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Cooking from Life: The Real Recipe for Street Food in Ha Noi

Lelia Green, Van Hong Nguyen

Abstract

Introduction

This paper is based upon an investigation into the life of a street market in the city of Ha Noi in Vietnam, and experience of the street food served on Ha Noi's pavements. It draws upon interviews with itinerant food vendors conducted by the researchers and upon accounts of their daily lives from a Vietnamese film subtitled in English and French, sourced from the Vietnamese Women's Museum (Jensen). The research considers the lives of the people making and selling street food against the distilled versions of cultural experience accessible through the pages of two recent English language cookbooks focussing upon this cuisine. The data from the fieldwork is used as a point for critical comparison (Fram) with recipes and descriptions from *Hanoi Street Food* (Vandenberghe and Thys) and *Vietnamese Street Food* (Lister and Pohl), two recent relevant English language cookbooks. The research question addressed is "How are the everyday lives of Vietnamese street market cooks (mis)represented in cookery-related books published for an English-language readership?"

The research team comprises an Australian Cultural Studies academic (Lelia Green) and a bi-lingual Vietnamese researcher (Nguyen Hong Van), who is Ha Noi born and bred, but who has lived overseas and whose first degree, in Sociology, is from a Canadian university. In each other's company and over a period of some weeks, Lelia and Van spent more than 40 hours on ethnographic fieldwork in street markets, and interviewing street vendors. The purpose of the research was exploratory, but it was also undertaken as a means of making the labour and lives of marginalised women more visible, since most itinerant food vendors in Vietnam are women (Jensen). As Bhomik notes, male vendors "are engaged in motor cycle repair or sale of higher priced goods such as personal products, souvenirs etc. and their earnings are higher" (2261). Although the teamwork between Lelia and Van went some way to resolve the challenges posed by insider/outsider qualitative research (Corbin, Dwyer, and Buckle), Van has never lived or worked as a street vendor.

First Take an Informal Street Market ... Eating on the Street

An informal Vietnamese street market is a multi-layered space, ordered according to the geography of the area in which the food is prepared and consumed. The informality of a street market indicates its status between legitimacy and repression. Informal street markets spring up in locales where there is significant demand—usually office workers nearby, and schools. The food they sell is cheap and flavourful, catering for the needs of people who have little time or money and want something hot and nourishing to start, punctuate, or end the day. As markets grow, so the vendors in the market constitute a secondary population in need of sustenance.

Itinerant street vendors carry with them everything they need for their day's work. Typically this includes a little oil or coal-based stove, their raw ingredients, dishes or trays for food preparation and serving, often a bowl for washing food or utensils, and a large bag to carry the dirty dishes used by their customers. Often these tools of their trade will be carried in two baskets balanced upon a pole that acts as a yoke across the vendor's neck. Sometimes well-resourced vendors will also carry, (or push a bicycle or cart with), sets of small plastic stools and tables, so that their clients can sit and enjoy their food. In the semi-tropical climate of Ha Noi, carrying the raw materials to cook for and feed dozens of patrons is a tiring and difficult business. These street vendors' lives are made more complex by the semi-legitimacy of the informal street market where itinerants are viewed as potential sources of income by a series of officials who extort small but frequent payments in the form of demanding bribes, or levying fines for illegal activity such as obstructing the pavement (Lincoln). Trung, who sells crab noodles, says the police are the most difficult aspect of her job: "they can come anytime and confiscate all my stuff and give me a fine. One time I was so panicked when I saw them approaching on a small truck that I took all my bowls and ran. The bowl slipped out of my hands and cut into my leg. I still have a deep scar from that accident" (Trung).

Now add a smattering of street vendors.

Bánh Mỳ: Bread Rolls

"1 French baguette", states the Vandenberghe and Thys recipe for *bánh mỳ*, implicitly acknowledging the hundred years of French colonisation which provides Vietnam with its excellent breads and pastries, "beat the eggs lightly in a mixing bowl, crumble the paté and combine the paté and the lightly beaten eggs. Put the oil in a small frying pan and cook the omelette [...] fold the omelette double and put it on the [grilled, heated] bread [...] the variations are endless" (71).

The young Vietnamese woman, Anh, sells *bánh mỳ trứng ngải cứu*, bread rolls with egg cooked with mugwort, an aromatic leafy herb. She explains her initial motivation to sell food on the street: "some women in my village already came to the city to sell. I can't earn much money at home and I need money to send my children to school, so I decided to follow them" (Anh). She shares rented accommodation in the city with other women—sometimes up to ten people in a room (Jensen)—and starts her day at 4.30am, washing vegetables and preparing her baskets. Although a street trader herself, she is networked into a complex set of supply and delivery connections. Her eggs and bread are delivered fresh each morning and she buys the mugwort from a market near her lodgings. "I leave home around 6am and start walking along the streets. [...] I mostly sell to shop keepers. They have to stay in their shop so I bring breakfast to them. I walk through a lot of streets, whenever someone calls out I will stop and make bread for them" (Anh).

Mid-morning, at around 10am, Anh goes back to her home to have lunch and prepare for the afternoon, with a fresh delivery of eggs around 1.00-1.30pm. Usually, she leaves again around 2.00pm "but if it's too hot outside, I will stay until 3pm, because it is very tiring to walk in the heat, and people don't eat that early either. I go home whenever I sell out [...], sometimes as early as 4pm, or as late as 7pm" (Anh). Like many street vendors, Anh has sought out points of contact with the local community to punctuate her walking in episodes of rest. Her customers are mainly other Vietnamese people, "shop keepers and residents of the streets I walk along every day. There is an old lady. I sit in front of her shop every afternoon from 3pm to 5pm. She eats one egg every day" (Anh).

Anh has been selling *Bánh mỳ* on the streets for three years, but this is not her only source of income: "At home I grow rice, but I can only harvest it at the end of the season. It only takes a storm or hail to destroy the whole effort I spend for months [...] This [food] is very easy to make, and I make a little profit everyday" (Anh). She has never worked from a recipe book: "I think only people in hotels, like a big chef who makes complicated dishes need recipes, this one is very easy, just a common everyday food" (Anh). As for the problems posed by the policing of informal markets, Anh says: "if I am not careful, the ward police will give me a fine for selling on the street." Such a calamity can write off the profit of many hours' or days' work.

Xôi: Sticky Rice

Xôi is a popular street food dish, and Lister and Pohl provide two recipes, one for *xôi lạc* (sticky rice with peanuts)(68), and one for *xôi xéo* (sticky rice with turmeric and mung beans, and fried shallots) (80). Nga, the *xôi* seller interviewed for this research, sells both types of sticky rice along with *xôi gấc* (a festive red sticky rice cooked with and coloured by spiny bitter melon, and typically eaten at Tết, the celebration for the Lunar New Year) and *xôi đỗ đen*, sticky rice with black bean. She used to specialise in only one kind of sticky rice but, as she says, "business was slow so I added other types of sticky rice. I sit here in the morning everyday anyway, so I sell different types, a small quantity for each" (Nga). The biggest complication for street vendors selling sticky rice is the requirement that it is still being steamed just before being sold, so that it is hot, soft, and sticky, and not dried out. The cooked sticky rice is usually packed in banana leaves under a plastic cover and put in a bamboo basket. The basket helps with ventilation while banana leaves keep the rice moist and the plastic cover keeps in heat. Traditionally, *xôi* is also sold in banana leaves. Nga uses first a layer of banana leaf, then one of plastic, and finally newspaper.

Nga is a grandmother and constructs her street vending as a retirement job, which puts food on the table for her husband and herself. In Vietnam, there is a tradition that the younger generations look after their elders, but her work as a street vendor means that Nga and her husband can retain their autonomy and help their own family, for longer. Nga starts cooking at 4.00am, but her street food is only one element of her income: "In addition to selling here, I also deliver to restaurants. Actually most of my income comes from them. I deliver at around 5 to 5.30am, and start selling here at 6" (Nga).

Both of Lister and Pohl's recipes start with soaking the sticky rice overnight in water, just as Nga does. She says, "I wash the rice and soak them before I go to bed the night before. I get up, start the stove which uses black coal. I sell out all the rice everyday, otherwise it won't taste good [...] usually I sell out at 8 or 8.30am, 9am at the latest. I don't work in the afternoon. I pick up my grandchildren at 4pm and take care of them until the end of the day." Nga has strong views about the place of recipes in cooking, especially in cooking as a business:

I don't need to learn from a book. Written recipes or informal teaching from relatives is the same, they are just the starting point. What matters is you learn from your own experience. For example,

you soak your rice for 6 hours today, but your customers complain that the rice is not soft, so you soak it for 8 hours next time. Or maybe you sell to a poorer community, you will adjust your ingredients to cheaper type, so you can reduce your price but still make profit; but if you sell in a richer neighbourhood, you make sure you have good quality, even with higher price, or else they will not buy from you (Nga).

Lister and Pohl dedicate a two-page spread (70-1) to Đặng Thị Sáu and her *Xôi* shopfront stall, noting that she learned her business from her mother-in-law who was "an itinerant sticky rice peddler for most of her life, walking the city streets, selling from bamboo baskets. It was a hard and uncertain life and not one Sáu wanted to follow" (70). Sáu's compromise, ultimately, was to sell sticky rice from the comparative security and stability of a fixed location. Lister and Pohl's focus upon Sáu and her food, along with the pictures of everyday life featured in *Vietnamese Street Food*, mean that this is more than an inspirational cookbook. It is a vivid introduction to the vernacular foodways of Vietnam "a set of social, economic and cultural practices around the production and consumption of food that are normatively distinctive to an ethnocultural group" (Jonas 119).

Bún Riêu Cua: Crab Meat Noodle

Crab meat noodle is a complicated recipe and a reminder that many people who eat street food do so because these are favourite Vietnamese dishes which may require considerable effort to prepare. The specialisation of street food vendors, making a complicated dish for the relish of dozens of customers, allows busy Vietnamese workers to enjoy their authentic cuisine at an affordable cost without the time constraints of buying multiple ingredients and making the dish themselves. The recipe in *Hanoi Street Food* involves several steps: preparation of the sauce using sautéing, frying and reducing (Jones); cooking of the crab in boiling water (not including separately bought crabmeat used in the sauce); creation of a chicken stock, to which the sauce is added; along with the washing and chopping a range of vegetables including soya bean sprouts, spring onions, lettuce, fresh herbs, lime etc., some of which is used as garnish (Vandenbergh, and Thys 90).

Trung and her husband have been selling their *bún riêu cua* for five years. For nine years prior to working as a street food vendor, Trung was a recyclables collector. She began working in the city when she "followed a cousin to Ha Noi so I could earn money to support my family of six people. At first I collected materials such as plastic bottles, metal, papers, etc, but because I carried too much on my shoulders, I developed severe back pain and shoulder pain" (Trung). Now she and her husband use a bicycle to help carry the various necessities for her *bún riêu cua* street stall, using the vehicle to reduce some of the physical burden of the work. Trung learned how to make *bún riêu cua* from an aunt in Hai Phong, "I just observed her and other people". The dish remains time consuming, however:

I get up at 3am to start preparing the crab and cook the soup. My husband washes vegetables. It often takes us about 2 hours. By 5am, we leave the house, and we are here by 5.30, ready to sell breakfast [...] I am most busy during lunchtime, from 10am to 1-2pm. Breakfast time can last from 6am to 9am. When I am not selling to customers I often get tired and easily fall asleep because I always crave sleep. In between, my husband and I wash dishes. He also delivers to people too. We get lots of phone calls from patients of the hospitals nearby. They say my food is more delicious than food in the hospital's canteen [...] Usually I go home around 4pm in the summer and 5 to 6pm in the winter. But I also stop by different shops to buy ingredients for the next day on my way home. Once I get home, I wash the bowls, re-supply and re-arrange my stuffs, and do some preparation. I work until I go to bed at 9pm (Trung).

The illustration for this recipe in *Hanoi Street Food* is not of the dish itself, but of young Vietnamese men enjoying the dish. As is the case with Lister and Pohl, Vandenbergh and Thys's book is about more than recipes, it is a rich evocation of daily life on the streets of Vietnam.

Serve with a Side-dish of Conclusions

Authentic street food is cooked, sold and consumed on the street. However, street food cookbooks tend to recommend shopfront eateries, partly because they are easier to find, and are more convenient, in that neither the tourist nor the vendor is at risk of police intervention. Another reason for featuring the more established vendors with their own premises concerns food hygiene:

In 1989 the Vietnamese government adopted a law on the protection of people's health. A survey on food samples in Hanoi showed that 47 per cent were microbiologically unsafe. [This has now changed.] The government has adopted two practices for ensuring safer street food, namely, monitoring street food vendors through a licensing system, and educating and training them on hygiene (Bhowmik 2260).

Such licensing, training and the maintenance of hygiene standards are more difficult to police with itinerant food vendors.

In the two cookbooks featured, ingredients tend to be measured as to specific amounts, with the idea that the result should be predictable. Street vendors, however, learn to cook their signature dishes from friends, relatives, and experience. They do not measure their ingredients while cooking, and their products vary from one vendor to another, and also to some extent from day to day, even given the same cook. This creates a special characteristic of street food and means that regular customers gravitate to particular vendors whose choice of seasoning and cooking techniques culminates in the most attractive results according to their personal taste. While there are lots of stalls captioned as *bánh mỳ*, regular customers will find that there are significant differences between stalls. One reason for this is offered in Lister and Pohl: small quantities of special ingredients that are difficult to get in Vietnam and impossible elsewhere. The cook in a featured *Bánh cuốn* stall (selling rice pancakes) adds a drop of giant water bug juice to season her dipping broth: " 'It's the real thing! One drop off the top of a chopstick is enough' she explains" (Lister, and Pohl 33).

As is clear from the interviews with vendors, itinerant sellers of street food don't use recipe books, and have generally learned how to cook their dishes through women's networks of family and friends. The two cookbooks discussed are designed for consumption by people who engage in or aspire to "food and drink tourism" (Boniface vii) in Vietnam, whether the readers have visited in person or become aware of the cuisine through popular culture, such as Luke Nguyen's SBS cooking shows (Nguyen). They are as much coffee table books as collections of recipes, and are written by westerners for a western readership. The recipes focus on ingredients that can be sourced in everyday western contexts but the beautiful and evocative photographs of daily life in Vietnam, supplemented by written commentary on people and place, clearly locate the recipes in their Vietnamese cultural context. Culinary tourism allows people unfamiliar with a cuisine and culture to use "food to explore new cultures and ways of being" (Long 21).

Street food vendors are part of many communities. They require knowledge, skill, and personal networks to acquire the quality ingredients at the best possible price for the daily routine of food preparation and selling. Whereas recipe books deal with domestic-scale food production, a vendor may cook for a hundred or more people in a single day. Many itinerant street food sellers work in the city to support absent husbands and children in rural locations, taking money home on a regular basis (\$20 profit a fortnight makes their labour worthwhile), and spending 10 days in 14 on the streets (Jensen). As women help each other to begin a career as a vendor through oral teaching, observation, and first-hand experience, they do away with the invisible, authoritative voice of cookbooks. Itinerant food sellers are also a part of the larger communities in which they work, including customers, their suppliers, and other actors such as the authorities and the media. This larger community sets the tone for their food, and their lives.

The vast majority of vendors of street food are women, prepared to work hard and with passion and pride to make enough money to make a difference to their families. Books about street food might help recreate some of the dishes that can be bought on the streets of Vietnam. After participating in street life, however, as an observer or customer, it becomes clear that recipe cookbooks intended for English readers only capture part of the complexity and beauty of street food, and the lives of those who make it.

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