). As a classic example, generation conflicts can occur when the habitus of persons have developed in different moments in time, which leads to different and divergent understandings of what practice is ‘reasonable’ for one generation, which can be ‘unthinkable’ or shocking for the other generation (Bourdieu 1977:78).

The relationship of between habitus, doxa and practice explains social change and continuity over a longer time and I find this concept useful as there are many examples in Vietnam, such as: the experiences of colonialism, revolutionary ideals of the good peasant and the quite recent effects of the market forces, where the symbolic capital has been redefined due to changes in economic and political structures, which have caused hysteresis for vast parts of the society. This has caused situations where people in society have to position themselves in new ways and try to attain the new valued characteristics (Nguyen & Drummond: 2012:11).

Young people’s parents and especially grandparents can have very different ideas of what is a useful subject to study or to work with (stemming from their own life experiences at that age), than their children have, which can create disagreements and conflicts. It can also be confusing for people of all ages to make decisions if there are divergent opinions expressed by e.g. the current state ideals and family opinions. To make it even more complicated, there can be more than two different opinions to weigh against each other. Globalization has led to the spread of ideas and trends throughout the world and people can read about and see practices from other countries that they wish to emulate in their own environment, which can
create confusion, especially if the phenomenon or thing doesn’t have the same connotations or meanings that it has in another country.

5.1 Changing doxa?

By the mid-1990’s over half of the population of Vietnam had been born after 1975. There had been a change in attitude of the young generation who had not lived through the War and were seen as being privileged compared to their parents. The Đổi Mới had also opened up the door to different fashion styles and ideas arriving to the country and influencing the youth. Many saw a gap between the previous generation used to economic hardship and struggle for independence and the “new generation” who could wear designer clothes and eat at upscale restaurants. This resulted in a debate about the “moral of the youth” and depictions of bad youth, who were: lazy, addicted to drugs, sexually active, irresponsible, criminal and dressed provocatively. This shows how the youth valued different kinds of capital, such as economic and different cultural capital than their parents and especially grandparents. It could be said that the field conditions had changed due to the changes happening in the society following Đổi Mới and the youth’s habitus had adapted to changing field conditions faster than their parents and the state ideology. The government was also active in educational campaigns, against prostitution, AIDS and drug abuse. Decadent foreign influences were also blamed of encouraging unsuitable ideals to young people (Leshkowich 2009:96). Generally young boys have clearly more free time and freedom than young girls, who have more domestic responsibilities (Drummond 2012:89).

One of the key concerns of the country’s leaders is how to maintain a particular habitus and doxa that they consider to be the national culture and national identity while also trying to attain material prosperity (Nhat Minh & Thu Thuy 2005:191). The traditional culture emphasises that people show compassion and gratitude to their parents, ancestors and those who fought against foreigners in order to protect the country (ibid: 2005:198). Many are afraid that people (especially the youth) don’t care as much about these values in today’s Vietnam, when they work hard to succeed materially and economically. This shows how the country’s leaders are struggling with a hysteresis effect, as the doxa they are trying to preserve has deal with partly changing field conditions. The mentality of getting rich quick has also become considerably more widespread, many young people think that personal advancement is the most assured and fulfilling way to contribute to the society as a whole. Even if poverty has been greatly reduced since the economic reforms, there has also been a
growing inequality in the country. In 2013 Vietnam was the country in the world with the 2nd most increase of super rich people (198 people with over $20 billion dollars in assets). At the same time 20.7% of Vietnamese live under the poverty line and 8% live in extreme poverty (VCHR & Fidh 2014:4).

There is a big generational gap to the people who lived during the War. That generation had a clear sense of purpose and group solidarity, when they were teenagers and they demand respect for their sacrifices. Most young Vietnamese respect this, however they prefer to look into the future. The youth still believe in a proud “national culture”, but how that is exactly defined is widely discussed in the country (Marr & Rosen 1998:164-6).

5.2 Increasing uncertainty

However, many surveys and interviews actually suggest that the youth value the same kind of social capital and partly cultural capital as their parents, as they usually respect their parents and elders’ authority over their career and life choices and they want to have economic and political stability. Education and employment seems to be the greatest concern youth have (Nguyen Phuong 2002:243). In 1989, the government has charged tuition fees at every level in the educational system, the introduction of the fees have led to more drop-outs out of school. There are also informal fees that the parents have to pay (Marr & Rosen 1998:156).

Before students received government grants so they could complete their studies and they were provided a state job after graduating. The government planners and Party leaders realized that the fast growth of the economy, required some changes to the higher education as the demand for it was increasing and the state didn’t have enough funding to meet the demand. After Đổi Mới, only around 50% of students could receive grants for higher education and jobs were not guaranteed anymore (Goyette 2012:200). To get into a public institution higher scores on the national exams are required than for non-public (private) institutions, because of this the public higher education is considered more prestigious. Private education costs significantly more than public and they are less subsidized than public schools. People who choose private schools are more likely to study subjects that give them a greater return on investment, such as business, engineering, science and mathematics (Goyette 2012:203).

Corruption and bribes critically affect education opportunities. It can happen that poor students who graduate can’t find good jobs as they can’t pay the requested bribes to the
employment agencies. At the same time there are many with poor academic history who somehow pass university exams and get a good job placement (VCHR & Fidh 2014:19).

An article online on Vietnam News (2014)² is also pointing out how the stress of school has become a major concern for the society and that overcrowded classrooms, very hard high school and college exams and low salaries for teachers have led to a lot of pressure on the teachers which also affecting the children and youth.

This is also something that I noticed in my interviews, often without specially asking for it. Many young people had the same concerns about their studies and they expressed concerns about getting a good job and helping and taking care of their grandparents and later their parents. Some youth were also a bit worried about the job market as while there are more and different opportunities for people than before, there are also different requirements and no-one is really guaranteed a job in the way like they used to be before the economic reforms. Government jobs used to be the most sought after until the mid-1990s, since then university graduates have understood that working with real estate, trade and tourism and in foreign enterprises are more useful for a prosperous career (Marr & Rosen 1998:164).

“\text{The people in Vietnam do not live like people in other countries, because they don’t have very busy hours working in the company. For example, I’m a student and don’t have to go to class on time. If the class starts at 7 I can come at 7:30}” (Linh, March 2013).

This was interesting as she was the only one saying that they are not busy, yet she later talked about stress in the school. Linh told me (March 2013) that everyone in her family: her father, mother and grandfather are teachers and that they would like her to become one, but she doesn’t want to and she doesn’t really know what she wants to be in the future and she only had one year left to study Psychology in the University. This would be an example of changing habitus, when nowadays the students themselves have more power to decide what to study, while earlier it was mainly the state and parents whom decided what kind of career options were feasible.

5.3 Shopping, a response to uncertainty?

An increasing amount of different shops, cafes and restaurants and other venues where people can spend their money have been built in Hanoi in the 21st Century. People visit certain kinds of places and buy clothes and foods to differentiate themselves from some

people, but also to associate themselves with other groups of people and with trends that are often of a global nature. According to an advertising study in Vietnam, people under 25 years are very fashion and brand-conscious and greatly influenced by foreign aspirations and lifestyles (Le Thi Muoi & Jolibert 2001:9). People aged 20-45 spend 18% of their monthly income on clothes (Breu et al. 2010:4).

People follow Asian fashion models as well as North American and European. As elsewhere people want to try new things and being seen doing that, in this way consumption is important for some people to show their lifestyle knowledge (Drummond 2012:86). The big amounts of money spent on clothes and new “provoking” styles of fashion, such as miniskirts, baggy jeans and unbuttoned plaid shirts were analysed by social commentators who tried to understand what this was a symbol of. Some said that the obsession with fashion was due to a quest for identity because of a lack of self-esteem and some saw it as a quiet revolution through consumption (Mydans 2000).

Wearing provoking clothing can be seen as the youth expressing symbolic capital, which some of the adults or officials don’t share nor understand and thus complain about. The growing influence of mass media in the last few decades who target youth has led to an increasing anxiety about the effects on the local culture in this period of fast socio-economic change (Leshkowich 2009:97). In uncertain times it can be easy to express anxieties and concerns on the youth as they can (and often do) stand as a symbol of liminality. A reason why the media and state officials have expressed concern of the youth, is the historic role of the youth to continue the socialistic ideals and these quite recent influences (often from abroad) have been as threatening to that “project” (ibid: 2009:98). If the youth would not continue the ‘socialistic project’ then it would mean that the doxa would be questioned.

This creates a hysteresis effect as the state ideals promote a new economic thinking while sticking to their doxa (which entails) cultural and social values. It sends complicated signals to the population as it’s difficult to quickly change a habitus as a response to the new field conditions. What makes it difficult is that while the country leaders want that people are happy and can consume products and become wealthy, while they should also remember and honour the values of being a proud citizen of Vietnam and not forget its traditions and not get subsumed by different flows of media from abroad on the benefit of losing a bit of one’s “Vietnamese culture”, in other words, the still prevailing doxa.
5.4 Middle class?

The middle class is growing quickly. According to the Taylor Nielson Sofres (TNS) Company’s survey, the middle class in Vietnam expanded from 30% to 55% in 2006. Their definition of middle class is quite diffuse however, including a wide range of urban people with a solid source of income who can afford luxury consumer products. The media in Vietnam never really uses the term ‘middle class’ and there are clearly more discussions of the very poor and the very wealthy. However ‘middle classness’ appears to be quite normalized as ‘modern people’ which includes a quite wide range of urban citizens that the state see as desirable. It can be argued that the lack of description of this ‘middle class group’ can be useful for the state, as if they described this vast group, it could make it easier for the group to get together and potentially voice out opinions or protest together, which the state could see as undesirable (Nguyen & Drummond 2012:8). The middle class people in Vietnam often stress that they have acquired their wealth because of hard work and education and because of their responsiveness to be modern and civilized (Leshkowich: 2012:98). This explanation points out how middle class people want to emphasize that they have acquired their wealth through legitimate means (in accordance with the prevailing doxa) and not through immoral ways, which would be condemned by the doxa?

I think it’s important to not see any groups as closed or strictly defined. I would agree with the definition which Nguyen and Drummond point out, in not seeing classes as being defined by some objective and fixed attributes: “But on the idea of ‘symbolic capital’. In this view, ‘middle class’ is a social group (including sub-groups) which adheres to a certain lifestyle (or set of lifestyles), or is encouraged to do so by market or state actors (...) (Nguyen and Drummond: 2012:9).

As an example, most of the young people I saw in the city and the ones I interviewed wore same kind of modern clothes and had a smartphone and many (not everyone) liked K-pop and J-Pop. Even if the people would live very similar ‘middle class’ lives, it doesn’t mean that they have to identify with each other or act in a collective way.

5.5 Changing gender roles?

The Ethnic Kinh, who are the majority of Vietnam’s population have a patrilineal system which is very similar to China. However there are also highly variable kinship structures throughout the country due to the big number of ethnic minorities. There is also a much

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higher sex preference for boys by birth in the north than in the south, where it’s almost non-existent (Guilmoto: 2012:41). There are many myths in Vietnam that celebrate equal child care by mothers and fathers and women’s important roles in overthrowing outside invaders have been celebrated in historical narratives (Truong 2008:16). There are many gendered dualisms in Vietnamese discourse that refer to the complementarity of men and women and the thought of Yin and yang, is especially prevailing (Phuong & Eipper 2009:52).

Many times gender topics are discussed people say that the country has already achieved gender equality. There is a difference between women’s position and women’s condition. There are more women who have a position in e.g. decision-making, political representation and in the work force than in Japan or Korea, however when looking at the women’s condition, their work intensity and health status is lower in Vietnam (Scott & Kim Chuyen 2007:244). In the first constitution of Vietnam in 1946, it’s stated that “women and men have equal rights in all areas”. A National Strategy for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam was approved by the prime minister in 2001. Its objective is that women should hold 50% of the positions in state agencies and political and socio-political organizations on every level by 2010. As of today, unfortunately it hasn’t succeeded. There is a big difference between what verbal commitments have been made regarding gender equality and what the actual practices are (Truong 2008:16).

In the last election women hold 25.7% of the seats in the parliament. Some male deputies have complained about the planned quota by insisting that implementing the law of the quota would include incompetent women getting positions weaken the quality of the “staff”. However that is masking the real problems for women to reach higher posts as they face discrimination in employment and education and there are too few advancement and training opportunities for women, and women dedicate 2.5 times more hours to housework than men (Truong 2008:18).

Vietnamese women tend to be active in the labour force and not to take breaks even for child-bearing and rearing (Knodel et al. 2004:2). Many people have argued that women’s status have been lowered together with the development of the market economy and the subsidized day care services have disappeared which have often led to more household work for women (Asia Development Bank 2002). The children of couples will usually help out substantially with the household chores when they grow old enough (Knodel et al. 2004:5).
State rhetoric have changed a bit from “considering women as productive workers to view them as caring mothers and desirable wives”. This change of ideals is most easily reached by middle-class women and it’s a noticeable change from the propaganda from the revolutionary times when the working classes and rural peasant were to be looked up upon (Nghiem 2004:299).

Vietnam is still a quite patriarchal society, even if increasing numbers of women are working outside home. A few of female informants said that they don’t like the traditional gender roles, because the men have too much saying and power in the women’s lives and they wanted it to be more equal. Many of them said that they want it to be more like in Europe and US. According to some of my informants, there are clearly more girls studying languages in the university and some said that girls have a better English than their male counterparts. The girls seemed to be more stressed with life, studies and work and chores than the boys I interviewed. I did however also hear remarks about things getting slowly better in terms of gender equality.

I asked Mai (March 2013) about whether street food will stay or change? And she replied, a bit unexpectedly that she thinks that men should know how to cook, which she thinks is good, so that they can help at home as well as their friends. She mentioned that some of her friends think that cooking “is just a work for women” and that “men just go out and earn money” but she considers “it’s not actually a good thinking”. When I commented that a similar change has happened in my countries, she replied that “you know that in some parts in design and cooking, cutting hair men is already good, very good” and after that she said that the most famous and best hair cutters are always men and that there are also many men designers.

Philip Martin’s study of young urban men’s sexuality in Hanoi revealed that the young men often thought that the women today have changing sexual needs and expectations as they also have changing fashions, bodies and opportunities compared to the women who grew up before Đổi Mới. (Martin 2010:S5). While thinking that the women have changed, the men also valued the traditional Confucian ideal of wives being virgin at marriage. The ideal of the man holding a more ‘active’ role in sexual relationships compared to women persists (Ngo 2008:S207). Many men were afraid that women would have expectations they couldn’t fulfil. Most of the men had watched pornography and knew someone who had visited a prostitute or had visited themselves in a group, by doing that they could try to learn something (as in not to “fall behind”) and also practice sex without expectations from the girl-(friend) (Martin
Unmarried cohabitation has become a trend in youth sexual culture and the National Assembly recognises that “a woman could have a child without a husband“. The youth have also become more materialistic when it comes to the partner’s family background, financial situation and status (Nguyen 2007:304). The young people are also marrying later as many invest time in education, careers and jobs and the later marriage time, partially explains why an increasing amount engage in premarital sex (ibid: 2007:309)

I think that these kind of conflicting ideals about gender tasks is quite descriptive of the opinions of the society which seem to be a bit split between the changed field conditions—that give women more agency and more options—and the still prevailing doxa much influenced by the Confucian school, where women’s duty as caretakers of the family are emphasized more strongly. Considering that there are more possible professions than before the Đổi Mới and the state doesn’t guarantee people a job in the way they did before, it makes sense that ideas about people making a living in a way or another are more accepted by more people than they would’ve been before. I believe that this has an impact in ideas about the gender divisions of professions as well. Having said that, it doesn’t mean that there are not jobs or professions that people look down upon.

**Summary**

Much has changed in the society and economy in Vietnam after Đổi Mới. The youth can face conflicting ideals from the state, their family and friends and from abroad, about what they should study/work with and how they should dress and how they should behave. I’ve used Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory in trying to explain how there can be a gap in understanding each other between the different parties involved. The grandparents and partly parents of today’s youth in Vietnam lived in a quite different society and economy than their children. Throughout the years’ e.g. different professions, clothing fashions, media and views of sexuality have emerged and it can be hard for the parents and especially grandparents to understand the constant changes and what they entail. For example some professions that used to guarantee a good job, don’t do it anymore and people have to pay to study, which can become costly and it is harder to find a job than it was before Đổi Mới.

In the next chapter I will discuss the state’s influence in affecting people’s decisions about how to behave and what kind of opinions one is allowed to express on the internet. The youth have access to much more impressions and influences from all around the world than their
parents or grandparents had in their youth. These influences can become part of one’s own identity and influence one’s consumer choices.
6. STATE INFLUENCE

The state rhetoric changed in the 1990s to focus on women as private, socially important caretakers for children and husbands. Educational programmes from the Women’s Union and other official organizations told women how they could reduce the negative moral effects of marketization and how to protect the family. Items such as: a motorbike, rice cooker, television and a house with spaces for different purposes, depicted a new (middle class) ideal for the women. Newspaper articles and a range of self-help books appeared in the bookstores to guide the women in different topics from emotional relationships to children’s psychological development to sexual intimacy and diet (Leshkowich 2012:100). This gives an example how the state is cleverly influencing ideals, while projecting a sense of ‘free market’ and connecting the past with the present. It can be hard to orientate oneself in the stream of new information and attitudes while retaining certain more traditional ideas. According to a research by the Pew Research Center (2014), Vietnam is the most supportive of the free market out of the 44% countries surveyed, with 95% of the population supporting the free market economy, even if it means some people are rich and some are poor. This support can for example be explained by the fact that people might compare their current situation with that of before the economic reforms. Yet this comparison, comes from their current perspective and they might for example think that it was worse before, because people didn’t own so many different things and products. While at the time before the reforms, people didn’t actually value those things, at least officially. After the reforms and the gradual introduction of market economy, those same products have acquired a status, which they didn’t have before, and nowadays owning many things can be very seen as desirable.

According to the World Values Survey, around a fifth of the population are involved in a sport/recreation group, social welfare organization, political group, women’s group or a local community group. Many are also involved in professional associations, educational/cultural groups, unions and youth groups. These numbers are partly reflecting the government’s efforts to try and engage the people to take part in various social groups that are set up and directed by the government. It has for example been encouraged for the youth to participate in the Youth Union that has offered a route to advance ones career. However, there are also increasing amounts of groups, such as NGOs that are not directly under the state control and even in the groups mobilized by the state, more and more signs of independence and different views within groups can be found (Dalton & Ong 2005:3-11).
The state has also noticed the diminishing interest that the youth have in political groups and they have also tried to cater for the younger people by allowing different economic and entrepreneurial activities as well as allowing discos, karaoke bars and the import of many foreign movies (Marr & Rosen 1998:147).

6.1 Trade and moral

The communist party is still a moral exemplar and it was forbidden for entrepreneurs to be party members (and vice versa) until 2005-2006, even if many party members had worked their way around these restrictions (Leshkowich 2012:97). People don’t like the immoral misuse of the people’s or state’s money. The ideas of the “right” to wealth are continuously renegotiated and assessed morally and socially and these vary with time and place. Since Đổi Mới, Vietnam became a member of the WTO in just a few years, the same processes took decades in the neighbouring countries. These rapid changes have burdened the local moral economies (McElwee 2007:93)

Many people who held high positions in the party, have been in a favourable position in the more market-driven economy. As communism can offer a monopoly of power, capitalism offers opportunities to make profit, combining them both creates favourable conditions to use power to make money and use money to buy power (Vuving 2010:369). Many female street traders emphasize that they do business to focus on their family’s welfare and to make a living rather than to gain capital as independent business owners (Leshkowich 2006:279). This can be linked to the state ideals as discussed before on p. 31. The media, state officials and intellectuals have been concerned if it’s possible to pursue profit without losing moral character (ibid 2006:280).

This has led to an increase in spiritual and religious activities and practices. More attention is once again spent on spiritual activities and paying attention to ancestors and honouring ceremonies. The study of Buddhist texts and visits to shrines of fortune goddesses in order to protect from the fluctuation of the market forces has become more popular. It’s argued that the folk traditions and religions are celebrated as they can help to preserve the Vietnamese identity through the cultural transformation (Leshkowich 2008:15). Entrepreneurs and traders have explained that Buddhism has helped them reach success, as according to their belief, fate determines how one’s life will look and individuals have to use their talents to develop their virtue and achieve optimal fate (Leshkowich 2012:103).
I think it’s interesting to see the interplay with the traditional values and the new ideals and how they are used in somewhat contradictory ways (from a traditional understanding) for the people to become successful privately, which is also seen as becoming successful publicly, in the sense that it’s good for the country and the economy. However, the sheer greed for money is condemned and people should and need to also remember to value and respect their close family and friends. It will be interesting to see whether this connection to the traditional values is just a transitory idea in a short run to ameliorate the effects of a change in state ideals or will it be subsumed by the market forces and the hunt for maximal profit. This is another clear example of how the state is trying to promote a new kind of economic thinking while maintaining the doxa, which could be seen as a bit contradictory. However pointing out that one’s personal successful is due to hard work, good luck and faith, will often convince others that the success was deserved, which is something that would rarely have happened before the gradual economic reforms.

The small-traders usually have to do a lot of work to be successful. If a person becomes successful in trading she/he often thank lộc—which is a concept of good luck, prosperity and divine helpfulness. Lộc can become stronger through ritual practices and it can also be given to family and distributed to future generations. It’s a thing that is circulating through “heaven” to humans to ancestors and back again (Endres 2013:7). A person who has a predestined affinity for trade will be noticed by lộc which leads to lots of customers, high profits and good sales. However, if a person is not predestined for trade they will come across more difficulties and not make big profits. There is also another concept called “chance-luck” (mệnh) which is important to use if people want to have good luck in trade: e.g. picking a lucky day and time to open the market stall in the beginning of the new lunar year. The time is often told by a fortune-teller or a feng-shui expert and the number tends to be based on the vendor’s birth year (Endres 2014:12).

6.2 Media

Theatres, musicians and artists have lost the subsidies that they used to get before the Đổi Mới, this has made it increasingly hard for many of them to operate. Many found themselves to have to compete with the foreign and exotic forms and influences that flowed into the country, some did it with replacing their whole show with foreign elements, while some borrowed some of those influences in order to remain new and attractive. These actions have been criticized as folk, traditional and cultural performances have become hybridised and
some have disappeared altogether (Taylor 2005:139-140). However some critics have also said that the regime in 1975-1986 was promoting a very narrow idea of tradition, which they saw as ‘anti-foreign’ resistance, at the expense of cultural traditions. Foreign music was restricted and many Western films were banned and Chinese and Eastern European elements that had existed e.g. in the Cai Luong plays were removed. (ibid: 2005:144).

Local TV programs and soap operas in Vietnam are dealing with current issues, such as: conflicts in decision-making and discussing on a suitable level of parents involvement in their children’s decisions about jobs, education and marriage and the modern, immoral use of money to resolve or take over genuine emotional relationships, as well as the lonely and isolated urban life. It’s a continuing cultural theme to equate the urban with the bad, modern, stressful and cold and see the rural society as traditional, timeless, warm and peaceful. The variety of choices in the urban life in terms of creating identities is seen as positive, however not all of the choices one can make are of good quality, which implies that one can take a wrong path (Drummond 2005:155-165).

Vietnam has the highest number of internet users in Southeast Asia. 70% of the people who use internet also use Facebook (Oosterhoff et al. 2014:3). In Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City over half of the population have an internet connection and spend on average over two hours a day. There are 32 times more mobile telephones in 2009 than there was in 2003. (Breu et al. 2010:4). According to a survey by the Ministry of Health, WHO and UNICEF in 2005, 50% of the young people in the cities and 13% in rural areas use the Internet. Considering the survey is almost 9 years old I believe these numbers to have greatly increased as of today. Most of the respondents chat on the internet (69%) and play online games (62%).

The young people are using the internet for obtaining knowledge and information about lives and cultures elsewhere, such as foreign celebrities’ and many watch foreign films online at Internet café’s to avoid their parent’s supervision. (Ngo 2008:S202-205). This reminds me of when three people told me they had friends or had heard of people checking in, in the newly opened Starbucks on Facebook, even if they had not been there. However two of the informants pointed out the “silliness” in acting in that way. Sitting in my hostel one evening, I happened to see an insert from MTV Vietnam TV channel, where the young fashionable hosts visited the new Starbucks and interviewed celebrities who were outside the Starbucks private opening posing for cameras. The MTV channel is quite popular for the youth worldwide, because of its music videos and TV shows. Covering the opening of a major international
company in a local version of the channel, which still mainly shows music videos and programmes from abroad gives clear associations of what is modern and hip.

The government doesn’t care that much about managing apolitical online forums as they focus on controlling some individual bloggers and Facebooks members. In the Decree 72 (that came into effect in 2013) it is forbidden to post internet content “that challenges the Vietnam government, national security, public order, customs and traditions, or national unity” (ibid: 2014:15). Even if criticism against the government will most likely have repercussions, the state is allowing some news organisations to partake in investigative work, because they value their corruption-fighting efforts (Oosterhoff 2014:14).

Summary

This chapter has focused on the role of the state and issues of trade and moral and the media. The state is influencing people through its ideals and through limiting access to certain blogs and websites online. Young people can see movies and videos online and become interested in e.g. ‘provocative’ fashion styles or new eating trends which they might not have come across otherwise.
7. FOOD TODAY

This chapter is going to describe the Vietnamese food, its most common ingredients and what has influenced it throughout the history. Foreign influences have added new ingredients that have in turn produced new dishes, such as the Bánh Mì sandwich. I will also describe the eating patterns and habits as well as issues of food safety as they all help to explain people’s general food preferences that are also reflected in their choice of eating out, which will be discussed later in Chapter 8 and 9. I will also write briefly about international food trade as it shows what Vietnam is contributing to the world food culture.

7.1 Foreign influences and the attempt to create a unified food culture

Different historical influences have affected the cooking and food in Vietnam. The country used to be more divided into more distinct food cultures (which it still is, but less explicitly). Influences from China in the North and from the Chams, Khmer, Malays and Europeans in the South and the important trade port location in the Centre of Vietnam for Hội An and Huế affected the development of differing food traditions. The emperor Minh Mang in the early 19th Century wanted unify the country, politically and culturally according to the traditions in the North and he succeeded quite well. The French influence is apparent with e.g. coffee, condensed milk, white bread and the increased consumption of beef.

As the Chinese were ruling over Northern Vietnam from 111BC to AD 939, cuisine in North Vietnam has been influenced by Chinese ingredients, cooking methods and the Muong culture (people in the Northern Mountains of Vietnam). The Chinese influence is characterised by the use of chopsticks, bowls and other general Southern Chinese traits. There was also trade with Portuguese in Hue after 1630, which is seen in the use of chili and shrimp pastes (Brissenden 2007:484).

Minh Mang was the emperor of Vietnam in the early 19th Century. He had decided to try and unify the country, culturally and politically. People across the whole country were supposed to adopt the Vietnamese culture, especially the food and agriculture like they were in Northern Vietnam. He made up a program which included the creation of culinary customs, such as that non-sticky white rice was the heart of every meal. People should share food, but have an individual bowl with the right kind of rice and nước mắm as flavouring and chopsticks as utensils (Peters 2012:29). The people in the north and central Vietnam were used to eat with chopsticks, whereas the influence of different groups, like the Cham, Khmer,
Malays and Europeans in the South meant that some people ate with their hands. The different climate, crops and dishes in the South also posed problems for the mission of creating a unified Vietnam culinary culture (Peters 2012:30).

There were many food shortages in central and Northern Vietnam in the early-mid 19th Century. After 1858 and the French invasion, the French were writing many books about the traditional village life for interested readers back in France. Many of the French booked overly generalized and simplified the culinary habits of the villagers. The generalizations of a singular Vietnamese cuisine were studied by educated Vietnamese who learned about their own culture and the national image of the “traditional” Vietnamese cuisine developed (Peters 2012:49). After 1897, heavy taxes on salt and rice alcohol were introduced by the French, much to the discontent of the Vietnamese whose opposition to the French rule increased notably (ibid: 2012:81).

There was a big Chinese trading community in Vietnam since the 17th Century, if not before. Many of them who worked with food were of Cantonese origin. They introduced new dishes, especially in the cities, and some of them developed slowly to Vietnamese soups, like lẩu (hot pot) (which is quite a common soup in street food restaurants). The popular noodle soup Phở emerged in the first decades of the 20th Century, allegedly, from a Cantonese noodle soup, which combined the beef broth and beef scraps that had become more available after the French had introduced more cattle to the country to please their own appetites. The French only liked certain cuts of meat, which left beef scraps and bones to be used for others (Peters 2012:128).

Many French also wanted to eat French food and wine, flour, milk and canned foods were exported to Vietnam. Boulangeries and bakeries started spreading in the cities soon after the French arrival. Urban populations used French foods as supplements to their own diet. Some Vietnamese saw advertisements praising the benefits of the sweet, condensed milk which was aimed for French children and bought it for their children. More advertisements were made which gave the impression that one becomes stronger when consuming the milk. Initially urban Vietnamese started using the milk and came up with other uses for it, e.g. in creamy sauces, desserts and in coffee. The French had started many coffee plantations after their arrival, which also introduced coffee to many Vietnamese. A new favourite coffee style emerged, strongly brewed coffee, with sweetened condensed milk (Peters 2012:191-196).
7.2 Defining street food and fast food?

The definitions of street food and fast food vary quite much. I see street food as something that’s still today most commonly eaten by the large majority of the population entailing cooking techniques and ingredients that have been used in Vietnam for a clearly longer time, e.g. 50 years, than that of fast food. One other definition which I would point out is that many of the fast food restaurants differ from street food restaurants in the way that they’re often chain restaurants owned by a foreign multinational company (except for VietMac and Pho24). In my definition street food would be considered more ‘traditional’ than fast food. However as seen above, street food is far from static and it’s changing throughout the time and adapting certain outside influences. As an example I would consider the French influenced baguette sandwich Báhn Mi as street food, while I would consider a sandwich from the chain Subway as fast food.

My informants commonly called foods such as: sushi, pasta and pizza as fast food. Generally foreign foods were often considered as fast food. This is quite interesting from a time-perspective, e.g. considering that getting a pizza would often take a longer time than getting street food. Few people mentioned that street food can be fast food, when it’s served quickly.

7.3 Importance of rice

“In any South-East Asian language, to ‘eat rice’ means to have a meal, and to ‘cook rice’ is to prepare a meal (...) Rice is the central staff in a meal with fish, vegetable, or meat dishes and sauce mixtures, all of which encompass the five tastes-salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and pungent.” (Yen Ho 1995:42).

Rice is the most commonly used crop and holds a very unique status in South-East Asia. Rice is used in many forms: the grains can be made into flour which is used to make rice noodles, rice vermicelli noodles and the rice can be used to make flat rice paper sheets for the Vietnamese spring rolls, gỏi cuốn (Trieu & Marcel 2005:6).

Other noodles that are quite common are glass noodles (miến in the North) that are made from mung bean starch and egg noodles made from wheat (ibid: 2005:21). Consumers have different rice preferences, depending on the region. “Consumers in north and central Vietnam prefer short and bold grain types while south Vietnamese like long and slender types” (Hossain et al. 2003:2526-7).
Only around a quarter of the territory in Vietnam is good farmland (land that can be used for e.g. wet rice cultivation) and most of the Kinh live on this land (Jamieson 1995:4) Rice occupies almost 60% of the cropped area in the country. There is an imbalance in the country when it comes to rice production as some regions are not as suitable for rice production as others. The surplus rice from the Mekong River Delta in the south is used mainly for exports, while there are still provinces in the central and northern regions which suffer from food deficit. Underdeveloped transportation systems and infrastructure have impeded the movement of rice to the deficit areas from the surplus areas and also increase the cost to acquire food (Hossain: 2003:2524). Next I’ll tell shortly about the land reform changes in Vietnam, which greatly affected the amount of rice that could be produced and consumed.

In 1953 the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) initiated the Land Reform Law, which meant that the land was redistributed from individuals to the VCP. Farmers who were in cooperatives were organized to smaller production units, who were under surveillance from unit leadership committees and the cooperative’s committees for management and inspection. As the cooperatives paid farmers only according to their time, as it was too hard to monitor the performance of hundreds of cooperative members, it resulted in the farmers not benefitting from working harder than their neighbours and many worked poorly as they would still receive the equal share of the net harvest. The cooperatives were inefficient and the administrative bureaucracy in the top was often corrupt, and the farmers got paid after they had fulfilled the state quotas, which resulted in a declining per capita grain production in North Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s (Raymond 2008:48).

In early 1988, many provinces in Northern Vietnam, including Hanoi, had a food shortage which caused a famine which affected around 40% of the northern rural population. The Vietnamese Communist Party had to do something. Cooperatives were urged to give unused land to individual households and farmers were allowed to privately raise livestock without any limits. In April 1988, Resolution 10 was introduced which gave households the right for all phases of cultivation as well as the option to sell crops to the state at negotiated prices or to merchants and individuals at market rates. Farmers were also allowed to buy seeds, irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides from private suppliers. These changes led to an enormous acceleration in agricultural productivity. Vietnamese rice exports more than doubled from 0.91 million tons to 1.95 million tons from 1988-1992. The changes were a huge success and there was a motivation to work more as you’d gain more which was often not the case before (Raymond 2008:55-56). The rice cultivation has been intensified with the use of new rice
varieties that take a shorter time to mature. This has resulted in an increased rice cropping intensity from 133% in 1980 to 188% in 2000, while the actual net land used for rice cultivation have decreased from 4.2 to 4.0 million ha (Hossain et al. 2003:2523).

7.4 Ingredients and cooking

The preparation before cooking can take up a lot of time, however for most of the dishes the actual cooking processes are not that complicated, which is also common for food in China as well as throughout Southeast Asia. Vietnamese cooking uses more sugar, less oil and more fresh uncooked vegetables and herbs than Chinese food. There are also similarities with Thai food in the fishy and sour flavours, but the Vietnamese food is less hot. There are variations throughout the country, which depend on the influences from neighbours and the different cultural history (Brissenden 2007:485).

Characteristics for the food in the south include tamarind, lemongrass and coconut (usually coconut water instead of coconut milk). The cooking in the north has some similarities with the cuisine of Laos, in the use of country fish paste, galangal and the habit of grilling over charcoal (ibid: 2007:487). The use of seasonings, like salt, sugar, MSG, fish sauce and soy sauce and dipping sauces for the ready food is common (Brissenden 2007:489).

*Nước mãm*, a salty, fermented fish sauce has quite a central place within the Vietnamese cooking. It’s made by putting fresh anchovies and salt in layers in big wooden barrels. The process takes almost six months and the liquid which drips down from the barrel is poured over the layers of the fish. The nước mãm’s grading process is as refined as that of olive oil. It’s used in sauces and marinades and in cooking. *Nước mãm chấm* is a lighter dip sauce, made of nước mãm which is diluted with lime juice, water, (vinegar), crushed garlic and fresh red chilies. It’s a very common dipping sauce on the table, and used with spring rolls and as a dip to meat or fish (Trieu & Marcel 2005:9).

Fresh ingredients play a key part in Vietnamese cooking. The different lettuces and herbs are virtually always served raw and the salads have not too much dressing and vegetables and fish are lightly seasoned and gently cooked, which make the real flavours of the food to stand out. Stir-frying, grilling and deep-frying are the most commonly used cooking methods (ibid: 2005:16). The Vietnamese cooking utilizes most parts of the animals and not much is spilled. People also highly appreciate different textures in the food and one dish can have e.g. chewy, crunchy, crispy, spongey, liquid elements in it. Vietnamese food is often described as textural, with sharp, fresh flavours. It’s also more fragrant and tropical than Chinese food. The
Vietnamese cuisine stands apart from other Southeast Asian countries in its use of fresh leaves and herbs, which come in many different varieties, e.g. mint, basil and cilantro, some of which don’t grow outside the country (Triệu & Isaak 1998:10). Common spices such as: Lime, chili, ginger, shallot, garlic and pepper are also important sources of minerals and vitamins (Avieli 2011:43).

The most important source of meat is pork which is consumed by over 98% of the Vietnamese households. The urban consumers consume almost half of the total pork output in the country, even if they stand for a quarter of the total population (Dinh Xuan Tung et al. 2005:2).

Meat consumption has been rising in the country since the early 1990s, mainly because of decreasing prices due to an increase in production and due to peoples’ increasing awareness of the diet benefits. There has also been a simultaneous reduction in the intake of staple foods, such as rice and potato. This change is mainly attributed to people living in urban environments whereas the rural populations’ rice consumption has barely decreased at all. (Canh Quang Le 2008:285).

7.5 Eating patterns

The traditional eating pattern is to eat three meals a day. It’s not that common to have different foods for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the same meal could be eaten at different times. All of the foods are usually served and eaten at the same time. Traditional meals usually consist of: rice, soup made of meat or fish stock, vegetables and a dish of meat or fish cooked with vegetables (Carlson et al. 1982:231). Eating habits are slowly changing and there is an increasing amount of people who eat out and snack between meals (Fiquié & Moustier 2008:210). People often order rice over the phone or from rice wholesalers who live nearby (Fiquie & Moustier 2008:213). On average rural households consume more calories than urban households, as the rural work often includes manual farm work, which requires more energy.

Food sharing is important for the Vietnamese and food is often served in common dishes, which are then picked with chopsticks to people’s personal bowls. Considering that Vietnamese cuisine includes hundreds, if not thousands of dishes, the daily meals at home are surprising uniform. Lunch and dinner are often similar and usually include a mild soup, mixed raw vegetables, a dish containing cooked meat (or tofu) with vegetables and a bowl of fish sauce as a condiment (Avieli 2011:43).
According to a Study by Vu Thi Hoa of 413 secondary school and high school students, Vietnamese teenagers prefer meat products and vegetables to fish. They prefer chicken, then beef, eggs and vegetables and pork in a descending order (Vu 2010:32). Youth from Hanoi clearly didn’t like seafood as much as people from the other cities: Ca Mau, Da Nang, Nha Trang. I have to point out that all of those cities are right by the sea (opposed to Hanoi), which can affect the freshness and types of seafood eaten (Vu 2010:48).

Every Vietnamese household spent on average 53% of their disposable income on food and drinks (Nguyen 2012:35). Food sales stand for two-thirds of total retail sales (Nguyen 2012:36). When household incomes’ increases it’s more likely that they shift to more calorie-expensive foods, meaning that often they would eat less staples, like rice and eat more fish and fruits instead. It’s also more likely that the household would buy less regular rice and more glutinous rice (ibid: 2008:166). The expenditure for rice is 17% in urban areas. Eating food away from home makes up for over 16% of the food expenditures in urban areas. For the poorest 20% rice consumption accounts for 41%, meat and fish for 26% and food away from home for 3% of the food expenditure. For the richest 20%, rice takes up 14%, fish and meat 32% and food away from home 18% of the food expenditure (Linh Hoang Vu: 2008:111).

The location of the household affects the food consumption to a higher degree than factors such as, the gender, education and age of the head of the household (ibid: 2008:291). The amount of meat consumed (grams/person/day) has more than doubled from 1987 until 2000, from 24.4 to 51.0g; and the dairy has trebled from 2.9 to 10.3g; and there has been a huge increase in the consumption of fresh fruit, from 4.1g to 62.4g (Le Thị Top et al.2003:3) The general living standard has clearly increased, however the poor have not been benefitting proportionally from this, which means that the inequality between the population has been rising a bit (Thang & Popkin 2004:2).

7.6 Meanings of food:

People are proud of their own cooking and traditional food. People attribute different meanings to food. The festive national holiday treat’s bánh tété’s texture, colours and composition all have a symbolic explanation that link it to Vietnam. There is a traditional medicine Thuộc Bá, which stems from China, which operates with two complimentary forces yin and yang and different foods have different properties and it’s important to try and eat a balanced amount to get the correct nutritional elements. This also explains how many of the everyday foods have different textures and flavours. Certain foods should be used for
certain physical conditions. Eating some rare animals is considered to help one possess certain properties that will be beneficial for one’s health or give one luck.

As an example, the rice growers in South-East Asia believe that the rice grain has a soul. Rice is seen as life and considered to be a gift from the gods. There is a rice guardian called Phi (which is also common with Laos) who is treated with respect, care and certain thanksgiving rituals and ceremonies. Certain oblations, such as glutinous rice, coconut, eggs, sugar-cane, areca and betel nuts are put on the holy water sprinkled ground. There are also many taboos that the rice farmers have to consider during the time when the rice grows and ripens (Yen Ho 1995:40).

7.6.1 Symbolization of Rice Cakes

The rice cakes *Bánh tét* are the most prominent food item in the Vietnamese New Year festival. They consist of blocks of sticky-rice which is stuffed with green beans and fatty pork in the middle. The whole thing is then wrapped in bamboo leaves and the package is boiled overnight. The Rice cakes are fatty, heavy, filling and sticky which makes them stand out from the everyday Vietnamese cuisine which is often light, fresh and crispy. The cakes’ square and round shape is said to represent the shapes of earth and (plots of land) and heaven. The cakes can also be seen to represent the countryside’s spatial organization with the many rice fields, small areas of vegetables and pigs (and other farm animals) which are kept near the house. The stickiness of the rice opposed to everyday plain rice have been suggested to stand for unity and social cohesion (Avieli 2005:172-6).

The words *Tét* and *bánh* are borrowed from Chinese the usage of the condiment soy sauce strongly hints that the rice cakes actually have a Chinese background. The preserved rice cakes were previously used during wars as they are a good source of iron and this tradition adds another symbolic dimension as something that will survive and endure hardships, like the people (Avieli:2005:178). The rice cakes can be made at home or bought from the market or supermarket and it’s also an important food offering to the ancestors, representing a symbolic link between kinship and rice. The rice cakes are popular gift items to exchange between friends and kin. There are also different styles of rice cakes to choose depending on which regions one wants to identify with (McAllister 2012:119).
7.6.2. Thuốc Bắc

_Thuốc Bắc_, is a traditional Vietnamese medicine, which came from China. It’s based on a system where there are two complementary, yet opposing forces – female _yin_ or cold and male _yang_ or hot. Yin and Yang have to be in equilibrium with the five universal elements (wood, earth, fire, metal and water) and their characteristics. A thing or a person is never completely yin or yang, it varies on a scale until either one dominates. A food is predominantly hot or cold or balanced, if it’s a neutral food, like rice or wheat noodles. There are five flavours (bitter, sweet, sour, pungent-spicy, salt) are basic in the Vietnamese cooking. It can be hard to say whether a food is yin or yang, however it’s clear which cold and hot foods should be used for various physical conditions, e.g. sicknesses, pregnancies etc. The balancing between the five elements makes sure the diet will have a variety of different foods in it (Carlson et al. 1982:233-4). According to the five elements theory, everything in the world are composed of fire, wood, metal, water and earth. These elements are interconnected (e.g. as in water extinguishes fire, fire destructs wood etc.) and the relations of the elements and their transformations generate the movement of life. As for the culinary dimension; rice stands for earth (and centre), greens for wood, soup for water, dry dish (often meat) for metal, fish sauce for fire. There are also five basic cooking modes: fried/grilled, raw, steamed, boiled, and fermented and five textures: crispy, chewy, crunchy, silky, and soft (Avieli 2011:44).

Another example of symbolism of food is the thought that eating certain animals will have some kind of positive effect on one’s life. E.g. turtles are seen as a sign of luck and there are quite many foods that are seen as having various health benefits, from lowering cholesterol, to giving energy and enhancing skin quality or male virility (none of which are scientifically proved), e.g. shark fins, reproductive organs of some animals, and rhino horns. Some of the animals are endangered and hunted illegally which have created headlines and demanding people to stop these kind of practices. Some of these thoughts are based on traditional Chinese medicine⁴ Meat of jungle beasts, like: bear, tiger, monkey, snake, elephant and lizard is expensive, rare and sought after. As in many places, there’s a convention that people absorb the power of the animals they eat. This kind of food is mainly associated with men (Avieli 2011:44). Most Vietnamese avoid dog meat, because of religious or moral reasons, however meat is eaten in the north mainly by men (Avieli 2011:44)

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Most people whom I interviewed were proud of their traditional native food and asked me whether I had tried certain dishes and recommended some I hadn’t tried yet. I also have some of them as friends on Facebook and I have seen all of them post photos about their own traditional food and often street food quite many times and seen it described in very positive terms, whereas I only recall seeing two photos within almost two years of none native food dishes. While the internet can spread influences of trends and influences from other countries it can also make it easier to spread ideas outward from one’s own culture and people decide what ideas they wish to emulate and in what ways. I think these kinds of movements are quite complicated and it would be wrong to generalize a completely equal exchange of ideas in both directions and to try and apply models of the spreading of ideas from one country to another.

There are different symbolical meanings for eating certain foods and rare animals. The rice cakes bánh Tét are considered to have many symbolical meanings attributing it to Vietnam. The Thuốc Bắc-traditional medicine, which stems from China divides food into different complementary categories such as yin and yang and neutral. Different foods are thought to have different capabilities, which are divided into five basic tastes and five textures and it’s preferable to eat a meal compose by all of the different elements. This has also affected the outlook of the everyday dishes that people prepare and buy that have many different textures and flavours. Some people think that eating certain rare animals will give luck or certain health benefits, such as more energy, more radiant skin, lowering one’s cholesterol, increasing virility.

7.7 Food safety

There is a growing concern of food safety and quality, which is shared by a wide range of people who buy food from local markets, street vendors, supermarkets and who eat at restaurants. For consumers in Vietnam, regardless of their economic situation, the main worry concerning food quality is about pesticides in fruits and vegetables and antibiotics in meat (Fiquié & Moustier 2008:213). Fast food restaurants also point out that some of their food is organic or produced locally. The Vietnamese media reports actively about negative health impacts (and deaths) that were caused by contaminated and spoiled food. According to a survey from 2009 targeting 499 households in urban and peri-urban Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City, more than 90% of the respondents said that they had heard or seen reports about negative health impacts caused by spoiled/and or contaminated food in media, especially on
TV (Mergenthaler et al. 2009:272). Statistics from the Ministry of Health’s Food Safety Department say that 40,000 people ate contaminated food every year, which resulted in 46 deaths and 4800 hospitalizations between 2007-2011.

In a research study from 2012 covering eight provinces with 1050 vegetable samples, it was shown that 51.24% contained too much pesticides according to WHO standards and 47% of the samples had exceeding amounts of nitrate and heavy metal substances. Another research conducted by Hanoi Medical University found E. coli bacteria in around 72% of the 660 collected vegetable samples in Hanoi and Nam Dinh (The Anh et al.2012:6). Over 300 laws by different ministries have been completed concerning regulations, standards and certification processes of agricultural products. As of 2010, less than 5% of the vegetables in Hanoi are identified as safe by the consumers. In April 2015 the WHO made a commitment to co-operate with the Vietnamese Ministry of Health in trying to ensure food safety. A centre that releases early warnings and risks analysis of food safety is planned to open in 2016 and it will operate on three levels: ministerial, national or municipal/provincial and on a grassroots level. This system will make it significantly faster to bring emergency food safety causes under control and to handle information fast.\(^5\)

7.7.1. VietGAP

There is a VietGAP (GAP=good agricultural practices) standard which was implemented in 2008, it requires the producers to write down their practices and examine production and harvesting according to many food safety criteria (Moustier & The Anh 2010:1). An external inspector comes and checks these records and the government plans to make sure that VietGAP is respected in at least half of all vegetable- and tea-producing fields by 2015. However the external inspection costs are high, an equivalent of 1000€ for a hectare with VietGAP, which the small-scale producers can’t afford (Moustier & The Anh: 2010:1). Eighty-five percent of the farming households in Vietnam are small. There is no punishment or sanctions for farmers who violate the regulations and safe production procedures. The Food Safety Law is followed by three ministries: the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT) and the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

Each ministry has offices that are in charge of their own area of food control. Processed food products, can involve three different categories of food, which files under all the three

different ministries responsibility, this often creates problems as there tends to be an information gap between the different departments that are under the three ministries (The Anh 2012:20). To make it even more confusing each ministry has an own definition of safe vegetables. The state, market and civil society should be integrated which would assist in building and maintaining a sustainable quality management system, regarding food safety (ibid: 2012:37). It’s also problematic that there are reportedly more unofficial and illegal trading at the borders to China, Cambodia and Laos than official and legal trading as the quality control system and scanning is weak or non-existent, which means that it’s very hard to guarantee the quality of the vegetables, fruits and agricultural products (The Anh 2012:20).

7.7.2 Safe vegetable-programme

The Vietnamese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural development implemented a programme called “safe vegetables” in 1995 as there was so much public interest regarding the safety of vegetables. The programme taught farmers how to use pesticides and fertilisers ‘reasonably’ as well as how to use water from non-polluted rivers and wells. In 2001 the safe vegetables farming area covered 30% of the total vegetable farming area in the Hanoi municipality. The vegetables sold in supermarkets are all sold under the “safe vegetable” label (seen on the packages or on a sign next to the shelves). However, the majority of the “safe vegetable” farmers are selling their vegetables outside supermarkets. According to some estimates made in 2004, 8 times more vegetables (24 tons vs. 3 tons) were traded daily in safe vegetable shops and market stalls than in supermarkets in Hanoi. The grand majority of vegetables (350 tons) were traded in other retail places in Hanoi (Moustier et al. 2007:12-14).

7.8 Supermarkets

There has been a supermarket revolution in Asia starting in the late 1990s. It has been driven by the growth in incomes, urbanization and from foreign direct investment (FDI), modernization in procurement systems to be able to lower costs, new diversification plans to meet consumer segment needs. The total sales from retail supermarket chains in Vietnam grew 20 times from 2001-2009 (Reardon et al. 2012:12333). The first supermarkets in Hanoi opened in 1983. In 2005 there was 126 supermarkets in Vietnam, 55 in Hanoi and 71 in Hồ Chí Minh City (Moustier et al. 2007:4). Supermarkets say that the quality of the produce is their main priority when choosing a supplier of vegetables (ibid: 2007:12). A comparison of 10 food products, ranging from staples to vegetables, meat and fruit showed that prices in supermarkets in Hanoi were 10-40% higher than in traditional markets (in 2008). However in
Hồ Chí Minh City the price difference between traditional markets and supermarkets is very little (mostly as there are more of them, which brings the costs down) (Fiquié & Moustier 2008:212). Some people go to supermarkets often, especially on the weekends just to ‘spend time, hang out’ in an environment which has air conditioning and to look at new and imported products and to enjoy the ‘modern’ environment. Some place even have free play areas for children (ibid: 2008:214). One advantage that the traditional open-air markets and street sellers have over supermarkets is that some of them offer purchases on credit, which you can’t get in supermarkets (Fiquié & Moustier: 2008:215).

7.9 Vietnam’s role in the international food trade

After the late 1970s a number of changes have taken place in the world food trade. The trade dominance in “classical” food products, such as coffee, sugar, cocoa, tea etc. has been clearly decreasing in relative terms, due to the quickly increasing trade in other food products, like vegetables, fish, poultry, fresh fruit and dairy products. These products are often exported after they have been processed (‘processed foods’). Forces on both the demand and supply side has accommodated this shift in the trade goods. There is an increasing demand for imported processed food items in developed countries, this is due to a number of reasons, like the international migration, communications with other countries and tourism as well as the “internationalization of food habits”, as well as improvements in food technology and refrigeration facilities (Athukorala 2009:100).

From 1990-2006 the amount of non-oil exports from Vietnam was growing at an annual rate of 18.7% which was almost double of the average annual growth rates of developing countries (9.5%) (Athukorala 2009:99). Vietnam became the world’s third largest exporter of rice in 1992 (Raymond 2008:45). There are over 200 rice-exporting companies in Vietnam, however state owned Vinafood 1 and Vinafood 2 had over 55% of the market share in 2008 Vu & Glewwe: 2011:18-19). Looking at the total amount of non-oil exports, the share of the processed food exports have risen from 17.2% in 1992 to 43.3% in 2006. Much of these processed food exports from Vietnam have been fish products and preparations, however the share of pig and chicken meat as well as some vegetables in the processed food export has been growing rapidly (Athukorala 2009:102). The coffee production has increased by 15% annually in the 1990’s which also led to fast growth in coffee exports since the mid 1990’s (Agergaard et al. 2009:135). The food production in Vietnam is almost 1.5 times the value of
food consumption, reflecting Vietnam’s role as a major exporter of food products (Linh Hoang Vu 2008:207).

**Summary**

Rice is the main agricultural crop in Vietnam and also the most important food ingredient. It can be eaten in many different forms: as grains of rice, as noodles, as thin rice papers, as sticky rice, as compressed rice patties or as bread made from rice. The rice doesn’t only have a local significance as Vietnam is also the third largest exporter of rice in the world. Different foods have different nutritional properties and people assign certain foods with specific symbolic meanings, such as the banh Tet-rice cakes, which are mainly eaten during the Vietnamese New Year. People and its colours and texture and history are strongly linked to a symbol of the country of Vietnam and its brave inhabitants, despite it likely having Chinese origins. Avieli is making a great point in claiming that:

“*Foreign influence was always adjusted to the local ecological conditions, nutritional demands, cultural norms, and local tastes. Some foreign culinary aspects are evident in Vietnamese food, while others are deeply transformed and hard to observe.*” (Avieli 2011:44)

People are becoming increasingly aware of the risks of pesticides and there is a higher demand for safely produced food. Supermarkets are slowly getting more popular in the country for food purchasing. Next I’m going to discuss street traders’ role in the city.
8. STREET FOOD TRADE

This chapter will mainly focus on roaming street vendors in Hanoi and not on the permanent food stands- and restaurants in the city.

Street traders’ roles have changed throughout the last 150 years in Hanoi. Those changes have depended on the local authorities, ideologies and the French colonial influence. In most of the Old Quarter streets, around 20% of the residents have lived there before 1954. Many of the traders have been very adaptable in changing trade commodities after the demands of the urban population and their connections and experiences have helped them survive and work in constantly changing, often unstable environments (Turner 2009:11) A vast majority of the street vendors in Hanoi are women (Turner and Schoenberger 2012:4). The street vending is an activity that can be temporary, seasonal or full-time (Barthelmes 2012:6)

People have sold food on the streets at least before the start of the 20th Century (Koh 2008:147). During the pre-colonial times trade was often seen as naturally immoral as the traders was considered not to produce anything directly, but somehow they still had to persuade buyers to pay more for a product than the traders spent to obtain it. Back then trade was ranked below farming, artisanship and scholarship as an occupational status (Leshkowich 2008:12).

In 1954 at the end of the French era, it had become hard to feed the city’ population locally, because of the ‘insurgents’ who were fighting in the nearby countryside and the city was becoming increasingly dependent on external sources and in that year around 70-80% of the rice in Hanoi came from Saigon (today’s Hồ Chí Minh City). The distribution of the wanted goods required traders, and an increasing amount of them arrived in the city. In 1954 there was around 40,000 people who owned shops, market stalls incl. sidewalk hawkers and peddlers and they served the metropolitan area of 400,000 (Turley 1975:373). In 1958 the government implemented a plan to socialize all existing and new industries, this led to a decrease in street stalls and traders had to pay a monthly interest on their stock to the government, which often resulted in a significant loss in their trade. Many traders in the Old Quarter became part of larger collectives and individual businessmen were required to join co-operatives. This was a hard time for many people and ration coupons were needed in order to obtain staple goods, like rice, cloth, meat and rice from state-operated stores. Many traders slowed down their activities or stopped it altogether or they limited it to only trade secretly behind closed doors (Turner 2009:10).
After reunification in 1975, Hanoi became the capital of Vietnam which led to an increase in the population and most of the traders stayed in the co-operatives. Other traders produced goods at home that were sold through the state’s outlets in other places. The country was now officially a Communist one party state and trade was seen as non-productive in the society, which considered offering full employment, health care, education and housing for its citizens. There was around 300 state and collective stores in the city in 1984 (Quang & Kammeier 2002:379). The state didn’t like people to trade and make profit as they wanted to stress that people are equal and that people should work together for the common good of the country. There was also a few cases where products produced in factories outside the city were traded for coupons in shops in the Old Quarter. The trade was becoming more diversified after the war, as trading links which were often family-based were renewed between Hồ Chí Minh City and Hanoi. Also a black market trade was also increasing to complement the socialist system and some smuggled Western consumer goods could be found, if you knew where to look and whom to ask (Turner 2009:11). Since the early 1980s more and more second hand goods were sold along streets, the variety expanded as well to include snacks, cooked food, beverages. At some places the sellers occupied the pavement and in some streets with less traffic people were literally trading on the streets. The private sector accounted for 25.8% of the trade volume in 1975 which increased to 50.6% in 1983. The state didn’t appreciate this growth in the private sector, yet they couldn’t stop it (Koh 2008:147).

After the Đổi Mới the private sector became legally recognised and it was allowed to expand ones businesses and hire more employees. Since that more rights have been given to individual entrepreneurs, such as the Enterprise Law in 2001 which helped with business licensing procedures that helped the establishment of small enterprises. Many of the new businesses in the Old Quarter and older ones expanding was possible due to savings that families had collected earlier (before the market liberalisation) when working for the state. People had saved money as there was only a quite limited amount of services and goods available in the market before and because the state disapproved of people showing off their wealth. It was also useful to save money in order to prepare for possible harder times or changing conditions (Turner 2009:12). In 1988 the peasants were allowed to sell their remaining produce in the market after they had fulfilled the state contract amounts, which led to an increasing number of rural people to trade in the city (Koh 2008:145) By 1988, the vast
majority of the houses in the Old Quarter had opened up their front for selling goods again (Waibel 2004:38).

8.1 Street trade and the Informal Economy

Sometimes street food can be considered to be a part of the informal economy, especially in the form of roaming street vendors. Restaurants that have street seating would mainly be part of the formal economy. However there are also restaurants that for example make fake hygiene control certificates and who might have a good relationship with a local official and thus would not need to adhere to all the official rules and regulations. This goes to show that it can be complicated to exactly draw a line between formal and informal economy. There are different definitions of informal economy.

The term informal sector was first mentioned by Keith Hart in 1970, when he was analyzing mostly self-employed people in Ghana who were working outside the formal economy. Hart (1970) saw the workers as entrepreneurs, and not only as ‘marginal’. One modernization theory suggests that informal sector developments stem from transitory migratory flows of unskilled labour which have been launched by rapid urban industrialization. Another theory suggests that firms in the formal sector want to lower wages by keeping a reserve of surplus labour, which forces big numbers of unemployed or underemployed workers into the informal sector. A third theory suggests that firms in the formal sector want to lower their costs, which they do by ‘outsourcing’ high risk or marginal processes to the informal sector (Despres 1988:3). For an informal sector enterprise, all or at least some of the services or products are meant for barter or sale (except for the employment of paid domestic employees). The size of employment is below a certain threshold and or the enterprises are not registered under exact forms of national legislation (commercial acts, factories, tax or social security laws, professional groups’ regulatory acts, regulations or laws). The activities may take place without a fixed location, or in an (un-)identifiable place or in the enterprise owner’s home (Hussmanns 2004:3-4).

The term informal sector has been criticized because some does not consider it ‘a real sector’ and the term informal economy has become more popular and all encompassing. The term informal economy is often used to stand for economic activities that at least partly are operating outside the national and local laws and regulations. These informal activities are often seen as being outside the criminal economy, yet placed somewhere between legal illegal activities in a sort of in between “grey zone”.

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“It’s widely known that in developing and transition countries most informal sector activities are neither underground nor illegal, as they represent simply a survival strategy for the persons involved in them and for their households.” (Hussmanns 2004:9)

It can be that the products are legal, but the ways and processes in which they are made might not be completely legal, e.g. businesses that are not registered and do not pay taxes (Brown 2006:5). It can be very complicated to know if a business is in the informal sector, as some of its activities or procedures can be informal while some can be formal.

Trade accounts for 31% of the informal sector and services for 26% in Vietnam, the rest is in manufacturing and construction. Most of the sales and purchases in the informal sector stays within it and there are only marginal amounts of trade with the formal sector (Cling et al. 2010:6). This means for example that a street trader in fruit and vegetables would most often buy her goods from other informal sources, rather than from an official market, which she would later sell in the informal market. The informal sector is playing an important role for the formal sector as it is increasing its competitiveness e.g. in competing with lower prices. According to the definitions 82% of the employment in Vietnam can be defined as informal and it’s also the informal sector is the biggest employer both in Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City as elsewhere in the country (except for in agriculture). It’s very hard to know exactly how many people are working in the informal economy because the informal economy is changing constantly and different countries use different classifications of informality, e.g. it might not be necessary to register a company, the size of the enterprise can vary and mixed criteria can be used (Brown 2006:6).

Most of the informal household businesses (84% of them) in Hanoi don’t have any premises from which to run their business which is also restraining them from hiring more workers. There is also more competition in Hanoi than in Hồ Chí Minh City (Cling et al.2010:15-20). Family relations and an extensive network of people are often very critical for operating stalls. Daughters, sons, brothers are often assisting the women in many important ways. There are also sellers who address their employees, in a familiar way, as if they would be relatives, even if it they wouldn’t be as that could influence people’s perception of the stall and believing it’s a family business is often positive for the customers and can help to make a sale (Leshkowich 2008:14).
People are often turning into the informal economy, due to complicated (seemingly unnecessary) bureaucracy and lack of regulations by the state (Brown 2006:6). A great majority of the informal household businesses think that registration is not mandatory (Cling et al. 2010:7). In Vietnam, all enterprises and registered household businesses, regardless of their size, have to register their permanent employees (who have at least a three-month employment contract) to the Vietnam Social Security (VSS). Women are less willing to register their businesses, however this is partly due to the fact that many don’t seem them as real “businesses”, rather as “additional” activities (Cling et al. 2010:29). Even if the businesses are not registered, more than a third of the informal household businesses are still paying at least one sort of tax in Hanoi (ibid 2010:31). The major part of the individual household businesses have only one worker who is working in the street or at home. The traditional view of women as nurturers have impacted their association with the informal market as supplemental workers whereas men have mainly been considered as “primary workers” (Leshkowich 2011:278).

Even licensed traders take part in ‘informal’ street trading activities. They can for example sell goods that they’ve received through illegal channels or bought from unregistered producers or traders and they can sublet their trading space ‘informally’ to other people.

“In Vietnam’s largely local, relationship-based economy, informality in fact constitutes a particular mode of social interaction and economic exchange and should, therefore, be treated analytically as an aspect of the moral economy rather than as a separate sector from the formal” (Endres 2013:5).

I think this is a good point as it shifts the attention to the actual every day meaning of the informality for the people. Moral economy, in this context would be the social relationships that people have with friends, acquaintances and possibly local officials. An act of helping someone, who then helps you back, could be considered corruption if the other part is a local official or higher ranking worker for the state. People may have family members helping out when needed and some other friends to stand in and work for a shorter time, without following proposed (yet rarely strictly enforced) labour contracts or requirements. However this kind of relationships have existed for a long time and they’re part of people’s economic network.

The employment in the informal sector is expected to grow, because the formal sector doesn’t seem to provide enough jobs in the labour market and more people are moving from
agricultural activities to non-agricultural ones (Cling et al. 2010:23). These kind of developments have been mentioned by a few of my informants in chapter 4.

8.2 Ban of street vendors

On the 1st of July 2008 street vendors were banned from 62 streets and 48 public places in Hanoi, mostly located in the core centre of the city. The ban concluded that street vending is not aligned with the central authorities’ view of modernity, they want to get rid of it in order to make the city more beautiful and that it’s a non-productive activity that causes traffic congestion (People’s Committee of Hanoi 2008). Somewhat ironically foreign tourists and locals alike have been worried about the ban as many think it adds to the atmosphere of the city and it’s nice to see the women on their bikes wearing the traditional conical hats as well as the colourful products, such as fruits and flowers. It is also appears “nostalgic” and traditional to tourists, who are not aware of how restricted the street trading has been throughout the history (Lincoln 2008:263).

Before the ban took place, it had been calculated that there were about 5900 fruit street vendors and 5600 vegetable vendors who worked in greater Hanoi (inside the 2004 city limits). The ban is enforced and implemented at the lowest level of local urban administration, through the ward (phường). The state regime is negotiated to fit with the interests of the local officials and even the needs and concerns of residents through the ward. This kind of state-society relations means that the ward officials can be quite permissive and benign due to e.g. the socioeconomic situation of residents within their jurisdiction, while they are also minding their own informal interests, which often happens via corrupt activities. The ward officials are often mediating between those two ways and they can e.g. ignore the command to clear a street from street vendors, and explain it’s due to “local economic conditions”, while they are simultaneously accepting bribes (Turner and Schoenberger 2012:7). Another factor which can increase the distrust in the wards is the unevenness of their actions, as some of the officers are very strict with fines for roaming street traders and some are very lenient (Koh 2008:153).

Most of the roaming street vendors come from the surrounding countryside and they consider the city’s streets to be one of few alternatives for their livelihood, they often share a rented room in the city with other roaming street vendors and return to their village to visit family once a month or so (Turner and Schoenberger 2012:7). The agricultural employment in the rural surroundings of Hanoi (and Hồ Chí Minh City) have dropped from 58% in 1998 to 22% in 2006 (Cling et al. 2010:22)
There are also Hanoi residents who are street vending in order to make a living they are mostly operating from a fixed small stall in front of their house or close to it. A majority of the roaming street vendors say that the main reason for their trade is to save up money for the children’s school fees. This can be related to the state’s decreased social welfare provision. The monthly school fees can amount to VND 1-2 million (333kr-666kr or $46-$92, which is a heavy burden for street traders who typically earned around 333kr or $46 a month in 2009 and especially if you have many children (Turner and Schoenberger 2012:7).

The loss of a livelihood, due to the government having taken over a land area and thus a decreasing amount of land to cultivate is another main reason why roaming street traders head into the city to trade, despite the ban. The fixed street vendors, who are most often long-term Hanoi residents are selling things for different reasons, e.g. have extra money as pensions and elderly people are doing it in order to have something to do and to remain active. The fixed street vendors often see the roaming vendors as “outsiders” and of a lower social position. The roaming vendors on the other hand don’t like the favourable treatment that the fixed traders get by local officials (ibid: 2012:8).

The officials noticed that the ban wasn’t working as effectively as the thought and they decided to accept street roaming partially, mainly at places that didn’t interfere with the traffic too much, the city authority allowed some vendor trade activity on 57 streets and lanes in Hanoi. There were five principles that the vendors should follow:

“-vendors should be from poor families;
they shouldn’t contribute to traffic disorder (and thus would be allowed only at certain times of the day);
they shouldn’t be allowed where the pavement is too narrow;
they should clean up any rubbish at the end of the day;
and they should pay taxes to the ward” (Koh 2008:162).

A reason why the authorities don’t like the vendors is that they can make the road traffic slow down significantly which can be dangerous, when some of the roaming vendors stand by busy streets at peak hours to be able to attract as many customers as possible and this can slow down the traffic flow (Koh 2008:163). Another reason why the ban came into place is that the city officials want to portray a modern and developed image of the city. However the fact that the rules are not strictly followed show that the city officials are aware of the street traders’ benefits and convenience to buy food and products, which many of the officials use
themselves. They also know that some of the traders couldn’t make a living if they didn’t trade, which brings up moral questions.

There are different branches of the state that work with security, policing and crowd control, they are: ward-level security, public security, traffic police, inspector and mobile police. However only the ward officials and public security groups can fine the roaming vendors and it happens that the other branches of the police support the street vendors by buying goods from them, even if they operate in banned places. The street vendors are using subtle, covert means to go around regulations and their enforcements and in abiding laws in ways that they see fit. The traders are also noticing the spaces and borderlines where the police operate, so that they can for example run into the neighbouring ward were the police can’t fine them (officially) if it’s outside their ward area. Many stay clear from the Old Quarter due to the abundance of police in the area. However traders have also noticed when the public security have their lunch breaks and some of them take the opportunity to go into the Old Quarter at that time (Turner and Schoenberger: 2012:10).

It can also happen that the police confiscate all of the goods. In some cases the street traders can claim the goods back, for a fee (Endres 2013:3) The ward-level police have also expressed that it’s hard to fine local people who they meet every day and have known for a long time and it’s difficult to follow the law strictly as they risk to lose votes and their “authority”. Both roaming and fixed street vendors work together in informing about the police’s whereabouts, so that they can for example move their goods away from the pavement into the house of a friend (Turner and Schoenberger 2012:11).

Even if these people are in a subordinate position they still have agency and are aware of their position in the society and to the state, which they are dealing with through their actions and their work in trying to reduce the effects of the dominant ideology towards their actions. These kind of everyday procedures have often worked more effectively than some organised actions such as protests (Turner and Schoenberger 2012:6). The mobile street traders are challenging and negotiating the planning policies that are decided by the state authorities (Barthelmes 2012:6). The street vending is often seen as a sign of underdevelopment and poverty and that is connected to a thought of the street vending staying in the way of prosperity and economic growth (ibid:2012:7).

The street vendors are providing the urban population with cheap goods, such as food and services and thus have an important function in the society. The street vending is useful as it
creates jobs and helps many people to fight poverty while also providing convenient and cheap options for urban residents (Bhowmik 2005:2261). A majority of the informants I interviewed bought food on the streets and many of them thought it was convenient. Also I didn’t hear anyone who thought that street vendors should stop working. Street vendors are mainly competing for customers with markets than with supermarkets (of which there are only few in the city) (Jensen and Peppard Jr 2007:239).

In a survey conducted by Jensen and Peppard Jr. before the ban of 2008, 51% of the interviewed said that street vending should be banned. Those who didn’t agree stated that it shouldn’t because these people should be able to make a living somehow. 33% of the interviewed think that the street vendors don’t weigh correctly and cheat with the weight of their products and 44% said something about their poor quality products. 46% say that the street vendors should return to the countryside if they are banned, to do farm work (26%). 87% of the respondents said that if the street vendors won’t be banned they should change the way they are selling. 67% said they should sell in fixed markets (ibid:2007:248).

However most people really liked the convenience in dealing with them, as they might walk close to their work and home and the fact that you can buy smaller quantities of goods (than you can sometimes at markets) (Jensen & Peppard Jr. 2007:243). One problem that affects the street vendors is that they are also working in and on streets with already heavy traffic and some people consider that the vendors are adding to the traffic congestion and this can also lead to fewer people buying from them, if it’s hard to reach them.

**Summary**

Street vendors have been a part of the Hanoi for over 150 years. They are mainly selling food, but also other products such as books, lighters, movies and tobacco. They have faced resistance throughout the years in the form of bans and their movements in the city have been restricted to certain streets and areas. Street vendors provide people with goods conveniently, e.g. if they for example walk past one’s workplace or home. This chapter has also shown how the state, mainly in the shape of local officials, can be quite flexible.
9. CASE STUDY: OBSERVATIONS OF STREET FOOD AND FAST FOOD PLACES

9.1 Observations of street food places

There are a lot of street food stands and restaurants throughout the city. Some of them don’t have any indoor areas, but rather have everything prepared on the street, or on the curb of the street. Some places have an inside area as well as a kitchen inside. Few places don’t have any outdoor seating. The outdoor seats are usually small plastic chairs. The space outside is often rather crowded during the peak hours of the day and you shouldn’t be afraid to sit close to a stranger.

Pretty much all of the street food stands look the same and even use a very similar font for their name and the name of the food they are serving. For a non-native it can be very hard to distinguish a place from another, if they were all right next to each other, as most of them have very similar signs with similar colours and fonts, mainly stating which foods they sell.

The street food places opening times vary quite a bit, some have open in the mornings, some also for lunch time and most of them, if not all, are open in the evening. Lunch is roughly from 10:30am to 2pm and dinner; around 7-10pm. Some places are open in between lunch and dinner, but it’s clearly quieter if you eat, at say 4pm. I think it was interesting to see how the street food stands and shops had so long opening times. I could’ve for example bought a pair of jeans on a Sunday at 9:30pm (outside the night market) in a small clothing store. There was also a big night market which was open until midnight on the weekend, selling a range of different things, clothes being the most common good. As for the food stalls and restaurants, midnight seemed to be the curfew. This was true for outdoor beer areas (set of plastic chairs) as well. There was also a night shop which was open 24/7 within a 5 minute walking distance from my hostel (I saw another three of them in the whole of Hanoi).

The street food places mainly serve traditional food. Most of the dishes are savoury and contain noodles or rice in some form. As for the definition of traditional food I stick to the definition I introduced in the research question in meaning the most common food eaten in the country, which is considered ‘native’ and have been eaten for over 60 years. While the traditional food is also influenced from abroad, it consists almost only of local ingredients and is produced with old cooking techniques. The difference to fast food has little to do about a
time aspect of the food serving, but more about the main origin of the (style of) food and the fact that the majority of the fast food places are foreign multinational companies.

The most popular Vietnamese dish in Hanoi and quite possibly worldwide is the noodle soup, Phở. The origin of Phở is unclear, some say it’s evolved from a Mongolian Hot Pot, while some others claim it was invented in Southern China when some Vietnamese fled there from the French occupation in the late 19th Century and was influenced by local Chinese dishes. Another theory is that it’s influenced from Polynesians who were one of the first settlers in South Vietnam. Phở is however most popular in the North of Vietnam and especially in Hanoi (Greeley 2002:80) The dish spread to the South after 1954 when around a million North Vietnamese fled away from the new Communist regime. The recipe of phở differs a bit from place to place, mainly depending on how they prepare the broth, but it commonly includes: noodles, beef or chicken, fish sauce, onion, lime, mint, cilantro, Thai basil and spices, such as clove and ginger (ibid: 2002:81). I thought it was interesting that some people told me that they (or their parents) never make, Phở at home because it takes many hours to make the stock. They usually do some faster dishes with rice or noodles instead.

I have converted the Vietnamese Dong prices to SEK (kr) and USD ($). The prices of a warm main dish, typically vary from 8.3kr-16.6kr or $1.1-$2.3. There also kind of hybrid places, which are mainly catered towards tourists, which have a menu (which is rare for most street food places) and serve some traditional dishes as well as foreign dishes, like pasta, pizza and beef. These places are unsurprisingly, often more expensive (noodle dish can cost 20-26kr $2.9-$3.7) - yet not always. There was for example a place in the tourist neighbourhood south from the Old Quarter which served Phở, and Bún chả and Bún thịt nướng for 10kr or $1.3 which was even cheaper than some “regular” street food places (see also p. 95-98).

As was discussed earlier, street traders can be seen walking around in Hanoi, especially in the central part of the city starting early in the morning. They sell various things, ranging from food products, such as pineapple, bananas, eggs, fish, lottery tickets, chewing gum to books and small souvenirs. Some food is also sold by people walking around with a cart, often selling Bánh Bao - a kind of dumpling which can contain eggs, meat or be sweet and there are also people walking around with baskets of fruit.

There are also few people selling fries and similar fried potato curls and sausages as well as kebab (toasted white bread, grilled pork meat, red cabbage, carrots, mayonnaise, onions) stands, which are mainly in the Old Quarter. Some people also have a mobile cart and sell Bánh Mì sandwiches. The sandwich resembles a sub sandwich. The baguette-style bread often includes: pork liver paté or pork meat, fried egg, carrots, cabbage (can be pickled), mayonnaise, cucumber, coriander, onions and chili sauce. The dish is an example of the fusion of French colonial past represented by the baguette, mayonnaise and paté and more commonly used “Vietnamese” ingredients.

The photo shows a street food place which has both an indoor area and some seats outside.
(Tommi Helmisaari 20.3.2013)

The opening times for the street food stalls are generally longer than for the fast food restaurants. However the fast food places are open more constantly, whereas the street food places might close down for a few hours in the middle of the day. The street food places are open longer than the fast food places, I didn’t see any fast food places that were open longer than 10:00pm (the McDonald’s opened in Hồ Chí Minh City after my visit would be an
exception being open 24/7 h), and whereas not all street food places serve food later than 10 pm, many still do.

9.2 Fast food places

There are both American and Asian fast food companies in Hanoi. I will list the most prominent examples below to provide some information about the fast food scene in the country. American fast food companies have opened up at an increasing rate which is a trend that is still going strong. The term fast food has a Western insinuation and is here mainly represented by restaurants that are global multinational companies. The common definition of fast food in dictionaries, e.g. Oxford dictionary and Collins dictionary, state that it’s food that can be prepared quickly and that needs little preparation before it’s served and that it can be carried with you (as take-away). Some also point out that it’s standardized and can be processed food.

All of the fast food places have outlets dispersed throughout the city and some of the outlets are located in shopping malls, together with other chains. The opening times of the fast food restaurants are roughly from 10 am to 9 pm, some close a bit earlier and some a bit later. They are constantly open though, which differs a bit from some street food stalls & restaurants that can be closed for some hours between lunch and dinner time. As mentioned before, many street food restaurants are open later and also throughout the day.

Many of the multinational fast food chains use the franchising system in their operations, which is also the case for all of the main fast food chains in Vietnam, KFC, Lotteria, BBQ Chicken, as well as Burger King and Pizza Hut in Hanoi (as well as Subway and McDonald’s in Hồ Chí Minh City). KFC has 60% of the whole fast food market. Even if there was high increase in overall food prices, fast food maintained their prices, which made their dishes comparatively “more affordable” between 2010 and 2013 (Le Ngoc 2013:13).

To open a franchise the franchisees have to pay a fee and be approved by the mother company, after that the franchisees usually have to pay a certain percentage of their sales to the mother company. Many of the franchise restaurants attract young people with little or no

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8 (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fast-food, at 24.2.2015)
work experience to work for them, which can make it easier for the companies to pay them less. A lot of complaints have been issued around these problems (Ritzer 2011:38).

Below I will list the most prominent fast food chains in Hanoi and some noteworthy impressions that I gathered from my observations in the locations.

KFC. KFC is the first major global fast food company establishing in Vietnam, in Hồ Chí Minh City in 1997 and in Hanoi in 2006. KFC is also the biggest when it comes to the number of outlets in the country, having over 140 restaurants located throughout the country. At one KFC, they had wash basin on the two floors, yet no toilet! In another KFC they had the separate wash basins on every floor and a toilet with a sign of how to wash your hands (below), I didn’t notice this anywhere else. This “educative” poster, is quite a ‘hands-on’ approach to showing that the company cares about hygiene and wants you to care about it too.

Instructions on ‘Proper hand washing’ at KFC (photo by me, March 2013).

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_BBQ Chicken_. BBQ Chicken is a South Korean brand that opened its first restaurant in Hanoi in 2006 and it has plans to expand outside the city\(^\text{11}\). I’ve struggled to find out how many locations they are opened in, but there are at least 8 in Hanoi. At another BBQ Chicken the interior is white and dark brown. There were lots of dishes left on tables. The place had 3 floors and about 16 seats and 4 outside on a balcony, which is quite rare to see. The seats were also different on the top floor, they were more restaurant booth like, padded seats. The kitchen is on the top floor, which is very unusual. It was interesting that the trash trays were still there after 23 minutes as it’s so empty, or maybe because they did not have to clean them immediately.

_ Loteria_. Loteria is another South Korean brand, being the biggest fast food company in its home country. They opened their first restaurant in Vietnam in 2004\(^\text{12}\). Loteria has almost 40 outlets in Hanoi and almost 150 in the whole country. I visited one Loteria by the Hanoi main railway station that had three computers inside that you could use for free as well as the common Wi-Fi, which I’ve never seen in a fast food place before. While Wi-Fi is quite common nowadays, having actual computers inside, gives a quite a powerful link between what the company wants to communicate, as in convenience and connection to all over the globe? At another Loteria they didn’t have any TV screens or music playing and it was the only place I’ve seen that had teenage magazines that you can read/borrow, maybe to make up for the lack of other media available?

_Pizza Hut_ The first one in the country opened in 2007 in Hồ Chí Minh City and the first in Hanoi a year later. Since December 2013 they have 40 restaurants in the country. There are many waiters, waitresses, seems a bit overstaffed. Everybody is super nice and smile-prone. This makes me think of an American customer service-feel. I feel a bit watched by the waiters. Also all of the people pictured on advertisements look local yet very pale, which can be related to the Asian beauty ideals\(^\text{13}\). At another Pizza Hut a couple ordered fries from the neighbour KFC and ate them in Pizza Hut, which looked a bit surprising until they got a Pizza as well.


\(^{13}\) ([http://www.pizzahut.vn/vi/1236/about/pizza_hut_viet_nam.html#about_us](http://www.pizzahut.vn/vi/1236/about/pizza_hut_viet_nam.html#about_us) , 27.5.2013)
Phở 24.

This chain stands out from the others as it only serves traditional kind of food, e.g. no fries or burgers. I’ve struggled to find out how many outlets they have, as some were closed, when I visited, even if it said on their website that they would be open. I saw four outlets in Hanoi. It’s a Vietnamese chain that specializes in Phở (hence the name), but also serve a few other traditional dishes, such as spring rolls in an indoor fast food restaurant looking space. You can order a small and large Phở and decide what kind of meat you want and if you want to have tripe, which gives you more options than the standard Phở street food stall has. The price level is a bit more expensive than on the street though. They have 7 outlets in Hanoi and 70 stores in total out of which 30% are located overseas in Indonesia, Cambodia, Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan. They have table-service and they also sell ready-made instant Phở dishes in cartons that are hanging on a wall. The walls show pictures of food that they serve. There are all kinds of condiments to the food, such as three different sauces and lime, but no napkins.

Burger King Burger King opened their first restaurant in Vietnam in 2011 and they now have 20 restaurants in the country, of which 5 are in Hanoi and 11 in Hồ Chí Minh City14, at 19:13). As can be seen on Burger King Vietnam’s page on Facebook, about half of their status updates are completely in English. The place I visited was very clean and there were lot of wood, shades of brown and it was very airy, as in high ceilings and there were pieces of brick wall and photos of fresh vegetables on the walls and some actual flowerpots. It seemed sort of upscale from the other fast food chains (at least striving to be).

VietMac. A local hamburger chain that has one restaurant, in the shape of a diner in Hanoi. The location is close to the railway station and a bit far away from the core centre of the city. One informant mentioned that it’s interesting and I should check it out and I did. It’s also the smallest out of all the fast food places I visited and saw during my trip, with less than 18 seats. The place is small, but looks a bit like a Diner. I hear a microwave beep-sound, which is unusual, even in a fast food restaurant.

There is also a company called Alfresco’s group which owns different Western style restaurants in Vietnam, in Hanoi, Hồ Chí Minh City and Hoi An. They arrived in 1996 and have two restaurants with a very similar menu, including Pasta, Pizza, Hamburgers, Salads in their two restaurants called: Pepperoni’s (12 restaurants) and Al Fresco’s (13 restaurants) in

Hanoi. Jaspa’s is a more high-end restaurant serving the same kind of food and also breakfast and local dishes as well as burritos and steaks. They also have Bún chả, but it costs 58kr or $8, over 4 times the standard price. More price comparisons on p. 95-98. All of those three restaurants offer the possibility to order food online\textsuperscript{15}.

There is also a chain of restaurants called Gecko that are mainly located around the Old Quarter with three restaurants. They serve the same dishes, pizza, pasta, hamburgers, salads, sandwiches as well as a quite extensive range, numbering over twenty different dishes of ‘local food’. Their price level is around the same as Pepperoni’s and Al Fresco’s. Most of the customers were, not that surprisingly, Western tourists.

I rarely smelt anything in the fast food venues. It seems like most fast food places have two floors and I also saw places with three floors. It was also quite common to hear honking in the background from traffic outside, as the places where usually located by some quite big streets.

Typical interior at KFC’s, yet it was rare to see a place this empty (Tommi Helmisaari 25.2.2013).

\textsuperscript{15} (http://alfrescosgroup.com/cms/index.php , 24.8.2014)
9.3 “Local” Variations

The president of McDonald’s International has said that the company has a goal “to become as much a part of the local culture as possible” (Watson 1997:12). This means that they want to have more customers and become a regular alternative to visit among the local and more traditional options. The fast food outlets can also adopt to the local environment when it comes to their operations. Whereas people in some countries tend to eat and leave rather fast in fast-food restaurants, customers in some other countries might not behave the same way. Also, the basic menu of McDonald’s is similar across the globe, but many countries have their own “local adaptations”. Many other fast-food chains are doing the same and adapting to local tastes, e.g. KFC, Lotteria, BBQ Chicken and Pizza Hut in Vietnam had some different meals consisting of grilled chicken and rice and soup. VietMac had burgers with rice patties instead of buns. Burger King stands out, in not providing any soup or rice and having pretty much exactly the same menu as abroad, e.g. Sweden.

9.4 Customers and location

Most of the customers were below 30 years old and there was a little bit more women/girls than men/boys. It was very rare to see people over about 45 years in the restaurants.

I noticed that people are quite prompt with the lunch and dinner times and if one visits a fast food restaurant, e.g. at 3:15pm or 5pm, it can be completely empty, which wouldn’t be as likely during lunch and dinner times. The weekends seem to be a bit more popular than weekdays to visit. I saw the biggest number of kids and families on Women’s Day and on a Saturday at the big KFC which had karaoke equipment and a kids’ birthday party. I think it’s worth pointing out the majority being 20-30 years old customers that I saw visiting the fast food restaurants as my interview results suggest that the informants around that age only go to them quite rarely. Obviously, kids with their parents would tend to visit fast food restaurants in the evenings or on the weekends, when they tend to be free from work.

The location of the fast food place also affects the customer base. The very central KFC right in the northwest corner of the Hoàn Kiếm Lake and the Lotteria about 150m away from it, next to the Water Puppet Theatre had clearly more Western customers than any other locations. There was a lot of students in KFC and Pizza Hut in the Indochina Plaza shopping mall near the University of Foreign Languages in the Cầu Giấy -district (about 8km west from the Hoàn Kiếm Lake).
9.5 Fast food in Hồ Chí Minh City

This brief subchapter includes studies of fast food opinions in Hồ Chí Minh City (conducted in 2012-2013). I included this to give a better overall picture of people’s opinion of fast food in Vietnam. This subchapter focuses on people’s opinions regarding fast food at roughly the same time as I conducted a case study in Hanoi, which will be the focus in the next chapter. I also interviewed 6 people in Hồ Chí Minh City and will include some of their ideas here as well.

At Hồ Chí Minh City, one person had fast food once a week; two twice a month; two rarely; and two only if friends wanted. Note: I’m not aiming to do a proper comparison with the fast food scene in Hồ Chí Minh City, as I have too few interviews and observations compared to the larger material from Hanoi.

(The results were similar at Hồ Chí Minh City): Two of my informants ate street food every day (1 informant + 4 friends (present at interview) who live in a dorm and don’t have kitchen); two, few times a week; and two once a week.

In Hồ Chí Minh City a boy told me he likes pizza the most, because he says it’s a bit like traditional food with bread. He doesn’t think the Vietnamese really like hamburgers, because they are so different (Interview 1 HCMC April 2013). I thought it was pretty interesting to hear, as I would’ve thought that hamburgers are a bit closer to the traditional food, considering that cheese and tomato sauce seem to be used almost exclusively in foreign dishes, not in traditional ones. Three out of five informants mentioned that fast food is fatty/unhealthy without me asking them about it.

Fast food survey results Hồ Chí Minh City

In a survey, comprising 196 respondents: 30.1% of the respondents had fast food under 1 time a month, and 31.1% had it once a month. 19.9% had fast food twice a month. 10.7% had it 3-4 times a month and 8.2% had it more than 4 times a month. KFC was the favourite brand with 51% and Lotteria was a clear second with 20.9%, followed by Burger King with 10.2%. (Le Ngoc 2013:32). The interior and exterior design and layout of chairs, tables and the cleanliness of floors, kitchens and toilets were the main issues that people evaluate as most important regarding the service quality (Le Ngoc 2013:34). It was concluded that a reasonable price will enhance the satisfaction in food and services. Most competitive fast food products are of similar quality, which is why price becomes an important factor (Le Ngoc 2013:50).
In a survey from September 2013 from Hồ Chí Minh City, asking 400 students from Hồ Chí Minh National University, 36% spend less than 16.6kr or $2.3 per meal, and 27% spend between 16.6kr-23.3kr or $2.3-$3.2 and 17.8% spend between 23.3kr-33.3kr or $3.2-$4.6 a meal (15.5% spend between 33.3kr-66kr or $4.6-$9.2 a meal (Dang 2013:22).

As for what food the students most often have at fast food places in Hồ Chí Minh City, fried chicken was the most common with 73%, followed by French fries 58.8%, followed by hamburger 49.2%, followed by Pizza 42.5% (Dang 2013:26). The most popular time to visit fast food restaurants was between 4pm-7pm (55%), followed by after 7pm (34%). As for the remaining hours a range of 18-21% of the students visited between 7am and 4pm (Dang 2013:27). The most common occasion as to why people had fast food were: meeting friends (52%); someone invited (44%) and weekends (35%) (Dang 2013:29).

Wang, Tran and Nguyen made a survey with 456 responses in Hồ Chí Minh City to customers of all ages to fill in about different aspects of fast food and local food, on the five-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree; disagree, undecided; agree and strongly agree). Fast food was considered as unhealthy, poor in vitamins and minerals and animal fat and with a high content of salt with a score of 2.6 regarding the healthiness whereas the local food had a score of 3.8 (a score of 5 would imply that everyone strongly agreed with the statement). The interior and seating of fast food restaurants was preferred to local restaurants, as my own study suggests as well (Wang et al. 2014:1602).

According to the results, the majority of the youth in Hồ Chí Minh City eat fast food max once a month. The youth tend to visit fast food restaurants in the afternoon between 4-7pm and after 7pm. They mostly go to fast food places to meet with friends or/and if they get an invite. People generally thought that fast food is unhealthy compared with the local food. The following chapter is about my case study about youth’s perception of fast food and street food in Hanoi.
This chapter is a case study that I conducted in February to April 2013 of youth’s fast food and street food opinions in Hanoi.

All of my informants preferred traditional (street) food over Western fast food. Street food is widely available around pretty much every corner in the city and there are a lot different options what you can get and people also like the same kind of food that they eat home with their parents. Street food is also cheaper than most other eating out options, which is an obvious factor affecting people’s choices. I’ll compare prices more on p.95-98.

Another aspect which can affect people’s opinions of fast food, is the idea of eating healthy, which has been circulating globally for quite some time, but it seems that its magnitude has increased roughly in the beginning of the 21st Century and my informants told me that it feels as if it’s growing stronger year by year. The first fast food chain restaurants appeared in Hanoi about a decade ago and have spread quickly since. Fast food, such as hamburgers and fried chicken and fries are quite fatty compared to most Vietnamese food, which can also impact people’s opinion about it. I also think that the familiarity of the food and the connotations it has with the past in the form of parents and grandparents (and so forth) having eaten the same foods is a strong force to reckon.

One minor thing which I’ve been thinking about, yet can’t know for sure, is how much I as an interviewer and as a foreigner from far away affected people’s replies. As an example, if the informant knows about the ‘eating healthy’ ideas widely circulating, then it could lead her/him to presume that I don’t like fast food which then could affect her/his replies. However, I do feel as if people were being really honest and stated their own personal opinions.

Many of them mentioned that fast food is more fattening and unhealthy. Most people only ate out occasionally, like once-twice a month with their friends at Lotteria or KFC. Pizza was mentioned most often to be a preferred type of fast food. About half of the informants also stressed how the big selection of drinks at Lotteria is nice and that’s one of the main reasons they go there. Most people said that the environment is nicer and cleaner at fast food restaurants. Five informants predicted the arrival of McDonald’s and four of them responded that it would be nice if it came (when asked about the future of fast food in the country).
10.1 Who eats fast food?

People were quite unanimously agreeing that young people are most likely to eat at fast food places. Teenagers were mentioned by one in four (few late teenagers 18, 19 and some 20+ year olds mentioned that teenagers (implying their own age (and lower age) group) visit fast food restaurants often); high school students and young parents with kids were other common replies.

"Me: (About fast food restaurants)’’ If you remember when you were there, what groups of people do you usually see going to that kind of places?

Hanh:--like teenagers, 22-23, groups like that, you know I’m 29 ‘’(March 2013).

Only one person said that people of many ages, “even in their 50’s’’ eat fast food. My observations confirm that roughly 15-23 year olds are the main ‘age group’ visiting those venues, but I also saw a larger ratio of 30-40 year old people and families than what my informants told me. However there is great variation also in visitors depending on the location of the fast food restaurant and the time of the day, which can explain for example how students who for example visit the closest fast food place to their school at lunch time or right after school, may mainly see other students there. The very central fast food restaurants closest to Hoàn Kiếm Lake, were more popular among tourists, than other fast food restaurants. This can explain how one person said that she hardly sees Western people, whereas another person said that he often sees foreigners in fast food restaurants. Three people mentioned how their younger siblings and kids in general seem to like fast food, e.g. fried chicken a lot more than they (or people in their age do). It would be interesting to do a similar research in five and/or ten years and see how the responses compare.

"Ah actually you know in Vietnam girls like chatting and they maybe find a place and eat and chatting and they go to restaurants like fast food, boys just go to café-along the street with motorbike and chat and see if there is any beautiful girl, heh’’ (Mai, March 2013).

From my observations Mai’s insight proved to be quite true, considering I saw bigger amount of girls in fast food restaurants and also more boys in cafés outside. However, the difference wasn’t very big, I would say that I saw around 60-66% girls in fast food restaurants and the equivalent amount of boys in cafés.

I got a response to the question “who eats at fast food restaurants?” - “busy and boring people” from a questionnaire, which would’ve been interesting to elaborate on. Except for that and one person mentioning “rich students”, all of the responses of who visits fast food
restaurants pointed out an age group or category of ages, and no other factors or descriptive accounts of the people.

People didn’t generally attribute fast food to be either feminine or masculine, some informants mentioned that they see more girls in fast food places and restaurants and some people said it’s balanced. One girl said that men prefer a place where they can drink beer, which I thought was an interesting point, as that could also partly explain why it was rare to see older than 35-40 year old men in fast food restaurants, yet there were clearly more women than men in fast food restaurants, even if the amount of 30-40 year olds in fast food restaurants was quite small overall. I did however observe an exception. At a KFC on Women’s Day evening, I saw two 40-50 year old men with their wives and kids, who drank what looked like a bottle of spirits, judging from the mouth of the bottle and the fact it was held in a brown paper bag.

10.2 Why do people (you) eat fast food?

There are many different reasons why people go to eat at fast food restaurants, no specific one reason stood out clearly. However, almost two thirds of the responses mention that fast food restaurants are: modern, fashionable, places look nice and colourful, it’s something new, different, something Western and convenient. Almost a quarter of the informants mentioned that it’s fast and convenient.

Following is an excerpt from an interview about why young people go to fast food restaurants:

“Me: And why do you think that they go there more than other people?
Hanh:--why the reason?
Me: yeah what do you think?
Hanh:--ok, I mean it’s very easy to explain, they are young and they are curious to new things.
Hanh:--also the other thing is the decorations. It’s more modern and then. It’s kind of something to show that you’re fashionable haha.
Hanh:--that you’re, I don’t know, modern. And this kind of thing is very new to the country and everybody are like talking about it and yeah it’s a way to show your style.
Hanh:--that’s what I think”. (March 2013).

It’s hard to know exactly why other people than yourself are going to eat in fast food restaurants, especially if you don’t know the people; it can be stated to be due to the same reasons why oneself eats at those places or people can assume others to do it due to
completely different reasons, which often depends on one’s own attitude towards fast food. The majority of the answers don’t refer to the food being a reason to visit a fast food restaurant, with only three people referring to it. More often, the actual restaurant and the visiting experience are emphasized in the reasons why a person would visit a fast food restaurant. Common answers refer to the novelty of the places as well as to the colourful and modern, clean interior and to the convenience in the form of fast and good service and a good location. Three people mentioned that people go to them to show off and one person mentioned to show off with their iPad. It could be argued that many of these fast food restaurants are seen as possessing certain positive traits as a space, which certain young people are confirming by expressing symbolic capital in going to the places.

I think that one reason why there was quite many people using their tablets, smartphones and laptops is the free Wi-Fi that many of the restaurants provide, which can entice people to come there to use their appliances, opposed to some cafés or places on the street that don’t have free Wi-Fi. It has to be said though that quite many small independent cafés had free Wi-Fi as well.

My first informant mentioned that people visit fast food restaurants because “you can feel like you were in another country in Europe or US” (Interview 1, February 2013). She had been on exchange in Hawaii for two years and had become tired of fast food and more objected to the whole industry after she had read the book Fast Food Nation (by Eric Schlosser 2001). She also pointed out how there’s not that much to do in Hanoi so sometimes people go to fast food restaurants just to hang out or spend time there.

It was also mentioned separately that kids like the colours, and that kids are comfortable with friends at those places and that small kids like fried food. At one KFC they had a kid’s corner with a DVD player and speakers and karaoke machine looking device. Two informants mentioned that the toys attract kids who try to get their parents to take them there. The toys of the kids meals, which tend to change weekly are also way of creating a reason why kids would like to return to the fast food restaurants. It’s worth pointing out that McDonald’s is the biggest toymaker in the world, when it comes to the number of toys produced with around 1.5 billion in a year (Hamilton 2001:6). As also mentioned earlier, some people think that younger kids, e.g. informant’s younger siblings really like fast food a lot, seemingly a lot more than their older siblings or parents. More discussion of the future of fast food and street food can be found on p. 103.
“First, it attracts them (teenagers) by nice, colorful and cute and décor and nice space. Many of them want to go there because they have seen the advertisement on TV or magazines and it creates a trend and almost all teenagers want to be trendy. The food looks attractive too, and the taste is passable – that’s enough for those group of customers” (Giang, April 2013).

Giang was the only person that I met who thought that the fast food looks attractive. There was also only two other informants who pointed out that advertisement on TV or magazines is a reason why people want to visit fast food restaurants.

In general it seemed as if people visit fast food restaurants, because they want to change scenery and because the fast food restaurant look colourful, modern and different than other restaurants and because they are something new and convenient.

10.3 How often do people eat fast food?

At Hanoi, out of 19 answers, over half had fast food rarely (two had fast food only if someone invited, three people had it 2-3 times last year, but emphasized Lotteria’s variety of drinks and 7 people ate fast food, when they felt so, which means rarely, once a while, yet one person told that he/she had pizza or spaghetti every weekend). Almost as many had fast food at least once a month (two had it once a month, two 2-3 times a month, and three once a week). Out of those who had it once a month, one told that it was mainly for drinks or ice-cream and one told not to like it, but has it because of lack of time.

In general people were not eating at fast food places that often. It seemed as if it was more something you did out of convenience and sometimes as a compromise where some friends wanted to have e.g. an ice-cream while someone else wanted to have an ice-tea and someone wanted else wanted to have something small to eat. Another reason would be to have fast food for a change, because your friends wanted or because you were in a hurry. Four people mentioned that Vietnamese spend more times at fast food places than people in Western countries. I came to some very similar conclusions when observing the fast-food restaurants in Vietnam. This kind of behavior has also been noted in China around 5-6 years after the arrival of foreign fast food restaurants. According to James Watson, customers in a McDonald’s in Beijing tend to stay for quite long times as well, some even for hours in the restaurants and most of the people are eating smaller things, like snacks rather than big meals.
Some people like to hang out at the places and children’s birthday parties are organized as well (Watson 1997:77-109).

10.4 How often do people eat street (traditional) food out?

In Hanoi, all informants ate street food or traditional food in a restaurant at least once a week (three every day; two almost every day; two 3-4 times a week; three 2 times a week; one person once a week; two people had it 3-4 times a month.

As can be seen, people eat street food a lot more often than they eat fast food. Street food is also more widely available around almost every corner. Note: some people didn’t or couldn’t separate between eating street food and eating in a (sit down) restaurant, yet that was done clearly more rarely than eating on the street. Two people emphasized that they only eat in ‘nice’ restaurants only on special occasions. In one of the survey’s I got back, an informant told me he eats outside home once or twice a week, sometimes in fast food restaurants, yet he says he eats street food every day (Trang Tran March 2013).

Three mentioned low quality chicken in fast food (and two of them especially mentioned KFC having it). One mention of MSG by 24-year-old who haven’t been abroad. She also told me about the government’s negotiations about having a certificate of street food cleanliness (hygiene), but said that people having protesting by saying they would make their own (fake) certificate. She is also saying it would be really hard to control all those street food places (Interview 10, March 2013).

10.5 Which are the main factors in choosing a restaurant/place to eat outside home?

The food and its quality stand out as the main factor people have when choosing a place to eat out at. An affordable price was also an often mentioned factor as well as a good location. Many people had many factors they used in order to make a decision, rather than relying on only factor. One person mentioned that he prefers to choose a place with many customers, and two said that rumours and reviews are important to consider when visiting a place for the first time.

10.6 Favourite street food and foreign food

As for what foreign food people like the most (I didn’t provide alternatives): Pizza was mentioned 11 times. Spaghetti 7 times (and one who mentioned pasta (excl. Italian twice-and one implied Italian from Alfresco’s and Pepperoni). Japanese and or sushi mentioned 7 times.
(+1 dislike), 2 mentions of hamburgers. Two people said that they like Korean, one pointed out that she doesn’t like Korean food. It’s worth pointing out that only two people in total mentioned that they like hamburgers and it wasn’t their favourite foreign food. Beef steak was mentioned twice, French fries once, Thai and Indian once.

I was a bit surprised by the popularity of pizza, as there are not that many exclusively pizza and pasta places, yet many restaurants, such as the Western style and owned chain restaurants Al Fresco’s, Pepperoni and Gecko’s have a very wide menu, with everything from grilled sandwiches, burgers, pasta, pizza, salads, steaks, quesadillas and chicken with rice.

Three informants pointed out they want to eat healthy and light, they were all 24-29 year old females. And there was one who had been for two years in the US who thought so as well, she was 21 years.

“I think that if there are restaurants with fast food they have to like compete with other restaurants, Chinese restaurant, Thai restaurant, Korean restaurant and people maybe like Chinese more because they know exactly what they [get] aha” (Linh, March 2013).

This was an interesting point and somewhat relevant considering the relatively popularity of Korean food and the frequent mentions of Japanese food. However, nobody mentioned that they like Chinese food. I think this could also partially be due to the Vietnamese kitchen also has influences from the Chinese and maybe it’s not perceived as that exotic and obviously the complicated history of China as an imperial invading power might also influence people’s opinions.

Almost everyone said they usually eat out with their friends. Few pointed out they never eat out alone or with their family at fast food places. I also think a reason for this is that the informants were already ‘adults’ and rather ate home with their parents or in street food restaurants and in fast food restaurants with their friends and younger siblings.

Most people’s all-in all favourite dish was a native dish, Phở was mentioned most often and then Bún chả, however most of the time they said they didn’t know the name (as in a name, I, the interviewer would know) or they said noodle soup or rice with vegetables etc. Pizza, spaghetti and Japanese food (incl. sushi) were the most popular foreign kitchens.
A meal of Bún chả (photo by me, February 2013).

10.7 Interior of fast food places

Very few mentioned any colours when talking about the decorations and interior of the fast food places. Three informants mentioned that the places are colourful or have nice colours. Only one informant mentioned colours (red and yellow) in describing the interior. After my observations it turned out that all of the fast food places had prominent red coloured interior details, whether it was seats, coloured walls or pillars etc. I wonder whether there is a ‘subtle’ connection with the Vietnamese national flag as well, even if strong colours are quite common throughout the world in fast food restaurants. I thought it was interesting that there was one informant (interview 2) who didn’t like the interior, yet she was the most positive towards fast food and ate it once a week. While the interior and environment of the fast food restaurants were generally considered as nice, some people preferred the environment outside by street side street food stalls, because they were great for people-watching.
10.7.1 English phrases

In all of the fast food restaurants there were some words and phrases in English as part of the interior, decoration and in some places some menu items had only English names.

KFC: At the biggest KFC: I saw other English words on the walls, such as: “Mega fun, sun, bucket-attitude, spice up your life”, “Awesome day”. In one of the places there were pictures of young people in the background.

There are hanging ads from the ceiling saying” Kreme Ball, Big Juicy chicken”- Also there is a big column all in English above KFC being present in more than 100 countries worldwide. Another KFC and two other KFC’s: they had interestingly wall decorations where Saigon, Huế, Hanoi, Ha Long Bay scenery is included with English words like “let’s go, spicy, original, love KFC, downtown, stop to eat. At another KFC you could see “KFC secret recipe since 1939” “chicken + herbs + spices=tasty”, “don’t be late”, “keep going”.

At Pizza Hut they have paintings that say “Pizza, tomato, aubergine, shrimp, thyme”. All food/pizza names are in English. Some examples: Fisherman’s Favourite, Supreme Meat Lover, Hawaiian Paradise. (Observation 8). They have headlines, like “hot!” And “Pizza hut delivery” and a slogan “Pizzas and more” the rest of the text is in Vietnamese.

BBQ Chicken: You can see phrases like: Best believable quality”, Welcome to the BBQ World”. “For you, For me and For US”, “Best of the best quality” on the wall. At Another BBQ Chicken there is an English text printed on the tables about how natural the chicken is.
At Lotteria: There is a New York, Times Square sort of theme going on with the skyscrapers and lights: it says “Angel in US coffee”, New York. I can also see the texts: “Injoy Lotteria [sic]” and “I’m your present”, “Enjoy shopping and culture”. In another Lotteria, they have a similar style painting, but with popular European landmarks, like the Eiffel Tower, leaning tower of Pisa, Big Ben and the Brandenburg Gate.

At VietMac all the texts are in Vietnamese, except the recurring sentence “live fast-eat fresh”, which was on the wall and on a small leaflet holder on the table.

There are words and phrases literally written on the walls in fast food restaurants that are almost only in English and which gives associations to good quality food, fun, enjoying your life, be active. Considering that the youth in general are better in English than their parents or grandparents, having texts in that language can appeal better to that customer group. Some central street food restaurants and bigger street food places also have an English menu, which you get when you sit down. None of my informants mentioned the English phrases and words to me when discussing the interior of the fast food restaurants. These depictions clearly communicate a global presence and connection. It could be argued that a bit of cultural capital in the form of some knowledge of the English language could be useful to have in order to understand to a larger extent what the restaurant tries to communicate.

The fact that all of the fast food places have English phrases, some less, some more, might make it harder to question them, if they are expected to be found in fast food restaurants.

10.7.2. Music (do you notice it and opinions)

Music is played in the background in fast food restaurants or in the form of music videos shown on screens. It happened only once that I didn’t hear any music playing. Sometimes they play music in the speakers, yet show other music videos and commercials on mute on TV screens. The music is predominantly foreign pop music, mainly Korean, Japanese and American-European. Most of the employees at the fast food restaurants are young people and play what people generally in their age like. This can also affect people who don’t like the kind of music to avoid those places. Many people like the kind of music they’re familiar with.

I asked my informants if they notice the music and what they think about it. Only two people said that they like it, whereas four stated that they don’t like it. Most people where indifferent about the music. Two people said it’s important with music and four people actually said that they haven’t noticed any music and two of them questioned whether they
play any music. Some people also pointed out that the music shouldn’t be too loud and it has to fit the situation and nice restaurants and romantic places should play slower music. One informant said that people go to fast food places, because of the music videos. I thought it was interesting that one person said that music is important if you are outside having a drink for 1-2 hours, but not if you’re eating. He said that it’s nice to have music in the background when you’re having a drink as it makes ‘the feeling’ better, and different places can stand out, because the music they play. Another informant, Thanh had quite similar views:

Thanh about music in restaurants:

“Do I care about it? Yeah. Although you come to a restaurant with a friend you always want to chat with them and have a conversation, but at the same time you want to listen to some music while you’re eating, because, you can’t talk all of the time. You have to take a break and the music affects our attitude a lot” (Thanh, March 2013).

He was also pointing out how the familiarity of the songs, especially if it’s “a good one” can make the attitude (as in mood) better and some songs can remind of things or good times, which you can talk about with the person you’re eating with. People were quite indifferent about the music in general, few expressed that they really like it, some disliked it and there was a general preference of slower music.

Summary

All of my informants preferred street food over fast food. Street food was eaten on average at least once a week. Fast food restaurants are visited on average less than once a month and some people pointed out to me that they prefer to have drinks or ice-cream than food at the fast food places. Mainly young people go to fast food restaurants and many pointed out how fast food is even more popular for even younger people, aka younger teenagers. Many youths like the colourful, modern interiors of the fast food places. It makes the places stand out from street food restaurants (with indoor seating) that are often not as colourful. Most people’s favourite dish was a native one. My informants’ favourite foreign food was pizza, followed by pasta and Japanese food (incl. sushi). The most important factor in choosing a place to eat is the food and its quality. My informants also think that the service is good and that it’s convenient when many of the fast food places are in a central location. All of the fast food restaurants had phrases in English written on the walls. The music in the fast food places is often popular foreign music, such as K-pop, J-pop or American/West European pop. Fast food restaurants can attract or deter some customers from coming to their places because of the
music they play. In the next chapter I will discuss differences between street food and fast food.
11. STREET FOOD VS. FAST FOOD

As mentioned before some of my informants raised a very good point, by arguing that street food can be fast food. It all depends on the definitions of the two terms. Some people mentioned pasta, spaghetti as fast food. I’m sticking to calling the traditional food street food, as it’s commonly used and understood.

Most of the street food was served with proper bowls and utensils and didn’t include disposable paper waste as is very commonly found in fast food restaurants. It’s also possible to take the street food with you and return the bowl to the restaurant later and some places have disposable bowls as well. At Lotteria they served a carton box for fries, but inside it there was a plastic plate on which the fries were on, which is a bit funny. The drink was in a paper cup. At KFC you get real metal cutlery if you order chicken with rice or soup and the drinks were served in a real glass as well. At BBQ Chicken they also had real metal cutlery, yet the glass was made of hard transparent plastic. Burger King served everything in the paper boxes and had paper cups as well.

Time wise, there is only a very small difference in eating street food and fast food, they can both be as quick, which is something that was also pointed out to me in interviews. The street food places have table-service which was not the case in the fast food restaurants. In those places you always had to order at the counter (except at Pizza Hut, however that is more like a regular restaurant) and then you could either wait or go sit down (if you were told so by the workers) and they brought the food to you.

Me: how do you think it will look in the future with the street food and the fast food and the restaurants?

Hanh: -- Um I think that the people would still like to eat on the street, because like it’s a traditional thing and they would say that good food is on the street, but there is also a tendency that very traditional food is usually eat by very poor people

Hanh: --like everything in the restaurants they try to make more organized and things like that, and to make it more, uh make it more high class I would say

Hanh: --simple food, but high class. SO there are two tendencies, people eat on the street, but there are also this kind of food, and street food in the restaurants

Hanh: --and also because there are more and more people getting richer and richer and they also eat like more western food like you see pizza and it’s very popular now and people getting more even to fancy restaurants and to show themselves

Hanh: --that’s what I think, but street food will definitely stay there (March 2013).
As Hanh described there are many kinds of different restaurants opening in the city. The lines between street food, fast food and “other restaurant food” can be very blurred and a fine dining-restaurant can serve a traditional street food-dish with “flashier presentation” for 9 times the (street food) price (e.g. Jaspa’s) and they can also have gourmet burgers that cost 4 times more than at e.g. Lotteria. There are multiple and diverse ways how the food scene is changing.

I think it was interesting to see how people who had been abroad always thought that young people go to fast food restaurants because they are modern and because the people want to “show off”, as in, appearing cool and trendy. They were also more critical of the unhealthiness of the fast food and often pointing out that they serve a lot of fatty products.

“I care about my taste first and then about my health, So if I have it once a week or once a month it doesn’t really affect my health” (Thanh 19yrs March 2013).

Linh, provided a short, but powerful explanation of fast food in a questionnaire. “Fast food=Western unhealthy fat food” (March 2013).

Mok had quite a similar view: “Fast food is always fat and unhealthy” (March 2013).

Almost half of the people mentioned that it’s unhealthy and/or fatty without me mentioning or talking anything about healthiness (Nine in in Hanoi and three in Hồ Chí Minh City). Other comments of what fast food is: ”Anything, except rice; sausage, bread, not noodles; hot dogs; instant noodles; what you eat before class, due to lack of time” (group interview, March 2013).

The last reply reminded me of having seen a few food stands outside the Hanoi University of Languages, which sold sausages, sticky rice, snacks and soft drinks. According to a news article online there are many mobile stands that sell food outside many schools in Hồ Chí Minh City. The stands sell various foods like mentioned above. Some people have been worried about the origin of some of the foods that are unpackaged. Some schools have been annoyed as they are trying to increase the control over food safety in school cafeterias, yet they can’t do much to ensure safety for students outside the schools. Some parents say that it can be hard for them to forbid their children to buy street food as most of their friends gather around those mobile stands after school. This example goes to show that the line between street food and fast food can be blurry and people can be selling both traditional rice foods, as well as hot dogs.

Linh thinks that the portions are too small in fast food places and you get too little rice (compared to street food places where you get more if you need) (March 2013). Huan said there is also a tendency of street food being served in a restaurant (connect to Jaspa’s example on p.75).

Two people thought that street food is Vietnamese fast food (March 2013). One informant said that some street food is the same as fast food, for example Döner Kebab (interview 10 March 2013). (Informant 9) also says that Lotteria can feel like a non-fast food restaurant when she has a drink or ice-cream and it’s cheap and convenient.

One thing which I thought was interesting is the frequent use of the adjective “delicious” when describing how good something tasted, as I also heard the word used by people with a quite limited English. It reminded me of when I had learned the same amount of English as them, it was very unlikely that I knew the word “delicious”, while I might have known some more simple words that they didn’t.

11.1 Economic choices

The prices of food dishes vary a lot depending on the place, location and what kind of restaurant it is. First I will describe the prices of different dishes at different food outlets and then I will continue with looking beyond just the price in describing why people can make certain economic choices.

Cheaper prices can be more important for youth who don’t generally have as much money as older people. Street food is generally cheaper than fast food. Smaller meals of spring rolls can be had for 6.6kr or $1 upwards, whereas meals, like Phở, Bún chả will cost around 10kr-16.6kr or $1.3-$2.3. You can also get grilled sausages for 3.3kr or $0.5 and kebab sandwiches for 6.6kr-10kr or $1-$1.3. There was only one person who mentioned that fast food ‘has good price’, whereas four people mentioned it’s expensive. However that informant was from Hồ Chí Minh City and this was said in a Pizza Hut, which actually had a pretty competitive student deal, where you could get a drink, small pan-pizza and a side-order for 11.6kr or $1.6, which is pretty much an average price for a street food meal. Excluding that student deal, looking at the prices fast food is clearly more expensive than what street food is and even if there are dishes that cost the same, you get far less food in the fast food restaurants than you get in the street food stalls and restaurants.
The photo shows KFC’s fried chicken and rice meal for 10kr or $1.3 (Photo by me, March 2013).

As seen from the photo above, the cheapest fast food meals are quite small. For a regular meal with a burger, fries and drink you would commonly pay 18.3kr-26.6kr or $2.5-$3.6.

Some bigger meals with more side-orders cost more than 33kr or $4.6. Burger King stands in its expensiveness, a Double Whopper meal costs 49.5kr or $6.9! Pizzas start at 33kr or $4.6. However, Pizza Hut had quite a competitive lunch deal on weekdays, where a daily special normal pan pizza (which is big enough to share between two people) cost 21.6kr or $2.99. Lotteria served vanilla soft ice-cream for 1kr or $0.13 which seemed to be an unbeatable price, judging from other ice-cream prices on the streets and in small supermarkets, kiosks and a few of my informants also pointed out that it’s cheap.
The table presents a rough comparison of eating out prices. It’s hard to compare some dishes with each other as an average pizza is often bigger than an average street food meal and could be shared with two people. The prices of pasta and pizza can also reach up to over 70kr or $11. I didn’t include restaurant prices as they vary from about 23kr or $3.2 to over 1000kr and $100 if you have something exclusive etc.

11.1.1 Beyond the price

Apart for getting different things to eat at the different places, people are also sending signals to other people when they decide to visit a certain restaurant or if they decide to avoid it. If people see other people who they admire or look up to around the world e.g. from movies, music artists or blogs on websites going to certain chain restaurants it can create associations that one ‘is a bit like them’ if one goes to the same chain or similar kind of restaurant.

The environments of the pasta, pizza restaurants and fast food restaurants are often a bit more spacious than many street food- restaurants and outdoor seating areas and they often have painted walls and more interior decorations, which can make their environment more appealing to some customers than places with less emphasis on the interior. People may also pay more money for a dish, even if its serving size is smaller, when they’re in an environment they consider more desirable. Also this kind of behaviour is also dependent on other people’s acceptance or confirmation of its validity. As, if there was only one person who would do so
and none of her/his friends nor family nor acquaintances would understand it, it would be rather strange, if not pointless to choose to eat at that more expensive place.

People are often curious of new things and want to try new flavours and dishes. If one has heard or read or seen a type of food or chains of restaurants before it can make it seem a bit more familiar so that the experience isn’t all too exotic. Often e.g. multinational fast food chains have some version of ‘local food’ or dishes in their menu, apart from the usually quite standard assortment of dishes across the world. This can also make it more inviting for people with other preferences to come in and have something ‘not as exotic’ at the new fast food restaurant.

Fast food restaurants also serve different kind of drinks; hot and iced coffees and -teas, ice-cream floats, sodas, juices. Some of these beverages are rarely available in street food restaurants (e.g. ice-coffees, juices), yet they are available in cafés. The prices for the drinks in the fast food restaurants are ranging from the same price to a bit more expensive than the cafés. The cafés don’t tend to offer as many eating options, which can explain why some customers might want to visit a fast food restaurant as some of their friends might want to eat something, while they might want to have a cold coffee or ice-cream and they might not have been able to get all what they wanted in a street food restaurant or a café.

11.2 Use of the space

Street food places often have seats outside and sometimes inside as well. Fast food places tend to only have indoor seating. The fast food restaurants were quite spacious in general, and generally larger than street food places and many times I walked past them and went to do observations I noticed that they were very empty. Having said that I also saw two completely full KFC’s that had a kid’s birthday party and there were more than 100 people inside. Some informants mentioned me that they like the spaciousness of the fast food restaurants. Considering the amount of people eating alone and watching a screen for a longer time, I believe some of them use the empty fast food restaurants as “extensions to their living room”, as there’s not much empty space available in the city. It wasn’t uncommon to see young people in groups sitting and talking in the fast food restaurants. It was quite rare to see them all having meals, it was more common to see people sharing some food and/or having ice-tea or ice-cream. “In a situation whereby people meet at public spaces such as the pavement too enjoy goods and services of the private sector as well as to discuss civic issues, market spaces can double-up as civic spaces”
It’s important for people to have a space where they can gather, even if for a quick glass of ice tea, as there are not that many open public spaces in Hanoi.

There are only a few urban green areas (UGAs) in Hanoi. There is a high demand to use parks. Parts of some parks have been converted to parking lots, kiosks and restaurants. Facilities, such as western fast food restaurants, shopping malls and amusement parks are competing for space with parks and gardens and have taken over their location due to their successful businesses (To Luong & Steingrube 2013:284). The main activities in the parks are relaxation, sport and to gather with friends and recently more people are using the parks for socializing/communicating. As the economy grows people have more free time, and thus more time to spend in parks (To Luong & Steingrube 2013:290).

The space in the fast food restaurants could be classified as semi-public, as seemingly anybody can enter, yet it’s expected that people purchase something to have the right to enjoy the space. This does deter some people, who don’t want to buy something, from entering the premises. As an example I never saw street traders enter the fast food restaurants, while sitting outside in a street food restaurant it could happen that they’d stop and try selling something, e.g. chewing gum, books, while you were sitting down. Obviously it would be quite pointless to go to fast food restaurants if they’re mostly empty, but I never saw them in full fast food restaurants either.

Catherine Earl writes about a concept called “informal public space” especially in postsocialist states, where people, especially young people gather in, in e.g. cafés, salons, concerts and exhibitions. These places could be regarded as private, in the way that they are not monitored by the authorities and also because the activities often include friends and relatives. However these activities are also public as they can be observed and discussed by unknown people. These use of the informal public space can shift from being more public to private, depending on many factors, such as the time of day, year, season and who use the space (Earl 2010:92). The emergence of the private spaces have also led to an increased social differentiation as not everyone can access those places.

Many residents of the inner cities of Hồ Chí Minh City and Hanoi hang outdoors by street stalls, food stalls, trading stalls and on the pavement in font of houses, shops and apartments, because of a lack of private space in their houses (ibid: 2010:94). Some people also told me that it’s nice to sit outside and just watch people. In the evenings you could see a lot of people sitting on the chairs on the pavement outside cafés and street food restaurants. It seems as
people visit fast food restaurants more for their space and interior than mainly for their food, considering how everyone preferred street food to fast food. There was also public parks, which charged for entrance, e.g. the big Thống Nhất (Reunification) park, about 30 min walk from the Old Quarter that charged 3kr or $0.5. There was also two café’s inside. I walked through the park twice and it was really empty and there was about 10 amusement park rides of which only a few were open and all of them had suffered a bit of wear and tear.

11.3 Food origins

“Adults told me they don’t like KFC, because the chicken they use in KFC, is not good. In Vietnam we have a kind of chicken, which is smaller than the one they use at KFC, but they are far better. KFC uses a different kind of chicken and they put too much muscle in to their chickens. In KFC the taste is boring, a little bit more boring. I have read many articles in the newspapers and they say that the chicken they use at KFC for their fried chicken is only raised for one month. One month from the very small and they grow big” (Linh, March 2013).

Linh was the only one who said that they use a different chicken in street food than at KFC and it was also interesting when she said that “in Vietnam we have a kind of chicken” as in separating the KFC Chicken from the Vietnamese chicken, even if the origin of both chickens might be Vietnamese, they are most likely treated in a very different way. Linh was also the only who mentioned the differently treated animals and their muscles.

I thought it was very interesting how Linh also told me about some chicken you see wrapped up in plastic in a supermarket, and it’s been there for a while, let say, over a week, since it was slaughtered. She thought that was not nice and she much preferred to eat freely running “mountain” chicken or the kind that you sometimes see walking about next to a street food stand/restaurant as it’s much fresher. I thought it was interesting as in where I’m from and in many other “Western” countries, people have become so detached from the “slaughtering of the animals” and people just go to the supermarket and buy readily chopped and packed pieces of meat and then prepare them. Many see the slaughtering of the animals as something rather barbaric and maybe even dirty.

People don’t seem to be that concerned (although recently there are opposite trends) of how long after the slaughter they eat the chicken and what distances it has travelled and how long it has waited in shelves and been transported in trucks. In a way you could say that there is a discrepancy between the street food restaurant and a “fast food restaurant” as the environment and surroundings where you eat in a street food place, might not seem as clean or hygienic as in a fast food place, yet the food quality can and often is better and more organic in the street
food restaurant. Having said that, one does also see some fresh meat lying around in street markets unrefrigerated when the outside temperature can be +30 centigrade which can raise some concerns about contamination risks, unless the meat is prepared correctly to eliminate possible contamination.

The discussion about the freely running *Mountain Chicken* made me think of the connection between a certain animal or dish to a certain area or district. As an example Linh pointed out to me a few times that I should eat the Bún chả in her home province in Ninh Binh because they do it the best way in the whole country. This was after she had asked me what dishes I had already tried and I told her it was probably my favourite so far (I had only been in Vietnam for about a quarter of my whole stay, by then). Few other people also had specific place or town where they said that I’ll get the best food of its kind. For example, in Hồ Chí Minh City I was told to go to Vũng Tàu (two and a half hours away) to get the best seafood and in Hanoi, I was sitting on a motorbike for half an hour to get to the best seafood place, however it was so full that we had to find another place. It’s common for people to link certain foods and dishes to certain areas where the foods are perceived to be the most tasty (and authentic). These places have often a long tradition of preparing certain foods, due to a specific geological setting, where e.g. the local soil and water can give (or are considered to add) a unique flavor to the food.

### 11.4 Health aspects

Fast-food restaurants are creating health problems for some people, e.g. when they are directing their advertisement to children who might get addicted to foods with a lot of fat, salt and sugar, from a young age. There has been a lot of criticisms about fast-food restaurants unhealthy foods, high in fat, salt and sugar. This has lead them to change their menu a bit and include healthier options, such as salads and vegetarian alternatives.

The amount of overweight Chinese teenagers trebled between 1992 and 2002 and the amount of overweight children had doubled about a decade after the arrival of McDonald’s to Japan (Schlosser 2002: 326). Time will tell whether this kind of development will also take place in Vietnam.

In 1995 food based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) were introduced as a tool to educate and communicate about nutrition to the people. Three newer versions have been published since that and it’s intended to assess the requirements of the FBDGs every 5 years and modify them if necessary. The FBDGs of 2006-2010 state that people should:
“-Eat different foods and change dishes often

-Eat protein rich foods and balance between protein from plant and animal resources and eat more fish.

-Eat a balanced amount of fat, also from animal and vegetable sources.

-Consume dairy products and milk according to age.

-Shouldn’t eat too much salt and use iodized salt in cooking.

-Eat more fruits and vegetables daily.

-Choose safe and clean foods and drinks.

-Drink enough boiled water every day, drink less beer, alcohol and eat less, sweetened foods.

-People should try to keep up a healthy lifestyle and have physical activities regularly and try to maintain a healthy weight. No smoking.”

Apart from the health care system, various public associations, like the women’s unions, youth unions and farmer unions are communicating the FBDG advices (Thi Hop et al. 2011:4).

Obesity has increased in recent years in Vietnam. According to a research in Hồ Chí Minh City in 2007, out of 1488 participants between 20-60 years in 30 randomly selected wards. The prevalence of overweight and obesity was 33.6% of the women and 31.6% of the men. This difference can be explained due to biological differences in fat depositing as well as the tradition of women working at home or in domestic environments and having more access to food. Underweight stood for 20.4% of the adult population. Other East and Southeast Asian countries have higher prevalence of overweight and obesity than urban Vietnamese adults in Hồ Chí Minh City. The overweight in men increased progressively with the household wealth status, this was not the case with women (Cuong & Dibley et al. 2007: 673-679).

The use of the flavor enhancer Monosodium Glutamate (also known as MSG) is popular in Vietnam as well as in China and Japan. It’s used to enhance the savory flavor of food, the taste can be found in food seasonings such as soya sauce and fish sauce. There has been plenty of studies about it with somewhat mixed results. It’s generally agreed that it’s safe to use, but not in extreme amounts, which could induce headache, nausea and dizziness. There have been reports which to associate MSG consumption with obesity in different areas in China since 2008 (Vu Thi Thu 2012:922). Vu Thi Thu’s study of 1528 adults living in randomly selected urban and rural areas of Hanoi, Hồ Chí Minh City and Thua Thien Hue Provine found no correlation between MSG intake and overweight, but significant correlations between the separate intakes of energy, carbohydrate, animal protein and
saturated fat and overweight. Overweight was found in 27.9% of the population in many of the different regions sampled. The prevalence of overweight in the urban regions was 31.1% for men and 32.4% for women. (ibid: 2012:926). These results are close to the ones found in a research conducted by Cuong & Dibley et al. five years earlier, which I mentioned before. The consumption of meat and cholesterol-rich food has increased in Vietnam which is connected to an increase in overweight and obesity (Vu Thi Thu 2012:922).

11.5 Future of street food and fast food

“Both will develop but in a different way- fast food will develop faster as the service is better and it’s quicker. Many children who were born in the generation of fast food will prepare to have fast food. They don’t care about the traditional food, but street food will still be there. Fast food can’t overcome street food in Vietnam, because that’s our traditional cuisine and it’s our specialty” (Thanh March 2013)

Thanh’s quote is quite a good summary of the opinions that people had about the future of street food and fast food.

People think that both street food and fast food will develop and that street food will remain, “because it’s traditional”. There is a sense of pride of the own cuisine and it’s no wonder that people don’t want it to disappear. I think that the ‘development’ will lead to more synergy between street food and fast food and that there will be increased differentiation in the designing of the street outlets and restaurants and their product range to attract certain customer groups. Considering how foreign ingredients have blended into the ‘traditional’ street food over time, it could happen that in 50 years (or possibly less) people would consider e.g. hot dogs with grated carrots, coriander and ngư mắm-sauce as ‘traditional’ street food.

Street food and the places serving it are expected to develop as well, as there are more rich people and people who get richer who might want to have a more comfortable environment. Three informants said that young people want to be westernized, however this meant mainly that they want to see restaurants and shops in Vietnam, which they’ve seen online or in movies or/and heard about. Many seem to think that the arrival of more fast food restaurant chains goes quite hand in hand with ‘development’ of the country and economy, towards more ‘modernity’, however they think that this should not happen at the cost of street food. It was also mentioned that more shopping malls are being built and they will have fast food restaurants. In three large shopping centers that I visited there were pretty much only chain restaurants. Two people mentioned how there is a trend of eating more healthy food, which
goes against fast food. Many thought that fast food will spread more. Nobody said that they want more fast food restaurants and quite many thought there is already enough fast food restaurants. One informant mentioned that there will be more fast food restaurants as many famous (US) chains have not arrived yet. However when I asked what chains, she said McDonald’s and “some others” (note: it hadn’t opened at the time of the interview). Four people hoped that McDonald’s would arrive to the country and one person was pretty sure that it would arrive soon. McDonald’s it’s also the only chain that was mentioned by name, when I asked about how they think that the food scene will look in the future.

As it happens, the first McDonald’s opened in Vietnam, in Hồ Chí Minh City on the 8th February 2014, less than 10 months after I left Vietnam and thus I could not include it in my observations or discuss about it in the interviews. As of now, in April 2015 there are five McDonald’s in the country, all located in Hồ Chí Minh City. Henry Nguyen who brought it to Vietnam is the son-of-law of the Prime Minister. He had studied McDonald’s business model as a part of his Master thesis and he was working as a teenager in McDonald’s in the USA. He was also behind the establishment of Pizza Hut in the country six years ago.

McDonalds, served over 400’000 people in its first month in February 2014, which exceeded the expectations by far. The price range is competitive compared to other fast food outlets 21.6-31.6kr or $2.9-$4.3 for an extra value meal. I thought it was also worth to point out that the cheeseburger at McDonald’s costs 9.9kr or $1.33 which is a lot as it stands for 124.5% of the standard price of the cheeseburger in the Eurozone! which is €1 .See pages 95-98 for more price comparisons.

McDonald’s informs on its website that:

“all of our vegetables are manual [sp?] planted in our farm in Dalat by the cleanest way. We don’t use anything imported. They will be transferred to the restaurants every day to make sure foods you’re served are always the best and freshest quality”

18 http://www.svd.se/naringsliv/snabbmatssvepet_8634766.svd?sidan=7, 06.05.2014
19 http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/article-2586011/Vietnams-McDonalds-serves-400-000-customers-month.html, 06.05.2014
21 (€1=23,250 at 08.04.2014 at 20:40 from xe.com).
22 Dalat is located about 211km from Ho Chi Minh City (http://www.distance-calculator.co.uk/world-distances-ho_chi_minh_city-to-dalat.htm, 06.05.2014
23 http://www.mcdonalds.vn/en/where-it-come-from, 06.05.2014
This can be related to the discussion about safe vegetables earlier on p. 55-58 in pointing out that people are increasingly aware and conscious about the origin and quality of vegetables and problems surrounding the use of pesticides. They are also “the first and only Quick Service Restaurant open 24 hours, 7 days a week in Vietnam” and the first one introducing the “Drive-Thru” service in the country, they explain clearly how it works and what is on their website24. This goes to show how they want to make it even more convenient to have fast food, as you can come whenever you like. As mentioned earlier on p. 56, the street food restaurants and stalls generally have a bit longer opening hours than fast food restaurants, but this would be an exception. Speaking of service:

Thanh mentioned that they (in Hanoi) have to become more service-minded and that you (allegedly-as he had never been there) get much better service in Hồ Chí Minh City if you go to a restaurant or clothing store. He also mentioned that the service was much better in Singapore.

“You know it’s like in Vietnam, we have so many restaurants, the traditional restaurants, the service staff are very rude to you, they can shout at, at the customers and they can do many bad service. If you complain about the bad service they just come and say, you don’t need to have the food anymore, go away, we don’t need you.

But those restaurants are always crowded, that’s the reason they seem to be so arrogant. I think it’s a technique to attract the customers, because when the customers hear that the owners of the restaurants are very arrogant, they start thinking, ah! there must be some reason why they’re so arrogant” (Thanh, March 2013)

He said that the arrogance is something which can actually work in the restaurants favour, as you can’t allow yourself to be arrogant if you’re not certain that you will still receive customers. The arrogance can also be perceived as a sign of confidence of their cooking, when they say that: “you can go, we don’t need you”, if you complain.

He also mentioned that you can’t find these kind of places in Hồ Chí Minh City, and they are only in Hanoi, because a friend of him who lives in Hồ Chí Minh City told him that. This reminded me of restaurants located in very touristic areas, where it’s common to see people trying to talk you in to their restaurants, recommend you a very visible seat (from the outside) and often their service and food doesn’t have to be any special or it can even be bad, yet they know there will be a lot of potential customers coming there regardless, because of their prime location.

Me: *Do you think there should be more of these Western kind of restaurants? Or less? Or is it good how it is?*

Thanh: *Do you count Starbucks…?*

Me: *Yeah, that could be one*

Thanh: *I think there are too many Western chains of restaurants in Vietnam already and we don’t need any more, because actually you know almost all of the most famous brands in the world exist in Vietnam*

Thanh: *So I don’t think we need more Western restaurants. And personally I don’t like Starbucks*

Thanh: *Cause when I had it in Singapore it’s not like the traditional coffee of Vietnam, I mean it’s very bitter and also it’s very expensive (March 2013).*

Interestingly enough Thanh chose for us to meet at Highland’s Coffee, which does resemble Starbucks a lot with the interior, cozy environment and services, such as free Wi-Fi, however it’s a Vietnamese café chain that opened in 2002. They have 68 cafés throughout the country, 20 of them are in Hanoi. Since the interview with Thanh, Starbucks have opened seven more locations in Hồ Chí Minh City and four recently opened ones in Hanoi. This is an example of how fast some trends can spread. Continuing on his reply, Starbucks have introduced a new coffee product, with a familiar flavor and it’s their only coffee that uses sweet milk. Vietnamese often put condensed milk (which is sweet) in their strong coffee. The condensed milk was introduced by the French in the 19th century (see p. 37). This paragraph has shown the complicated ways how the ‘local’ can be interwoven with ‘the global’ and how it can be difficult to draw a clear line between them. Perhaps it’s not necessary to separate them, yet it can be useful to understand how and why they complement each other or oppose each other at different times.

I think that in the future there will be more cafés and restaurants with all kinds of foods that will cater to the youth with different kind of drinks and coffees and juices and with a colourful interior and popular music and more variation from place to place. This would mean that the ‘division’ between a usual street food restaurant, chain coffee shop and fast food restaurant would get more blurry. While big multinational fast food chains are still popular in the West, they have been losing some of their market share in the recent years, for the gain of smaller newer chains and individual fast food restaurants and ‘fast-casual’ restaurants that often use higher quality ingredients for a slightly higher price. I think that this will also take place in Vietnam, but a lot faster than it did in the West, where it’s happened just recently, despite many countries having a history of fast food places for at least 30 years.

25.4.2015
Summary

My informants think that there will be more fast food restaurants as well as street food restaurants. People were afraid that the fast food restaurants would spread at the cost of fast food restaurants. The prices of street food and fast food vary a lot, fast food is most often clearly more expensive. Fast food restaurants are visited as they are usually spacious, air-conditioned, many have Wi-Fi and the interior is considered as nice and modern. It’s also considered trendy to go to fast food restaurants, “they’re a place to be seen in”.
12. CONCLUSION

Many changes have taken place in the city of Hanoi and in the society, especially in the last decade. The economic reforms gradually initiated in the 1980’s have paved the way for an economic growth still continuing today. An increasing amount of people are moving to the city and people are expanding their housing and building illegal and informal additions, such as extra walls and rooms. The authorities have been playing cat and mouse with these people, but they don’t have the capacity to control everything. The local officials can also feel that it can be morally wrong to make a family out, if they’ve made themselves a good place to live, as otherwise they might have to live on the streets. Between 2008 to 2025 Hanoi is predicted to be the fastest growing city (7% annually) followed by 4 cities from China and 3 cities from India (Luong & Steingrube 2011:95).

When the city grow more and more shops, cafés and restaurants are being built, as there is not that much open public space, people gather around on the streets and meet up in shops and restaurants. The parents and state officials are worried about the youth of today and the foreign influences and different attitudes they have. I’ve used Bourdieu’s practice theory (1982) to try and explain the generational gap that there is between the youth, and their parents, and especially their grandparents. The youth value different symbolic capital than e.g. their grandparents, and can for example consider other clothes as fashionable and prefer different music than their grandparents. There are different values and ideas that are regarded as important today as there were a generation ago, which can lead to a Hysteresis effect when the habitus have not adapted to the changed field conditions. It can be difficult for people of another generation to understand each other as they can have a different framework through which they view the world and value different things. This can create conflicts, e.g. when grandparents say that you should study a certain subject to become successful, whereas the job market can have changed and a different set of skills or competences are valued today. The youth are also much more globally connected than their elders, because of the internet and they can read about and come across influences, ideas and trends from all over the world, which can influence their opinions. The state is also influencing people’s opinions and consumption by e.g. listing products that a caring housewife should own. The society in Vietnam is still quite patriarchal, even if an increasing amount of women are working outside home. Some female informants expressed disappointment and wanted it to be more gender equal, without me having asked anything gender related.
The traditional kitchen is influenced by other countries, mainly from China and there are also items that were introduced by the French colonizers. Vegetables and fruit remain important in people’s diets and people also eat increasingly more meat. The five flavours (bitter, sweet, sour, pungent-spicy, salt) are basic in the Vietnamese cooking and people like food of different textures. Rice remains the most important crop, and its production have increased tremendously since the late 1980’s and an increasing amount of it is produced for export and the export of many other food products, e.g. coffee have increased considerably as well. The rapidly growing production of food have been helped with pesticides and toxins, which have led to negative health impacts on people, due to contaminated food. This has led to growing concern of food safety and a number of programmes, such as VietGAP and the Safe vegetable programme have been initiated to try and improve the situation and to control the food better. Safe vegetables can be bought in the increasing number of supermarkets, which are mainly being built in large cities.

Some people from the city and some commuting from the countryside, work as street traders and provide foods and products to the population in a convenient way. The government has not been too fond of them and have tried to restrict their movements and banning them from some places, as they want to convey a ‘modern’ image of the city to the tourists and to the world. It has proven complicated to curb their movements and many officials also like the street traders and want to support them, e.g. if they become familiar and provide convenient products for them, close to where they live.

There are also other options if people want to buy food, such as street food stands and restaurants and fast food restaurants. There are street food restaurants practically around every corner. The street food places serve mainly more traditional food, which has been eaten for at least three generations. There is a limited, but growing number of fast food restaurants, which are mainly operated by a handful of multinational chains. These restaurants serve e.g. fried chicken, hamburgers and fries, but many of them also serve local kind of food, e.g. soup, rice and grilled chicken. The environments of the fast food restaurants are quite colourful, generally clean and most of them have air conditioning and many have Wi-Fi. I also observed that many of the places where often very empty, if not completely deserted outside lunch and dinner hours. Youth like to go to them, because they like the environment and there are often empty seats and tables and they can use the Wi-Fi for their smartphones or laptops. Most of the places also play popular music and/or show music videos on screens in the restaurant.
Based on my interviews, people were not eating at fast food places that often. They eat street food a lot more often than they eat fast food, and almost a half were aware that fast food is unhealthy, especially low quality chicken in fast food was mentioned as well as small portions of rice. Fast food is more expensive than street food and even if there are dishes that cost the same, you get far less food in the fast food restaurants. It seemed as if it was more like the last resort or something you would do, because your friends wanted or because you were in a hurry. More and more women are working outside home and the family might not have time to cook a meal, which can lead them to choose and buy fast food, because takes less time, even if it would be cheaper to cook everything home, “from scratch”.

The increasing number of middle-income and high-income population has also contributed to the success of fast food restaurants. Few pointed out they never eat out alone or with their family at fast food places. Street food is preferred by all the people that I interviewed and most people thought that there were already enough fast food restaurants. It has to be reminded that KFC just opened in Hanoi in 2006, (nine years earlier in Hồ Chí Minh City), so it’s still a quite a recent phenomenon. About 10 months after my visit, McDonald’s opened their first restaurant and has spread since. There is already over 2012 McDonald’s restaurants in China and also over 2700 KFCs as the Chinese are said to prefer chicken over beef (Ritzer 2011:3). Even if McDonald's has just sat its foot in Vietnam, yet I think that McDonald’s won’t come to outnumber KFC as the eating habits resemble each other quite much in Vietnam and China and also considering the already existing chicken fast food restaurants operating in Vietnam.

However there is also a growing foreign interest in street food and there are many companies organizing tasting tours, and Vietnamese restaurants that serve street food in high-end restaurants. I think that the traditional street food, while influenced from China and France, will remain strong, but they will see more competition from different companies, both local and foreign who will focus more on creating comfortable locales for the customers, in a growing city which doesn’t offer much public space. It will be interesting to see how the balance of tradition and the curiousness for the global and the new work together.
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