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## **Embodying nation in food consumption : changing boundaries of "Taiwanese cuisine" (1895-2008)**

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### **Citation**

Chen, Y. J. (2010, June 15). *Embodying nation in food consumption : changing boundaries of "Taiwanese cuisine" (1895-2008)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15690>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## **Conclusion:**

### **Embodied “Nation” in Commodities and Sensibilities**

This dissertation examines the transformation of Taiwanese cuisine, aiming to explore how nationhood is embodied in food consumption. Instead of viewing “nation” as a given concept, this research scrutinizes how different concepts/versions of nationhood of Taiwan are embodied in the formation of Taiwanese cuisine and how consumers participate in this process. Therefore, beginning by presenting a historical overview of Taiwanese cuisine throughout the twentieth century, the dissertation shows how different notions of Taiwanese cuisine emerged under three different political regimes, while the status of Taiwan shifted from being a Japanese colony to a base of the ROC government, and then to a community announcing its distinctiveness in political and cultural domains. The second part of this thesis focuses on the perceptions and the bodily practices of consumers relative to Taiwanese cuisine, demonstrating the importance of cultural and bodily memory in the embodiment of nationhood. Chapter Four shows that Taiwanese cuisine could function as “tastes of home” for migrants who, in the late 1940s, made their way from the Mainland to Taiwan, where their cultural memories took root. The case studies in Chapter Five further illustrate consumers’ various definitions of “Taiwanese cuisine” and the complex relationship between national consciousness and culinary preference.

On the basis of the respective examinations of the preceding five chapters, I return in this concluding chapter to the three levels of questions I initially posed in the Introduction. My discussion begins with the three concrete questions regarding Taiwanese cuisine; then it will focus on the embodiment of nationhood in food consumption, and the interactions between politico-cultural elements of a nation and individuals in the maintenance of nationhood.

#### **1. THREE FEATURES OF NATIONAL CUISINE: RELATIONAL, PERFORMATIVE, AND COMMERCIAL**

First, what are the definitions of “Taiwanese cuisine” under different political regimes? The examination of Taiwanese cuisine shows that the definition of this term varies according to the term’s changing relationships with Chinese cuisine during the three political periods.

During the Japanese colonial era, “Taiwanese cuisine” referred to a selection from Chinese cuisine. Selected from Chinese regional cuisines, these dishes were

adapted to local food resources and to the tastes of the most privileged clients, that is, the Japanese ruling class and the Taiwanese upper class. After undergoing this adaptation, these dishes were presented under the name “Taiwanese cuisine” during the Japanese colonial era. Shortly after the Second World War, the Nationalist government fled from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan, where the Nationalist Party established its authoritarian rule. The relationship between Taiwanese cuisine and Chinese cuisine thus changed: Chinese cuisine was the national cuisine and Taiwanese cuisine became a constitutive part of it. Because the new authoritarian rule and its dominant cultural assumptions presented Chinese cuisine as part and parcel of the national culture, Taiwanese cuisine was marginalized in this transplanted culinary map and was only vaguely defined during this period. However, the 1990s witnessed political liberalization and an increasing emphasis on the subjectivity of Taiwanese culture, in turn fueling challenges to the idea that “Taiwan is a part of China”: in this context, Taiwanese cuisine came to occupy a category notably different from the category occupied by Chinese cuisine. Nowadays, it is commonly argued that Taiwanese cuisine comprises various Chinese regional dishes, Aboriginal and Hakka dishes, and some Japanese ingredients, and thus it can serve as a national symbol of Taiwan.

As the changing definitions of “Taiwanese cuisine” mark the object’s changing relationship with Chinese cuisine, it is evident that “Taiwanese cuisine” is a *relational* concept. The definition of “Taiwanese cuisine” serves as a boundary demarcating the dietary culture of one group from that of others. The existence of a relational concept thus presupposes the existence of some others, from which it must be distinguished.

The feature of being *relational* is applicable to a specific cuisine that represents a nation, an ethnic group, or a locality; that is, applicable to a national cuisine, an ethnic cuisine, or a local cuisine. Its definition is dependent on its relationships with other external political entities or internal groups within the nation. Therefore, in terms of the relationship with external political entities, a newly forged cuisine can be a local cuisine when defined according to its relationship with the global system; or it can be a national cuisine when defined according to its relationship with other nation-states. This is why the perspectives of globalization and nation-building are raised in the studies of cuisine. However, when it is expressed in terms of its relationship with other internal groups, such as other ethnic groups, a cuisine can be an ethnic cuisine, and a hierarchy may exist among these ethnic cuisines.

National cuisine is not only a *relational* concept but also a *performative* one. As definitions of a national cuisine serve to distinguish it from other cuisines, those cuisines nominated as “national” are often selective ones that perform the critical task of highlighting their distinctiveness. In the case of Taiwan, the Taiwanese cuisine during the Japanese colonial period acquired both a form and content that highlighted

the dishes of the new colony as well as the distinctions of social elites. However, as soon as the post-war period started, there was no longer a need to highlight these specific distinctions relative to Taiwanese cuisine, and the definition of “Taiwanese cuisine” became vague. As such, the definitions of “Taiwanese cuisine” involve the motives of the actors wielding the power to define. In the process of selection and presentation, the definers of “national cuisine” have played a crucial role, and the definer as an actor constitutes the focus of my second question: who has drawn the boundaries demarcating Taiwanese cuisine?

My second question concerns who planned and enacted the changes of Taiwanese cuisine. The changing notions of Taiwanese cuisine mark the changing definers, including the owners of Taiwanese restaurants, cultural mediators, and politicians. During the Japanese colonial era, the upper class, including the political elites and intellectuals, was the major clientele of Taiwanese restaurants, and the owner of the restaurant *Jiangshan Lou* published articles to define “Taiwanese cuisine” and its dining manners. However, soon after the migration of the Nationalist government brought numerous new consumers of Chinese regional cuisines and cultural mediators to Taiwan. These new definers participated in the process of selecting and presenting a national cuisine, shifting its meaning to “authentic Chinese cuisine.” In the process of defining, the Nationalist government built itself up as the guardian of traditional Chinese culture; Taiwan’s cookbook writers and intellectuals laced Chinese regional cuisines with strong expressions of nostalgia, and restaurants serving Chinese cuisines proliferated. Again, different definers surfaced with the process of democratization and indigenization. After its establishment in 2000, the DPP government played an active role in the marketplace to transform Taiwanese cuisine into a national symbol, and did so specifically by cooperating with restaurant owners and tourism agencies.

Although the upper classes, various governments, and various cultural and market agents have played active roles in the shaping of national cuisine, the performed national cuisine is not an invention stemming uniquely from a talented individual’s imagination; instead, it is constituted and articulated by a plethora of components that have taken root in and accumulated in Taiwanese society. The presented “Taiwanese cuisines” during the three political periods under observation are rooted in two traditions: the traditions of elite food and the traditions of popular food in Taiwan.

The elite food tradition originated during the Japanese colonial era, when Taiwanese cuisine symbolized colonial food and haute cuisine, and when its clientele consisted of the social elites. Through the definitions and the promotions provided by restaurant owners and through the consumption practiced by social elites, Taiwanese cuisine evolved into a new symbol of haute cuisine. For the Japanese colonizers, the

experience of enjoying Taiwanese cuisine could contribute to prestige and sophistication because the cuisine enhanced their experience not only of food but also of the cultural context. This elite food tradition declined after the end of the colonial era in 1945, when the previous upper class ceded place to the Mainlanders alongside the dramatic shift in political power to the Nationalist Party. After the transplantation of the Nationalist government from the Mainland to Taiwan, the previously haute Taiwanese cuisine was relegated to some public canteens and restaurants where government officers and rich businessmen dined. With government discouragement, a decrease in clientele, and the emergence of various Mainland restaurants as well as other dining venues, this elite food tradition disappeared gradually and is hardly visible today.

The second food tradition stemmed from the food of average Taiwanese families, a category that includes domestic cooking and feast cuisines served on special occasions and festivals. Although colonial-era Japanese anthropologists viewed these dishes as “food of Taiwanese” rather than as “Taiwanese cuisine,” segments of the Taiwanese population, with assistance from some Taiwanese politicians, began highlighting the dishes’ status as authentic Taiwanese cuisine in the 1990s. Underlying this shift in both perception and emphasis was the advocacy of the idea of Taiwanese subjectivity. Also since the 1990s, local politicians have been acquiring more political power and Taiwanese culture has become an increasingly important ingredient in the notion of a “Taiwanese nation.” In this context, Taiwanese cuisine has functioned as a cultural icon. Through state banquets, local food festivals, and promotion of ethnic cuisines, local Taiwanese dishes and ethnic cuisines have become viable commodities in the marketplace.

From the development of the two traditions, definers who have the power of cultural interpretation and reproduction can select ingredients of the presented “national cuisine” with the aim of strengthening their political positions and cultural distinction. However, although these actors play an important role in defining national cuisine, the role of consumers should not be ignored since national cuisine is also a commodity in the dining market. In other words, national cuisine is not only a *relational* and *performative* concept, but also a *commercial* product. A sufficient consumer base is crucial to Taiwanese cuisine’s viability as a commodity. Therefore, although the appreciators and consumers of Taiwan-based *Taiwanese* restaurants gave way to appreciators and consumers of Taiwan-based *Chinese* restaurants after the Second World War (when various Chinese regional cuisines entered the market along with powerful producers and consumers of these cuisines), Taiwanese restaurants re-emerged since the mid-1960s and witnessed a rise during the 1970s and 1980s, when Taiwan was a site of growing tourism and impressive mercantile success. Furthermore, the economic growth in Taiwan created more local consumers

who could afford expensive food and who felt a need to highlight their social distinctions. High-priced food, such as seafood, was established as a main feature of Taiwanese cuisine at this time.

Regarding the third question concerning the role of consumers in the formation of national cuisine, three roles can be identified from this research, that demonstrate different ways in which consumers participate in the formation of national cuisine:

- (1) **Definer:** Consumers can become actively involved in the formation of national cuisine by establishing and promoting specific knowledge of dining manners, and by further associating these with a particular social status or personal distinction. By doing so, consumer-definers can transform certain eating practices into carefully conducted exercises in the reproduction of intimacy and knowledge. This role is particularly prominent when the number of consumers is limited, and when new foods are introduced, such as when Taiwanese cuisine emerged during the Japanese colonial period.
- (2) **Interpreter:** Consumers can develop their own interpretation of national cuisine. Based on their personal interpretations, they can change the meaning embedded in cuisine. For example, among the informants for this research there were different interpretations of beef noodles. Some regarded beef noodles as a foreign food while others considered it a local invention. Moreover, these different interpretations were closely associated with the informants' different social positions and social experiences.
- (3) **Practitioner:** Consumers' practices concerning national cuisine can further shape the content and feature of national cuisine. This research shows that consumers' understanding of Taiwanese cuisine is influenced not only by the media but also by their own experiences of cooking and dining. These experiences are crucial in providing the corporal ground of the concept of "Taiwanese cuisine."

It should be pointed out that "Taiwanese cuisine" is not a meaningful category for all Taiwanese people. In other words, not all consumers play the role of definers and interpreters of Taiwanese cuisine. Only for those who perceive the symbolic meanings of cuisine, or those who embed meanings in particular dishes, can the nationhood of cuisine render itself perceivable. Moreover, consumers have different definitions and interpretations of Taiwanese cuisine. As I have shown in Chapters Four and Five, these differences result from different needs of inclusion and exclusion, and from personal experiences and memories, including cultural and

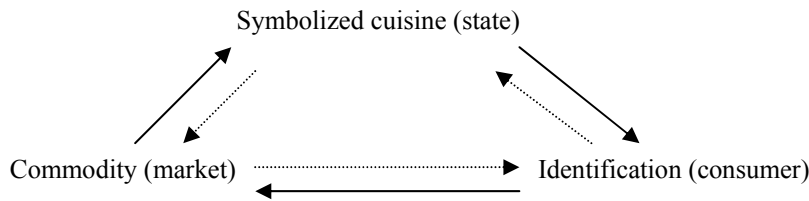
bodily memories. Moreover, consumers may take on different roles with the accumulation of experiences and memories, and the change of their social positions.

## **2. HOW “NATION” IS EMBODIED IN FOOD CONSUMPTION**

As shown above, national cuisine is a relational and performative concept as well as a commercial product. Its formation is based on its relationship with other factors; the ingredients of performed “national cuisine” are chosen by people who have motives and the power to define; and a national cuisine can be formed only when it is also defined, interpreted, and practiced as such by consumers. This research finds that there are three stages leading to the embodiment of nationhood in food consumption:

Firstly, specific cuisines are symbolized and performed as “national.” In the process of symbolization, political elements, including laws, policies, regulations, tourism promotions, certifications, or exhibitions, are influential in defining the external relations of a nation with other political entities, as well as the internal relations within the nation, such as ethnic and centre-periphery relations. Based on these relations, cultural elements, such as memory, tradition, myth, and history can be employed to embed the notions of nation, locality, or ethnicity in particular dishes, so that these dishes can be presented as national, local, or ethnic symbols. Political actors are powerful in selecting ingredients that comprise the national cuisine and in building it as a national symbol, and the political actors’ selection often conforms with their specific political interests.

Secondly, the symbolized cuisines are commodified. These commodities, such as state banquet dishes, ethnic cuisines, or national wine, provide a ground where consumers create their own experiences of the symbolized forms of nationhood. However, this pattern does not mean that political actors and market agents are dominant in the embodiment of nationhood. There is still the third stage: the practices and the identifying activities of consumers. When consumers perceive and practice these cuisines as national, the nationhood can be embodied in these particular cuisines. Although I use the term “stage” to signify this process of embodiment, these three stages form a circle and can restart from any stage. When the meaning or significance of “nation” changes, the process can restart. The following figure illustrates the process of the embodiment of nationhood in food consumption:



**Figure 6.1 Embodiment of nationhood in food consumption**

The formation of a national cuisine relies on the cooperation of state and market agents as well as the participation of consumers. The state and the ideology of nation-building can hardly serve as the single force shaping a national cuisine. Although a culinary category may refer to “national” cuisines, the entanglement of political and commercial interests is also crucial in the formation of national cuisine, and this entanglement is particularly evident in the development of state banquets. As such, the proliferation of Taiwanese cuisine in recent decades has not been a simple top-down process dominated by political ideologies of Taiwanese nationalism.

### **3. NATIONHOOD AND SENSIBILITY**

The discussion above has highlighted the process leading to the embodiment of nationhood in food consumption. Through this process, national cuisine is established as an embodied form of nationhood, which can serve as a boundary demarcating one nation from others. This research shows that the boundaries of Taiwanese cuisine change in accordance with political transformations, and such boundaries can be viewed as the “soft boundaries” to which Duara refers (1993).

Duara argues that every cultural practice is a potential boundary marking a community, including soft boundaries and hard ones. “Soft boundaries” signify those boundaries that serve to identify a group but that do not prevent the group from sharing and adopting the practices of another group. By definition, cultural practices such as culinary habits, language, rituals, music and dialect are soft boundaries if in-group members tolerate the sharing and the adopting undertaken by other-group members. Duara suggests that soft boundaries can evolve into hard ones when in-group members seek to “define and mobilize a community” by privileging a particular cultural practice or a particular set of cultural practices as the constitutive principle of the community (p. 20). In other words, when a community seeks to make a distinction between itself and other communities and to strengthen its self-consciousness of this distinction, the soft boundaries may harden and become hard boundaries. Duara argues that when the perception of a community’s soft



boundaries evolves into a perception of hard ones, an incipient nationality takes form. Nevertheless, hard boundaries can also soften. Between the poles of soft and hard boundaries exists a spectrum, and a community can have soft boundaries with one community but have hard boundaries with another.

From the perspective of soft and hard boundaries, the formation of national cuisine is a process wherein soft boundaries transform into hard ones. The transformation implies that the community has a growing need to undertake acts of exclusion and of inclusion, and that the community is becoming more and more self-conscious of its nationhood. In light of this view, the changing definitions of Taiwanese cuisine can be understood as movement along the spectrum between soft and hard boundaries. “Taiwanese cuisine” emerged as a selection of Chinese cuisines during the Japanese colonial era, and many of the boundaries between Taiwanese and Chinese cuisine have been soft and even vague. However, when migrants from the Mainland brought various Chinese cuisines to Taiwan, the boundaries became hardened. This hardening was evident in the negative and intolerant attitudes that many Taiwan-based Mainlander writers held toward the hybrid dishes served in some Taiwan-based restaurants during the post-war period. However, as tastes underwent adaptations and shifts and became more diverse, the boundaries between Chinese and Taiwanese cuisine softened within Taiwan. In contrast, new boundaries emerged between the aforementioned dishes and the dishes of such ethnic groups as the Hakka and Aborigines. After Taiwanese cuisine was employed as a national symbol after 2000, the soft boundaries between Taiwanese cuisine and other national cuisines started to harden.

This process shows the dynamic boundaries that ebb and flow between communities. The concept of soft and hard boundaries clarifies the nearly constant flux that characterizes a national cuisine. In addition, the concepts highlight the fact that a nation’s boundaries exist in and powerfully affect daily life. As boundaries of nation, cultural practices such as culinary habits, rituals, and music function in daily life as a means of demarcation, distinguishing a community from others. In other words, national boundaries exist in daily life and subsist through cultural practices. Constituting the corporeal and experiential grounds of a nation, these daily-life cultural practices strengthen the embodiment of nationhood.

Duara’s discussion of soft and hard boundaries centers on between-community distinctions; however, my research on Taiwanese cuisine shows that individuals have their own spectrum of soft and hard boundaries. Culinary habits can serve as hard boundaries for some but as soft ones for others. As I have shown in Chapter Five, individuals have different definitions of “Taiwanese cuisine,” and moreover, consumers are characterized by different sensibilities. In the following, I will further

develop the concept of sensibility, discussing how it can help to understand the relationship between the nation and the individual.

Chaney (1996) suggested that sensibility is a framework inscribed in an individual, a reference structure that people employ to make sense of their experiences. The framework of sensibility rests on some unifying principles that can influence the total repertoire of an individual's practices. Chapter Five's examination of consumers further shows that individuals differ from one another regarding the emphasis that they place on social categories such as nation, ethnicity, locality, gender, and so on. Therefore, I suggest that one's sensibility consists of various social categories, and that individuals differ from one another regarding the degree of importance that they assign to these social categories.

Sensibility is cultivated as early as infancy, and the formation of sensibility is influenced by both verbal forms of discourse and non-verbal sensual/bodily experiences, such as touching, tasting, and smelling. Through education, media exposure, and various bodily practices, individuals acquire knowledge, information, and experiences that help develop their sensibilities. The example of Lu Yao-dong clearly reveals both the influences of discourse and sensual/bodily practices on his sensibility. His intellectual training, cultural identification, and life experiences all helped shape his sensibility, which serves as a set of principles that guide his behavior and responses to phenomena. Therefore, he initially established a connection between himself and his fellow countrymen on the Mainland through food and regarded hybrid dishes in Taiwanese restaurants as a violation of Chinese tradition. However, with the accumulation of new experiences and cultural memory, he acquired a taste for these Taiwanese dishes, which took the place of his native cuisine. This demonstrates that both cultural and bodily memories are influential in the formation of sensibility, and that sensibility may change over time.

Since experiences of discourse and sensual/bodily practices differ among individuals, they develop different sensibilities. For example, the informants in this research differed from one another in their understanding of Taiwanese cuisine. Some informants highlighted the symbolic importance of locality, while some perceived it from an ethnic perspective. These different understandings of Taiwanese cuisine resulted from their individual sensibilities, with different rankings for various social categories.

Owing to the difference in priority given to different social categories, the nation is not necessarily an important concern for all individuals. Consumers can either make their own interpretations of objects marked as "national" or resist such external stimuli by simply regarding them as meaningless. Therefore, consumers can play different roles—definers, interpreters, and practitioners—in the creation of national cuisine. While those who have stronger sensibilities toward nation tend to play the

roles of definers and interpreters, those whose sensibilities toward the nation are relatively weak tend to be practitioners. “National cuisine” is a meaningful concept for those consumers who have a relatively strong sensibility toward the nation and who regard food as representative of the cultural values of a nation.

Following the discussion of sensibility, I would like to revert to the original concern of my research: how does the subjective identification of individuals interact with the politico-cultural elements of a nation so as to create or maintain nationhood in everyday life? This research reveals that the interaction can be understood from the perspectives of both the nation and the individual. Looking at the concept of “nation,” it is not only an institutional or discursive regime but also a space that has a corporeal and experiential grounding. Nationhood is embodied in various material forms and attached to numerous aspects of everyday life, such as law, entertainment, and cuisine. Through these embodied forms of nationhood, the political and cultural elements of a nation, like state apparatus and tradition, operate in the corporeal grounding of everyday life. For example, in the case of Taiwanese cuisine, the microphysics of nationhood<sup>1</sup> enter and are presented in a multitude of sites, such as state banquet wine, cookbooks, beef noodle shops, ethnic cuisines, and regulations on restaurants. These sites constitute a space where nationhood can be tasted, perceived, and circulated, so that it can be further manifested.

Looking at the individual, since the corporeal grounding of a nation has visual and sensual dimensions, individuals can interact with the embodied nationhood through their sensual and bodily experiences within these dimensions. For example, through dining experiences in outdoor banquets during festivals, individuals create their own experiences of Taiwanese public culture. By savoring Aboriginal snacks and appreciating the dancing in Aboriginal restaurants, the notion of ethnic groups is put into practice, with the strengthening of the connection between ethnic groups and nation.

Hence, looking at both sides, the interaction between the individual and politico-cultural elements of a nation can be understood as bi-directional. On one hand, the political and cultural elements of a nation, such as state apparatus and tradition, influence an individual’s sensual and bodily experiences in the corporeal grounding of everyday life; these experiences contribute to the cultivation of an individual’s sensibility. On the other hand, sensibility functions as a mechanism by which individuals perceive incoming information and assign their own meanings to this information. In the process, various forms of embodied nationhood constitute the space where an individual’s sensibility is cultivated. In turn, individuals draw different meanings of the embodied nationhood based on their sensibilities. Through

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<sup>1</sup> The usage of microphysics here is borrowed from Linke (2006), p. 218.

the bi-directional interaction between one's sensibility and embodied nationhood, the "nation" is practiced and embodied in daily life.

Based on the analysis above, this research suggests a factor that can limit our capacity to understand the controversies swirling around national identity in Taiwan. Because individuals have different sensibilities that help make sense of the world and guide their behaviors, individuals differ from one another regarding their conceptions of nationhood and of nationalist discourse. The growth of Taiwanese nationalism cannot be translated into a rise of Taiwanese identities directly, and the dichotomous ideologies of Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese nationalism should not be unquestioned assumptions in understanding the national consciousness of Taiwanese people. This point of view reminds us that the effects of political ideology and discourse should not be over-estimated. In other words, research should not equate elite ideology and elite discourse with a population's consciousness without first rigorously exploring the associations between these alleged causes and effects.

Furthermore, this research provides a reflection on "nation" from a micro-macro perspective. The nation-state is a dominant political form in the modern age, and influences people in many ways. A plethora of studies have shown that nationalism is an important ideology influencing people's lives, and the influence may come from war, education, media, and so on. By contrast, this dissertation takes another perspective involving body and food to examine some of the micro-level operations of a nation. Although the macro-structure of these national cultures cannot be reduced to individuals' understanding of nation, the examination of national culture from a micro-perspective can help to explain the diversity of national identities, particularly when a posited nationhood remains controversial.

Finally, this dissertation illustrates that national cuisine cannot be explained as a political artifact dominated by political ideologies alone; nor can it be understood as a touristic artifact that has been conceived to generate profits. Instead, it is better to interpret national cuisine as a symbolized product that has commercial potential. However, the product can be completed only through the interpretation and practice of its consumers.