The Fusion Between Culinary and Communication Culture in Traditional Vietnamese Family

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Сливане между кулинарната и комуникационна култура в традиционно виетнамско семейство

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Abstract

Family meal plays a huge role in traditional Vietnamese families. It is not only a moment when people meet their physical needs but also a space to practice and transmit the good cultural values left by their ancestors. This study was conducted to explore the specific expression of the traditional Vietnamese family's cultural and culinary behavior (the tray of rice) to preserve national culture in modern society. The secondary document analysis method is used as a bridge to link the sources together to have scientific and convincing statements and explanations. In addition, we analyzed primary data obtained through observations in ethnographic and sociological fieldwork for accurate and appropriate descriptions. The research results show that the traditional Vietnamese family’s behavior culture at the family meals is a mix of culinary and communication, integrated and profound human values. The characteristics of the culinary culture and communication culture of Vietnam not only show some common ground with other countries in the world but also contain many distinct values of identity.

Keywords: family meal, cuisine, communication, culture, traditional Vietnamese family, native culture

Резюме

Семейното хранене играе огомна роля в традиционното виетнамско семейство и не е само време за удовлетворване физически нужди, но и постранство за практикуване и трансмитиране на добри културни ценности, педавани от тяхните предци. This study was conducted to explore the specific expression of a cultural culinary behavior of the traditional Vietnamese family (the tray of rice), as a way of preserving national culture in modern society. The secondary document analysis method is used as a bridge to link the sources together to have scientific and convincing statements and explanations. In addition, we analyzed primary data obtained through observations in ethnographic and sociological fieldwork for accurate and appropriate descriptions. The research results show that the traditional Vietnamese family’s behavior culture at the family meals is a mix of culinary and communication, integrated and profound human values. The characteristics of the culinary culture and communication culture of Vietnam not only show some common ground with other countries in the world but also contain many distinct values of identity.

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Eating is a behaviour that meets basic human needs, but in each country, it has many other senses than the basic one. The meal is universal and exists in all societies, cultures, and classes (Fjellström, 2004). All countries have the family meal habit (Meiselman, 2000). Previous studies have also shown that family meal brings many benefits to all members, especially for children: health protection, better weight control, limiting risky behaviour, minimizing depressive symptoms (Wang et al., 2013; Christian et al., 2013; Hammons & Fiese, 2011; Sen, 2010; Skeer & Ballard, 2013).

Studies on family food culture also show that the home food culture environment supports healthy eating (De Wit et al., 2015); family meal experiences help to view perspectives on knowledge, learning, and culture (Jonsson, 2004; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999). Research on the typical family meal and the value of traditional meals provides suggestions for orientation for current eating trends of individuals and families in Europe (Fjellström, 2009), in the US (McIntosh et al., 2009), or the construction of family culture through meals in Asian families (Seo et al., 2015). "Family meals and daily meal preparation create more time for communication and higher quality of family communication" (Ho et al., 2018, 3850). Family communication is enhanced through the family meal (Offer, 2013) and promotes positive communication (Fulkerson et al., 2010). Moreover, the home environment becomes stable and supportive thanks to communication during meals (Sobal, 2000).

In Vietnam, research on culinary culture has attracted a lot of attention because of its rich and diverse culinary culture (Trinh, 2019; Phan, 2015; Nguyen, 2009; Tran & Nguyen, 1999). Vietnamese cuisine has a close relationship with the natural conditions of Vietnam, but we can also find interference and acculturation of culinary culture with other countries in the world (Nguyen & Tran, 2010). The unique feature of Vietnamese culinary culture is the application of yin and yang philosophy in selecting and processing dishes (Ngo, 2013). The culinary culture is passed on to generations through folk songs, proverbs, and oral folk knowledge and plays a significant role in social life (Nguyen, 1999; Nguyen, 2015). However, a study on the interweaving and synergistic relationship between culinary culture and communication culture expressed through the behavior of Vietnamese family meals seems to be left open. This study explores the characteristic expression of cultural behaviour in the traditional Vietnamese family meal. The research results show that family transforms family
meals into a sequence of current social life, simultaneously preserving and promoting the good cultural values of the nation.

**Method and materials**

To identify, locate and create a secondary database for the research topic, we searched for publications by keywords (Family meal, culinary culture, communication culture, traditional Vietnamese family) in prestigious professional journals. A total of 32 online data were found, mainly focusing on Google Scholar, Researchgate, Jstor.org, and many other reliable websites and libraries, such as university libraries, Vietnamese Government websites, and local websites. In addition to the documents updated on the website, we also found printed materials and typed files on the computer to collect the most suitable secondary source. We classify, synthesize, analyze and evaluate by private topic groups based on collected materials.

In addition to secondary data, we use primary data observed from ethnographic and sociological fieldwork in many localities of Vietnam. Primary data is processed, synthesized, and analyzed with secondary data to make objective and scientific judgments about the research topic.

**Results**

**Origins of Vietnamese Culinary Culture and Communication Culture**

Humans are affected by the natural and social environment. The specific natural and social environments for people with specific cultural characteristics. Therefore, comparing cultures worldwide, we can see that they are extremely diverse and rich, with similarities and differences. To explain the similarities, from the end of the nineteenth century, some scholars such as Ratsel, Frobenius, Grabner, Smith, and Rivers advocated based on the theory of “cultural diffusion,” arguing that culture is formed in one place and then propagated and spread to other places (Tran, 2001, 31). American anthropologists later rejected this theory and also proposed the “cultural areas” theory to assert the existence of many peoples in the same territory who have things in common. Later, Wisler and other researchers proposed the idea of “regional cultural type.” This theory mentions a set of general features of a cultural region (Tran, 2001, 31). The phenomena of “cultural diffusion” or “acculturation” take place in many places, so the above theories of culture have certain rational aspects, these theories, and concepts that may apply in specific contexts. In the case of Vietnamese culture, we see similarities with Asian cultures such as China, Japan, and Korea, but also distinct differences
compared to cultures of many western countries, even different from the Asian countries themselves.

Culture is a product created by people in their living environment, so it is necessary to check the residence area and development process to understand the root of cultural characteristics. Vietnamese culture has features of Eastern culture but also has its private national cultural identity. The terms “East” and “West” refer to the cultural aspects of the two centres of the East and the West, according to the geographical territory. “The two regions have very distinct differences in many aspects: while the western languages morph, the eastern languages are isolated; while Westerners value individuality, Easterners value community; while Westerners shake hands when they meet, Easterners hold their own hands (folded hands, crossed arms)” (Tran, 2001, 35). The opposite states of personality between Westerners and Easterners are also generalized in opposing pairs: dynamic and static, outward and introverted, quality and quantity. Therefore, there is nothing more convincing than making an assumption based on natural (geographic-climate) and social characteristics (economic history) to explain the deep origin of the difference between Vietnamese and Western cultures.

Vietnam is a country located on the Indochinese peninsula in Southeast Asia. Vietnam lies within the tropical belt of the northern hemisphere, which gives Vietnam a high temperature (average 21-27 degrees Celsius) with air humidity above 80% (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The characteristic of the weather, lots of sunshine, and lots of rain have formed many rivers flowing from West to east and running into the sea, bringing rich alluvium to vast river deltas. The natural conditions have created the agricultural economy of the Vietnamese based on farming as the main and livestock as a secondary. Pierre Gourou (Nguyen & Tran, 2010) has characterized Vietnamese civilization in the context of Southeast Asia and Asia as a plant civilization (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 74). The most popular and suitable crop is wet rice which formed an agricultural society known as the wet rice civilization for generations. The process of formation and development of Vietnam is also the process of developing agricultural culture. Although the character of the agricultural economy is self-sufficiency, it is also a critical factor in creating a long, stable, and quiet life, forming the static respect character of the Vietnamese.

In contrast, in the West, the country is cold, and the climate is dry, which is the condition for the immense grasslands to form a cattle-breeding economy, a nomadic lifestyle, and a nomadic culture. The nomadic culture focuses on convenient and quick movement,
creating the dynamic respect character of Westerners. Through a long development process, the core foundation of natural conditions and economic conditions remains the root for all forms of later development. "Modern cultures, no matter what stage of civilization they are in (agricultural, industrial, or even post-industrial) do not escape from the two basic types of "static respect" and "dynamic respect" that, according to the origin, it can be called the culture of "agricultural origin" and "nomadic origin" (Tran, 2001, 38). Vietnamese culture is a typical representative of the “static respect” type of culture of the East.

Vietnamese culture is formed according to the characteristics of the wet-rice agricultural economy, which depends a lot on natural conditions. Hence, people respect nature and intend to live in harmony with nature depending on their personality. That is consistent with Engels (Tran, 2001) that man's problem is not to win over nature but to live in conscious and subtle harmony with nature (Tran, 2001, 40). The attitude of respecting nature has a positive meaning, to protect nature, but its limitation is that it restraints personal development. Because people are always shy and afraid of nature, they must rely on collective strength to form a durable community cohesion. The characteristics of the agricultural economy and the stable community cohesion have developed a culture of respect and affection. A lifestyle that respects feelings leads to an attitude of respect for morality, respect for people, and respect for women (Tran, 2001, 42). The aspect of respecting women has been shown since the Van Lang and Au Lac dynasties and has become the source of the Vietnam national culture (Doan & Nguyen, 2004). The role and position of Vietnamese women were downgraded when Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam and showed the strong influence of the ideology respecting men and despising women. Because before Confucianism was imported to Vietnam, Vietnam was an independent country with a culture with its basic characteristics (Tran, 1993, 56). Later, when Confucianism was imported to Vietnam and became the state religion from the Le dynasty in the 15th century, the position of women was lowered in the decoration that overemphasized the role of men. The specificity of the agricultural economy makes the role of women important. Women participate in most of the farming work (from tillage, planting, care, harvesting, and processing products), while men are mainly responsible for the main jobs (plowing, transporting).

Moreover, the woman is considered to be the one who holds the key box and manages the income and expenditure in the family, “even though it is a patriarchal family, the wife is the real master” (Do, 1990, 10). The affirmation of the position of women is perhaps most clearly and meaningfully expressed in the role of the nest builder (Men make the house,
women make the home). Women are the ones who “keep the fire” in the family through arranging work, taking care of children, and most importantly, being in charge of the “kitchen,” which contributes significantly to the formation of culinary culture in the family and more broadly, the culinary culture of the nation.

Research about Vietnamese family culture (including culinary or communication culture) must pay attention to the socio-human environment in Vietnam. The traditional Vietnamese family is a small farmers’ nuclear family. The daily meal of a Vietnamese family is prepared and managed by a woman in charge. It is also the women’s responsibility to stir the rice for all members of the family gathered around the table. That proves that women have a large and diverse role in the family meal; they invest a lot of effort in making the family meal and then in making meal an enjoyable event (Trofholz, Schulte & Berge, 2018, 125).

Vietnamese family meals show the value of culinary culture and the communication culture of the family. The behaviour during the meal is a typical expression of the synthesis and interleaving between the culinary culture and the communication culture of the Vietnamese. These cultural features have been formed, accumulated, and transmitted through generations.

Eating and talking are a pair of behaviours that always go hand in hand in Vietnamese culture (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 48). Eating and talking are ranked as significant in Vietnamese culture, so each person must always try to improve their skills to form the appropriate “style of eating” and “way of talking.” Vietnamese pay great attention to aspects such as what to eat, who you eat with, where to eat, how to eat, who to talk, where to talk, what to talk, and how to talk. All these aspects have cultural implications and are elevated to symbolism. Therefore, a person who eats or speaks rudely is not polite, and people only use the phrase “uncultured” to reflect this situation.

**Typical Culinary Culture in Vietnamese Families**

A meaningful culture is what people produce and mobilize to act on their environment (Ortner, 1984). Dao Duy Anh introduced a simple concept of culture, saying that “culture is activity” and “eating and drinking” are also cultural activities (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 23).

Cuisine, understood in a superficial sense, is “eating, drinking, smoking”; people can approach cuisine culture in many ways many different aspects, but the cuisine in Vietnam has been elevated to art. It reflects many ways of eating and behaving through cuisine culture. Marcel Mauss considers cuisine to be “an overall human-social event” full of culture, just as in English, there is the phrase “foods as culture” (Nguyen & Tran, 2010). Thus, it can be
understood that culinary culture is the way of eating and behaving concerning food and depending on the living environment.

When researching Vietnamese culinary culture, it is necessary to put it in the background of the natural environment with the characteristics of a hot and humid climate with heavy rain, where vegetation grows. Biological diversity leads to gastronomic variety, but diversity still follows unity for Vietnamese people eating habits and culture of communication while eating are the result of dealing with natural conditions and the agricultural economy. In that economy, rice is the most important crop, so the Vietnamese appreciate the role of rice as "stronger by rice, daring by money." Therefore, rice is the main dish in meals, even breakfast. Rice is the main ingredient in every meal, so Vietnamese familiarly call it “bữa cơm” rather than a “bữa ăn” like Westerners. In addition to rice, Vietnamese food is also relatively simple. The leading food of each family is agricultural products made by themselves or exploited by nature. Haudricourt observed that "agriculture and cooking are closely related. Therefore, the land landscape is like a mirror reflecting the way of eating in a village" (Nguyen, 2015, 39).

Meanwhile, according to the theory of food culture, ecology and physiology are the most important and decisive factors in the organization/structure of the eating system. The meal structure of the Vietnamese includes cultivated plants, protein from livestock products, and wild-caught seafood such as rice - soup/vegetables - fish - meat. Author Tran formulated the daily meal of Vietnamese as rice - vegetables - fish; Later, Fukui formulated the daily feed of Southeast Asia, including Vietnam as rice - vegetables - fish - fish sauce (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 41). After “rice,” vegetables play the second most important and indispensable role in every meal. In each tray of Vietnamese rice, fish and meat may be lacking, but a bowl of vegetable soup must always be present; even without rice, there must be vegetables. The role of vegetables in a meal is confirmed by the idiom “healthy eat vegetable, sick take medicine.”

Vietnamese eat and drink in many different ways for a variety of purposes. Author Ngo divided the Vietnamese family meals into three types, including daily eating, ritual eating, and healing food (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 23). However, this classification is only relative because many everyday foods have medicinal value. The eating and drinking of Vietnamese are also heavily influenced by particular ideologies that an honorable man does not need to overeat (Confucianism) or vegetarianism - a lifetime without eating meat and fish (Buddhism). Eating is also taken into account in a spiritual meaning.
The eating habits of Vietnamese have been concluded into folk knowledge over the generations, experienced and applied for a long time, and gradually became the eating style of Vietnamese. First of all, it is the seasonal style of eating. Because the lifestyle depends on nature, the food is often seasonal and depends on the food available in the fields, gardens, ponds, and lakes. Vietnam’s climate changes with each season, so it seriously affects the surface of the plant and animal world - a food source for humans. According to the experience of Vietnamese, the quality of foods is often affected by the weather, so eat seasonal food accordingly to take advantage of the deliciousness and nutritional value of the food at a low cost, ensuring health.

Besides choosing seasonal food, food preparation is also necessary and valued. Engels once recognized the significant role of fire. Still, actually processed food, since having fire and knowing how to conquer fire made men completely escape from animal life and become persons (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 87). In Vietnamese culinary culture, food processing is the art of combining food sources to create delicious dishes. That is related to the way of cooking and the accompanying spices of each dish. Accordingly, food is divided according to heat (hot), welding (cold), neutral (cool), and warmth (warm). The seasoning is also mixed according to the above four properties. These properties are referred to as the yin and yang of the five elements. The things with heat properties belong to “Yang,” and the things with cold properties belong to “Yin .” A dish is considered valuable and good for the body if it is balanced by welding, heat, neutral, and warmth, that is, between yin and yang (Nguyen, 1999, 17).

**Meaning of family meal of Vietnamese**

In Vietnam, eating and drinking have a basic meaning of meeting human physiological needs, but also a sublime philosophy of “live to eat” or “eat to live .” Eating, wearing, and staying are the three most important human activities, but Vietnamese have the saying “fine words butter no parsnips,” and “spare the rod, spoil the child .” In addition to the meaning of providing energy for the body, a family meal is an expression of happiness and love and a place to nurture affection between members. A good meal is not only reflected in many delicious, suitable, and favorite dishes, but also in a warm atmosphere, moments when the family gathers together to enjoy family love. Through meals, the family performs the function of satisfying the psycho-physiological and emotional needs of family members. The family meal effectively resolves many complex issues related to gender, age, and work-related physical and mental fatigue. Family meals contain much meaning. Food is always arranged in
a circular object, called a tray. There are many ways to explain why Vietnamese choose a round tray to decorate their family’s food. Some people interpret it as a symbol of the sun and moon, but the deep meaning of the round rice tray is the cohesion of all participants sitting around the tray. Members can see each other’s eyes and can easily share food. The center of the rice tray is grandparents and parents; the children and grandchildren must show respect and be pious during the meal. That is shown in the rituals of a meal as sitting position, sitting posture, invitation, time to start eating and eating manners. The family meal is an expression of happiness, loving reunion, nurturing human souls, and creating close affection between generations in the family. Family meals, especially in multi-generational families, are a cultural space showing the process of cultural continuity and preservation, creating a unique feature in Vietnamese family culture. Cultural factors are not only conveyed through enjoying food but also preserved in traditional customs. Through the culinary culture, the Vietnamese also emphasize the labor responsibility of each family member: “no pain, no gain.” Therefore generations are educated as hard-working people because, in the Vietnamese sense, “labor” means “doing business,” which is working on eating, eating to live, and living to work for yourself and others (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 28). Therefore, in folklore, there are two conceptions: “eating to live” - showing a positive view of living to work for yourself and others and “living to eat” - showing a picture of enjoyment of the labor achievements.

The Fusion of Culinary and Communication Culture on the Family Meal

It must be said that the behaviour of each individual during a Vietnamese family meal is the result of the blending of two aspects of culture, cuisine and communication in the family. In the daily family or festive meals, all dishes are available so you can eat them, look at the ingredients, and “be careful of possible faux pas.” (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 18). Therefore, eating is also a highly social activity. The Vietnamese have elevated eating and drinking from a mechanical activity to an artistic enjoyment (Nguyen, 1999, 18). People eating and drinking are not only to exist but to reach something higher. That is shown first in the culinary aspect, including the art of cooking, arranging, and organizing family meals.

Traditional Vietnamese dishes are processed according to both natural and economic conditions of each region and depending on the taste of each family. However, Vietnamese dishes are not simply processed with single ingredients; but most of them are combined. Vietnamese enjoy eating with all their senses. The main dish often combines many ingredients and spices, the primary food is boiled dishes, and they eat both food and broth (broth, soup - Vietnamese soup eaten throughout the meal).
Therefore, according to the synthesis - system - structure approach, culinary scholars believe that it is not only a dish, but a combination of dishes. According to Braudel’s concept, it is “food coordination,” or according to Savarin, it is “food sensuality” that is the identity of each culture (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 82).

As mentioned above, the Vietnamese apply the yin and yang philosophy to the culinary culture. Using and practicing according to the mindset of yin and yang balance, Vietnamese appreciate the harmony of yin and yang in food, the balance of yin and yang in the body, and the balance of yin and yang between humans and the natural world. That shows the debate in the culinary culture of the Vietnamese. The principle of harmonizing yin and yang in food processing has helped the Vietnamese combine food ingredients and adjust spices to create diverse and complex dishes.

First of all, the harmony of yin and yang in food is shown in distinguishing food according to the five yin and yang consciousnesses corresponding to the five elements as Lương (cool, little yin = Kim), Ôn (warm, little yang = Mộc), Hấn (cold, lots of yin = Thủy), Nhịệt (hot, lots of yangs = Hỏa), Bình (neutral = Thổ). Thoroughly applying the rules of yin and yang to compensate and transform, the Vietnamese prepare dishes with ingredients and spices so that the combination brings the best balance of yin and yang. In particular, the bowl of dipping sauce is a typical symbol where the Vietnamese can harmonize all the Five Elements to harmonize yin and yang corresponding to the five visceral elements. The salty taste (extracted from fish) of Thuy in the kidney, the sour taste (from the lemon, vinegar) of Wood into the Can organ, the bitter taste (from the lemon peel) of the fire to the Heart organ, the sweet taste (from the sugar) of the Earth to the Pi organ, the spicy taste (from the chili) of Kim to the Phe organ. Vietnamese apply the philosophy of yin and yang balance to foods that provide nutrition and balance yin and yang in the body. It is also a form of healthy eating to ensure human health. For example, when having stomach pain (yin), Vietnamese often eat foods with heat (yang) like ginger; if stomach pain is hot (yang) eat foods with cold (yin) properties such as eggs, apricot leaves, black bean tea.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese focus on balancing yin and yang between humans and nature, forming eating habits according to seasons and climates. In winter (yin), food is more prone to hot foods to fight cold (meat, fat) with cooking methods usually fried or grilled; in summer (yang) favors cool foods (vegetables, fruits, shrimp, fish) with cooking methods usually boiling, soup, and steaming. But in general, due to the temperate climate's high temperature, Vietnamese prefer to eat foods of neutral, cold (yin), such as plants, vegetables,
tubers, and fruits. The choice of type and taste of food also depends on each region. The Northern people have distinctly cold winters (yin), so they prefer to eat meat and fat (yang); the Central people live along the coast, so seafood is rich (yin), so they like to eat chili (yang), the Southerners have a temperate climate (neither too hot nor too cold), so their taste is more in favor of sweet.

In culinary culture, the Vietnamese emphasize community and traditional standards. The community is most evident in the combination of food ingredients and tray arrangement. All family members share the same food, not in separate portions like Westerners. In the arrangement of the rice tray, the rice cooker is placed at the top of the tray. The food is placed all over the tray, and the bowl of sauce is in the center. This arrangement is symbolic of the simple but essential; the rice is the essence of the earth, and the fish sauce is the essence of the water – they are like the Thủy (Water) element and the Thổ (Earth) element, which is the beginning and the center of the Five Elements. The tray of rice of the Vietnamese family shows both the community and the democracy in it. Tran (Nguyen & Tran, 2010) stated that “democratic eating” is unlike Westerners who serve each dish, one dish after another. The Vietnamese put all the dishes on the rice tray; how much food everyone eats and what they eat depends on their taste and strength; no one is forced to eat the food they don’t like. This way of preparing the tray represents the difference between the traditional East and the West, reflecting the lifestyles of different societies. The West pays much attention to the individual, the East, although democratic, still value community. Besides the community, the Vietnamese also focus on traditional stereotypes for each individual in the meal. The style of eating and speaking is significant for each individual. Everyone must learn to eat and speak. Eating and drinking are thought to be an activity to meet biological needs, inclined to human instincts, but in Vietnamese culinary culture, eating is elevated to art. Standards are clear in eating, such as not eating too fast or too slow, not too much or too little, eating without leaving leftovers in each person’s bowl, and not eating everything from the tray. The last piece of food is often shared by people and given to others. This standard reflects subtle, humble eating behaviour and an elegant attitude to eating. Therefore, although the round tray of rice shows the closeness and cohesion between family members, each member must follow strict requirements of eating behaviour. So, each family member must be educated from a young age and behave appropriately. Three high standards are valued in the Vietnamese family culture: Gia Đạo, Gia Phong, and Gia Lễ. The Gia Đạo, Gia Phong, and Gia Lễ are fully expressed in the family meal. Gia Đạo represents the moral standards in the family. In the Gia
Dao, filial piety is the highest value (filial piety to parents and ancestors). Gia Phong, also known as “family routine,” is the way of life, habits, customs, and manners of family members to organize the family and educate people, especially spiritually. Gia Lễ represents customs in the family expressed through the way one speaks, behaves, and walks, which are passed on through generations, becoming a tradition that descendants must strictly follow. The existence of the family three and four generations is a significant foundation for the standards of communication and behaviour culture to be enhanced and strictly adhered to.

Author Tran mentioned that the three ways of eating in Vietnam consist of eating comprehensively, scientifically, and democratically (Nguyen & Tran, 2010). Comprehensive eating is eating with the five senses. First, eat with your eyes; food is presented beautifully, followed by eating with the nose, enjoying the taste of the food, then the teeth touch the food, making a sound, then eating by chewing and hearing, finally taste and enjoy the taste of food with the tongue (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 76). Eating scientifically is eating that takes advantage of nutrition to ensure health. Eating democratically is eating according to the preferences and needs of each person. But no matter how people eat, a family meal is organized closely, according to old rules and strictly.

Before sitting around the rice tray, each member must observe it overall because the Vietnamese attach great importance to “cross the stream where it is the shallowest.” That shows the hierarchy and order in the family. Women in charge of taking rice for everyone should sit near the rice cooker; other members sit around the tray of rice. When eating, do not sit too close or too far from the tray of rice to fit the hand when picking up the food. The dishes are furnished to be most convenient for all meal members. The person in the low position gives chopsticks to other family members. The person who gets the chopsticks first is the person with the highest place in the family, and the person who offers chopsticks is the last one to get chopsticks. The use of chopsticks shows the flexibility in the culinary culture of Vietnamese, which is gradually becoming a culture of using chopsticks. The divider must hold the chopsticks and arrange them equally to select pairs of chopsticks for balance because the Vietnamese are afraid of using skewed chopsticks. Before eating, each person must arrange the two ends of the chopsticks evenly. Each person touches the chopsticks' top edge and uses three fingertips to hold the chopsticks gently. Children are taught to pay attention to whether the tip of the chopsticks is in the right direction, after a meal to put down the chopsticks neatly, and not to let the chopsticks be staggered or skewed. Especially Vietnamese are very taboo about sticking chopsticks in a bowl of rice because that’s how to
arrange rice bowls for the dead. The newly dead must be offered an upside-down bowl of rice, a boiled egg, and a pair of chopsticks to hope that the deceased will have new vitality to live a different life (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 25).

When every member has their bowl of rice, the whole family begins to eat. Vietnamese are very attentive in inviting before and after eating, which shows respect for grandparents and parents. Everyone must invite others before having a meal, but the invitation of members in different positions is also separate. Usually, people of low status, children, will invite adults first respectfully; on the contrary, people in high places and the elderly also invite other members to have a meal, but in a more casual way. Family members must be asked, starting with the oldest person in the family as grandparents, then to parents and siblings. The invitation must be gentle and polite, accompanied by the act of chopstick division, cleaning the dishes for the elders, showing respect to the superior during the meal in particular and in the behavior culture in general.

The role of eating to maintain health and life is very important, but Vietnamese also focus on eating in a humble way, in order and putting personal honor above food. The Vietnamese meals express the spirit of respecting the elders and yielding to the younger. While eating, each person must pay attention to their eating behaviours, observe people around to ensure order and routine in the family. The elders take the food first, then the younger ones. Vietnamese do not have the habit of taking food direct delivery to the mouth, each people have to put it in a bowl before eating. Each people must pick up the food piece that the chopstick tip touches first, they do not use the chopsticks to stir the plate of food to choose a delicious piece, especially don’t pick up the food and put it down to choose another. The behaviour of shuffling the plate of food to choose the most delicious piece shows impolite behaviour, no culture of the meal. In the family meal, members often pick up food for each other, show attention and care for others. In order to show respect and filial piety, grandparents and parents are invited first to serve delicious pieces, then children come next.

In Vietnamese meals, there is always a bowl of soup for the whole family. To use the soup, people use a spoon to scoop up the hash for the entire family; they do not use chopsticks to stir the soup. After scooping up the soup, the soup spoon should be face down, not upside down. Besides the bowl of soup, there is also a bowl of dipping sauce for the whole family. When dipping food and vegetables into the bowl of dipping sauce, Vietnamese do not let the chopsticks dip into the dipping sauce. Vietnamese pay close attention to not opening their mouth and not making sounds when chewing and swallowing food. In particular, Vietnamese
do not like to criticize the food because the taste may not be suitable for one person but another. Because the dish is made with effort, enthusiasm, and love of the cooker, even if it does not appear reasonable, the first thing is to appreciate it.

Vietnamese have the habit of chatting while eating, so the meal becomes the most important communication space of the family. The conversations in the family meal are often associated with problems or daily activities and housework, so the atmosphere is peaceful and intimate. Children in the family are taught not to speak while chewing and not to interrupt when adults are talking; they have to wait for the adult to finish speaking before speaking. The content discussed and exchanged also focuses on connecting people and helping people understand each other. During meals, Vietnamese avoid saying things that affect the mood and enjoyment of food and avoid causing conflicts and arguments. Because Vietnamese think that “Guest Sun also avoid meals," eating time is when they must be most comfortable and relaxed. Serious matters are often discussed after a meal. Even teaching children should be avoided so as not to put pressure on children when eating. Therefore, the family members also pay attention to the tone and attitude when speaking. The speaker should pay attention to speaking softly and listening, being humble and polite.

**Discussion**

The cultural characteristics of Vietnamese expressed in family meals show the unique identity of Vietnamese culture. A culture is formed and developed from Vietnam's natural environment and specific social conditions. We can easily find many similarities and differences between Vietnamese food culture and communication with countries in the region and worldwide. Therefore, Vietnamese culture is a typical example of the theory of cultural diffusion, cultural areas, or regional cultural types to explain the similarities and differences of the ethnic culture characteristics.

Because in addition to the common characteristics of human cultures, such as attaching importance to meals and building eating rules at the table, the Vietnamese also create their cultural values such as the combination of ingredients and spices, how to choose and combine seasonal and regional foods, how to organize family meals. The diversity of climate sub-regions also creates different colors in Vietnamese culinary culture, creating diverse and rich culinary culture characteristics in unity.

Vietnamese meals meet not only physical needs but also imply other values, such as aiming for the balance of yin and yang between humans and the natural environment. Vietnamese are shy of nature but rely on nature, immersing themselves in nature to ensure
maximum safety and satiety in daily life. The Vietnamese do not dominate nature like Westerners; the Vietnamese enjoy nature in a way that promotes the advantages of natural products to enrich family meals and the culinary culture of the nation.

Vietnamese meals show the culinary culture and clearly reflect the communication culture between family members. The behaviour of each individual during the meal reflects the individual’s personality; it is also a mirror that reflects the family’s upbringing. The principles in the family meal sound dogmatic, helping to make the meal hygienic and keep the thoughtfulness and courtesy in eating. Children are educated about the right eating behaviours from a young age until adulthood. The children’s behaviour during family meals manifests in the family’s upbringing and etiquette. That is even more meaningful in that the Vietnamese are very hospitable. Visiting guests will be invited to dine with the families, and polite children during meals are their parents' pride. More, in Vietnamese culture, there are a lot of eating and drinking events in the community, from funerals, weddings to community activities such as festivals and anniversaries of village gods. All events share dining moments with many people in the community. Each individual who shows dignity around the rice tray is the expression of the family’s behaviour, culture, and routine and will be appreciated by community members.

**Conclusions**

In Vietnam, the climatic conditions, with year-round conditions of high temperature and high humidity, have highly influenced the ecosystem and the economic conditions, thereby influencing living, eating, drinking, and communication activities.

Over time, the process of adapting to nature and accumulating food knowledge over many generations has raised the level of Vietnamese eating and drinking into a culinary culture. The processing and enjoyment of food follow certain principles to ensure nutrition, health, and harmony with nature. In Vietnam, eating has surpassed the satisfaction of purely physiological needs, so the culinary approach must be an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach that includes biology, ecology, sociology, cultural studies, or technology [to see] that Culinary is a function, a structural component of the social organization of an ethnic group (Nguyen & Tran, 2010, 83).

No matter how ancient the Vietnamese family meal culture is, its values are very well preserved in modern society. Condominas (Nguyen & Tran, 2010) once commented that "the culinary style sometimes is imbued with national cultural identity more than language (language is both a product and an element of culture). Many people in the younger
generations (the third generation living abroad) “have forgotten the Vietnamese language, but still preserve the Vietnamese food and eating habits” (Nguyen & Tran, 25). Fortunately, each Vietnamese meal not only preserves the quintessence of culinary culture but also deeply expresses the culture of communication. Therefore, understanding and keeping the culture of the meal is the core of family culture, an important condition for preserving the national culture in modern society.

References


