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THAI FOOD IN TAIWAN: TRACING THE CONTOURS OF TRANSNATIONAL TASTE

Heng-Chang Chi and Peter Jackson

Abstract *This essay examines the recent proliferation of Thai restaurants in Taiwan, relating their development to different streams of transnational migration from Thailand, Myanmar and mainland China. Thai restaurants in Taiwan take many forms from low-cost 'ethnic' restaurants around the Taoyuan train station and in more peripheral areas, catering mainly to migrant workers from Thailand, to upmarket restaurants in city centre locations, catering to a 'cosmopolitan' clientele with high levels of economic and cultural capital. The paper traces the contours of transnational taste in Taiwan where Thai food has been adapted to suit local demand. In this context, as elsewhere, notions of culinary authenticity are contested, revolving around specific ingredients, recipes and dishes as well as notions of provenance, décor and other aspects of material culture. The paper examines the process of authentication, focusing on the culinary claims made by differently-located stakeholders. It also considers the material as well as the symbolic construction of 'taste', a term whose multiple meanings provide a valuable way of rethinking transnationality. As well as providing a case study of the evolution of culinary culture in a non-Western context, the paper sheds light on the role of food in defining Taiwan's contemporary political culture through notions of cosmopolitanism and modernity.*

Keywords Taiwan, Thailand, Transnationalism, Taste, Authenticity, Restaurant

In August 2005, more than 100 foreign workers, mostly from Thailand, rioted in Kaohsiung, Taiwan's second largest city. Burning down the dormitories, which housed around 3,000 workers who had been hired to build Kaohsiung's rapid transit system, they set fire to cars and threw stones at the hostel managers before being subdued by riot police. The rioters were protesting against the 'unfair and unjust' treatment they received from their employers who, among other grievances, owed them overtime pay and prohibited them from consuming food and drink which was not purchased from the dormitory store ('Thai laborers riot in Kaohsiung', *The China Post*, 23 August 2005). Former Taiwan Premier, Frank Hsieh, later apologised for the poor living conditions of the Thai workers, insisting that greater hospitality and fairer treatment should be extended to them ('Premier apologizes for Kaohsiung riot', *The China Post*, 21 September 2005). The riots were the most severe protest by foreign workers in recent Taiwanese history. Paradoxically, they coincided with a period when Thai food was becoming one of the most popular foreign foods in Taiwan, served in a growing number of cosmopolitan and

high-end 'fusion' restaurants as well as to low-income Thai workers in 'ethnic' restaurants across Taipei and Kaohsiung.

This essay seeks to understand how Thai food became more popular with Taiwanese consumers, while contrasting it with the simultaneous situation in which Thai workers were being forced to endure inhumane working conditions. It addresses this paradox by bringing together the study of labour migration and culinary culture explored as part of a single transnational social field. Focusing on the recent proliferation of Thai restaurants in Taiwan it addresses the construction and contestation of a specific form of transnationalism. It advances the idea that transnationalism is best understood as a 'social field' incorporating a range of people with diverse interests and investments rather than restricting the term to those who are themselves transnational migrants. It also suggests that thinking through the dual meanings of transnational 'taste' - signalling the marking of social distinctions (à la Bourdieu) and the material qualities of specific kinds of food (defined as hot or spicy, for example) - offers a valuable way of tracing the contours of this particular social field.

Transnationalism has been defined as the 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states'.¹ More specifically, the term encompasses the continuous connections between people in different places rather than assuming that migration is a one-off process that separates 'host' and 'sending' societies. Ulf Hannerz describes the complex transnational connections that characterise the modern world as involving 'an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and the imported'.² While some have celebrated the emancipatory potential of transnational culture and associated notions of cultural hybridity, recent studies of transnational migration have been criticised for their failure to 'ground' their understanding in specific empirical cases, studying its particular effects in practice. As Katharyne Mitchell has argued:

Without 'literal' empirical data related to the actual movements of things and people across space, theories of anti-essentialism, mobility, plurality and hybridity can quickly devolve into terms emptied of any potential political efficacy. It is geographical context ... that is best placed to force the literal and the epistemological understandings of transnationalism to cohere.³

In theorising transnationalism, we have been particularly influenced by the work of Roger Rouse who approaches transnationalism as a 'social field', occupied by a range of actors with different kinds of investment and different cultural orientations. In the case of Mexican migration to the United States, for example, Rouse shows how a complex Mexican-American social field has developed which affects members of the 'host' society as well as Mexican migrants and their US-born descendants:

1. Steve Vertovec, 'Conceiving and researching transnationalism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, (1999): 447, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/014198799329558>

2. Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, London, Routledge, 1996, p5.

3. Katharyne Mitchell, 'Transnational discourse: bringing geography back in', *Antipode* 29, (1997): 110, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00038>

The forces shaping [Mexican migrants'] lives are ... coming to affect everyone who inhabits the terrain encompassed by Mexico and the United States... [T]he comfortable modern imagery of nation-states and national languages, of coherent communities and consistent subjectivities, of dominant centers and distant margins no longer seems adequate... [D]uring the last 20 years, we have all moved irrevocably into a new kind of social space.⁴

Avtar Brah makes a similar argument about the development of diasporic space which she argues is 'inhabited' not only by diasporic subjects but equally by those who are represented as 'indigenous': 'In other words, the concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglements, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of "staying put". The diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native'.⁵ In an early statement about transnational migration, Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues attempted to encapsulate the diverse investments in this social field, referring to 'the constant and various flows of ... goods and activities [that] have embedded within them relationships between people':

These social relations take on meaning within the flow and fabric of daily life, as linkages between different societies are maintained, renewed, and reconstituted in the context of families, of institutions, of economic investments, business, and finance and of political organisations and structures including nation-states.⁶

As geographers, we have been drawn to the concept of 'transnational space' as a way of describing the social worlds of all those who engage in transnational practices.⁷ The term encompasses people from diverse backgrounds who enter the space with a whole range of interests and investments and from various positionalities, rather than being restricted to those who are themselves transnational migrants or who are members of ethnically-identified transnational communities. In our work on the transnational spaces of contemporary commodity culture, we attempted to map a social field that is multiply inhabited by people with different positionalities, operating along multiple dimensions including the transnational biographies of 'ethnic entrepreneurs', the business practices of transnational firms, the 'stylisation' of particular transnational products, and the diverse transnationalities of different consumer groups:

They may occupy its spaces momentarily (during the consumption of a meal, for example), or for a lifetime (as members of ethnically defined transnational communities). They may have residual affinities to the transnational identities of earlier migrant generations or emergent identities as a result of their own current transnational experiences.⁸

4. Roger Rouse, 'Mexican migration and the social space of postmodernism', *Diaspora* 1, (1991): 8.

5. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: contesting identities*, London, Routledge, 1996, p209.

6. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (eds), *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*, New York, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1992, p11.

7. Peter Jackson, Phil Crang and Claire Dwyer (eds), *Transnational Spaces*, London, Routledge, 2003; see also Phil Crang, Claire Dwyer and Peter Jackson, 'Transnationalism and the spaces of commodity culture', *Progress in Human Geography* 27, (2003): 438-56.

8. Jackson et al. *Transnational Spaces*, op. cit., p3.

It is this theorisation of transnational space as a complex social field that we now attempt to put to work in understanding the contested cultural politics of Thai food in Taiwan, grounding our understanding of transnational taste in specific material flows and connections as well as in a diverse range of symbolic imaginaries.

THAI FOOD IN TAIWAN

We begin by mapping the diversity of Thai food in Taiwan, relating this diversity to the numerous migration streams that have brought chefs and waiters, restaurant owners and managers to Taiwan from Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) and China, attracting customers from an even greater range of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Restaurant guides for Taipei City record at least 80 Thai restaurants in the metropolitan area, the majority having opened within the last ten years, as well as at least 60 other restaurants offering Thai food alongside other culinary styles. These estimates fail to record the many smaller Thai 'ethnic' restaurants which cater mostly to migrant workers and are largely invisible to the editors and readers of popular restaurant guides. One recent estimate suggests that there are at least 165 restaurants serving Thai food in Taipei.⁹

Our fieldwork data suggest that the diversity of Thai restaurants in Taiwan can be represented in schematic terms along two axes describing their number and their relative price (see Figure 1).¹⁰ At the low end of the price spectrum are what we call 'ethnic' or migrant restaurants, owned and managed by Thai migrants and catering largely to migrant workers from Thailand and elsewhere in South-East Asia, serving a variety of 'home-style' cooking and with little or no attempt to attract a Taiwanese clientele. These restaurants are typically located near train stations (e.g. Taoyuan) or in industrial parks on the periphery of Taipei City. At the other extreme, are what we call cosmopolitan or 'upmarket' restaurants, serving different versions of Thai food to relatively wealthy Taiwanese customers and tourists. In between these two extremes are a variety of other Thai restaurants, offering a mixture of cuisines including a fusion of Yunnan, Thai and Burmese food. We attempt to characterise this diversity in more detail in what follows, arguing that it can be related to different streams of migration to Taiwan from elsewhere in South-East Asia. Our account also aims to intervene in recent debates about culinary authenticity, examining the process of authentication where differently located stakeholders advance, defend and contest claims to authentic culinary knowledge. Rather than seeking to make judgements about authenticity in essentialist terms (relating each cuisine to specific social groups who are responsible for its production), we outline a more complex cultural politics of 'food on the move', associated with a more dynamic understanding of the contours of transnational taste (deploying the term both in the Bourdieuan sense of cultural distinction and in more material terms relating to the properties of the food itself).

9. Chih-hung Wang, 'Survival strategies and identity negotiation in ethno-cultural economy: case studies of Southeast Asian flavoured restaurants in Taipei', *The National Chiangchi University Journal of Sociology*, 39, (2008): 1-44.

10. Fieldwork was conducted by Heng-Chang Chi as part of his PhD research at the University of Sheffield, supervised by Peter Jackson. It included detailed field observations of 15 Thai restaurants including interviews with owners, managers and chefs, together with 14 customer focus groups. An extensive photo archive was also produced together with detailed field notes on décor, menus, ingredients etc.

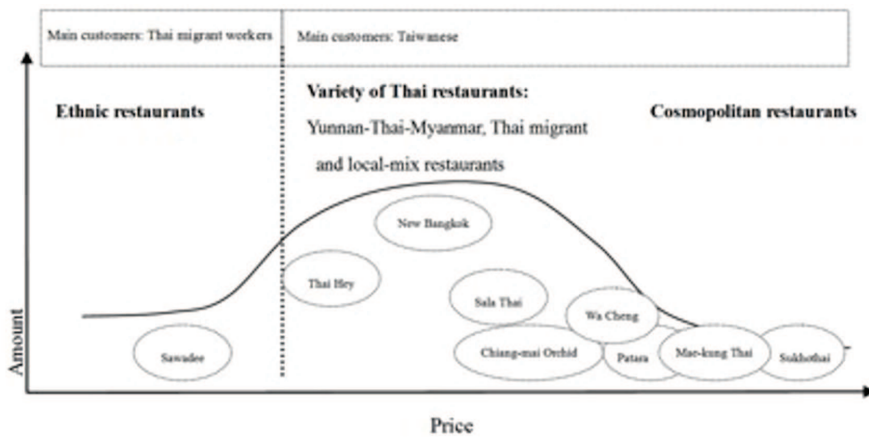


Fig 1: *The diversity of Thai restaurants in Taiwan*

TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION: 'PEOPLE ON THE MOVE'

We can identify at least three relatively distinct waves of migration that have contributed to the current diversity of Thai restaurants in Taiwan (see Figure 2). The first wave occurred in the 1950s and '60s, following the Chinese civil war in 1949 when forces loyal to the Kuomintang (KMT) government and their leader Chiang Kai-Shek were defeated by the Communist Party of China. Following their defeat, the KMT retreated to Taiwan where it ruled as a single-party state until the reforms of the 1990s. Meanwhile, a great many Yunnan Chinese anti-communist guerrillas fled to Myanmar (Burma). By the end of 1951, they numbered at least 14,000.¹¹ Until the communist coup in 1962, most descendants of the KMT troops and other Yunnanese refugees remained in Burma, later fleeing to Northern Thailand. Following complex negotiations, the KMT government in Taiwan agreed to receive two groups of evacuees in 1953-4 and 1961, including more than 11,000 soldiers and civilians.¹² Numbers later increased through family reunification and the migration of asylum-seekers and overseas Chinese students, with Yunnanese resettlement concentrated in Taoyuan county and other areas. These migrants established Yunnan and Bai-yi restaurants in Taiwan and subsequently added Thai food to their menus.¹³

A second wave of migration from Thailand to Taiwan includes an on-going stream of personal and family migrants which occurred throughout the 1990s and who now dominate the mainstream Thai restaurant market in Taipei. This stream includes Yunnan, Myanmar and Thailand Chinese who have migrated to study and work in Taiwan or who have made transnational marriages or joined dependent relatives already living in Taiwan. Taiwan-Thai marriages rank fourth in terms of all transnational marriages in Taiwan behind Taiwan-Chinese, Taiwan-Vietnamese and Taiwan-Indonesian marriages. This kind of migration was relatively unregulated until Taiwan's Nationality Act was

11. Wen-Chin Chang, 'From war refugees to immigrants: the case of the KMT Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand', *International Migration Review*, 35, (2001): 1089.

12. *Ibid.*, p1090.

13. Bai-yi are a minority group from the mountainous area between China's Yunnan province, northern Thailand, northern Myanmar and Laos.

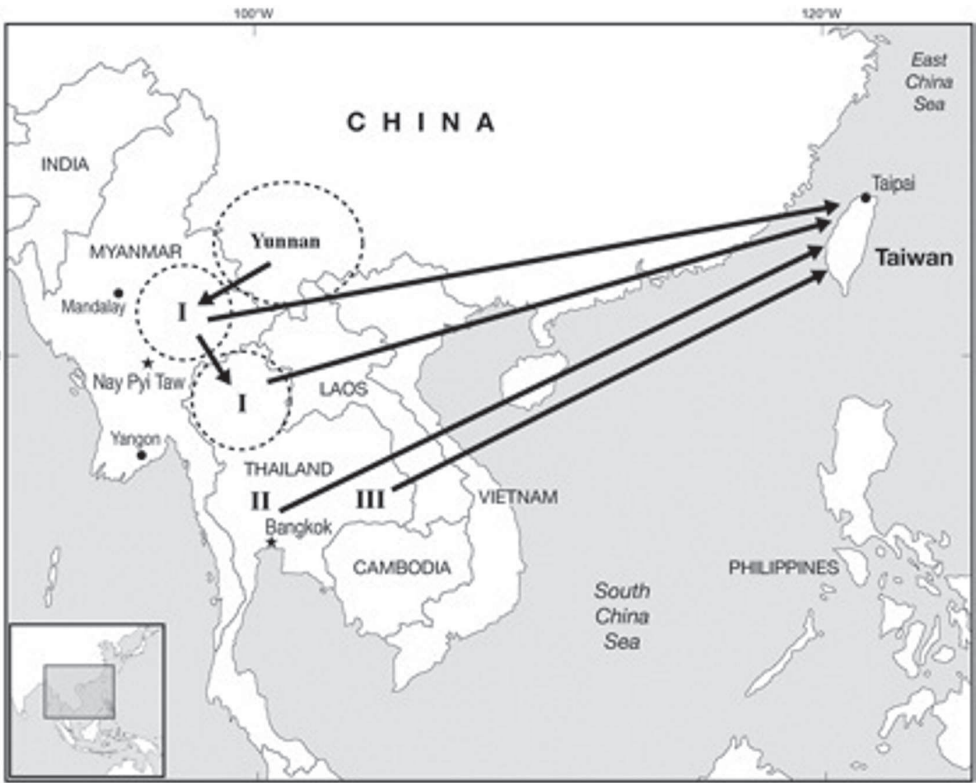


Fig 2: Migration to Taiwan from Yunnan, Myanmar and Thailand

revised in 1994, restricting the ability of potential migrants from Myanmar and Thailand to gain permanent residential status in Taiwan. In June 2008, protests by Yunnan migrants, including students from Myanmar and Thailand, challenged the current legislation and urged the KMT government to ease the immigration restrictions for descendants of the anti-communist military, emotively referred to as ‘orphan military’. The complexity of these personal and family histories is indicated in the following interview extract with the owner of a Thai restaurant in Taipei whose signboard includes the words ‘Myanmar restaurant’ (designed to attract overseas Chinese students from Myanmar living in Taiwan):

My hometown is located at the border of Myanmar between China and Thailand ... My grandfather was born in Chaozhou [Canton Province, Southern China]. My grandmother is a Thai who is still in Myanmar... My grandfather joined the military and their troops moved to Yunnan from Chaozhou during the WWII war ... Then, my father got married with my mother who is Yunnan Bai-yi.

The opportunities afforded by transnational marriage account for the high proportion of Thai restaurants in Taiwan that are run by women. More than

two-thirds of the foreign spouses involved in transnational marriages between Taiwanese and Thai people are women, attracted to Taiwan by the prospect of earning more money and gaining greater personal autonomy, running their own businesses rather than working in factories where they would have less personal freedom. As the owner of Sawadee restaurant told us: 'I had a job in a factory but as a restaurant owner, I feel free', a sentiment shared by the owner of the Wanpen restaurant: 'I do not like getting a job in a factory. I like cooking and eating [Thai food]. I saw many Thai migrant workers in Taoyuan. In 1997, I opened a Thai restaurant with karaoke for Thai people eating and singing'.

A third wave of Thai migrant workers from North-Eastern Thailand settled in Taiwan in the 1990s, responding to the demand for labour that was fuelled by Taiwan's rapid economic growth and the social transformation that occurred during that period. In 1989 the Taiwanese government legalised the entry of Thai migrant workers and in 1992 the Employment Services Act introduced further changes to migrant worker policy, allowing foreign 'guest workers' from South-East Asian countries to enter Taiwan to work. Official statistics show that by December 2009 around 351,000 migrant workers were living in Taiwan including 139,000 from Indonesia, 78,000 from Vietnam, 72,000 from the Philippines and 61,000 from Thailand, with the largest concentrations (40-45 per cent) in the Taipei metropolitan area.¹⁴ Among these migrant workers, many blue-collar employees provide the customer base for the so-called 'ethnic' Thai restaurants, located in low-income neighbourhoods which also provide a variety of other services (such as money transfers, mobile phone shops and grocery stores selling Thai ingredients). More highly skilled migrant workers, including chefs who have been trained in Thailand, are employed in higher-end Thai restaurants.

Though not strictly migration, another kind of transnational connection has been forged by the large number of Taiwanese tourists who visit Thailand on vacation. The demand for Thai food in Taiwan (compared to other national cuisines such as Myanmar food, for example) has benefited from Thailand's openness to international tourism. A particularly strong connection has been established between Thai food in Taiwan and the large numbers of gay men who visit Thailand as tourists, some of whom are described as 'Thai crazy', loving all things Thai. Our focus groups and customer interviews also make it clear that the transnational connections between Thailand and Taiwan are multi-stranded ranging from personal experience of migration to distant memories of travel and tourism, from tangible connections to a particular 'hometown' cuisine to more ephemeral imaginative connections with people or place. This is what we mean by referring to transnationalism as a social field, occupied by a range of people with different degrees of connection and different kinds of interests and investment in Thailand and Thai cuisine.

These diverse migration streams have contributed to the diversity of Thai cuisine in Taiwan including the development of various fusion styles,

14. Council of Labor Affairs, Taiwan, <http://www.evta.gov.tw/content/list.asp?mfunc_id=14&func_id=57>, accessed 3 August 2010.

combining ingredients and flavours from Thailand, Myanmar and Yunnan, particularly in mid-range Thai restaurants. These complex patterns of direct and indirect migration further complicate any simple connection between culinary style and migrant origins, reinforcing our emphasis on the rich amalgam of people and food ‘on the move’.

CULINARY CULTURE: ‘FOOD ON THE MOVE’

Food moves about all the time. It constantly shifts registers: from the sacred to the everyday, from metaphor to materiality; it is the most common and elusive of matters.¹⁵

15. Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: food sex identities*, London, Routledge, 2000, p63.

The diversity of Thai restaurants in Taiwan and the range of food on offer cannot be explained purely in terms of the different migrant origins of their staff (owners, managers and chefs). It is also related to the complex nature of culinary culture itself, with every ‘national’ cuisine showing a diverse range of influences and inspirations.¹⁶ In other words, the culinary culture of migrants from Myanmar, Yunnan or Thailand is already hybridised before the migrants arrived in Taiwan where their food becomes subject to further rounds of hybridisation. While some restaurants adopt the concept of culinary fusion as a specific strategy, for others it simply reflects the character of contemporary cuisine.

16. Arjun Appadurai, ‘How to make a national cuisine: cookbooks in contemporary India’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, (1988): 3-24, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500015024>

Particular dishes have come to represent Thai cuisine in Taiwan and to be considered ‘typical’ Thai food. These include *Jiao-ma chicken* and moon shrimp pancake. As one Taiwanese customer remarked: ‘I can identify *Yue-liang xia bing* [moon shrimp pancake] and *Jiao-ma chicken* as authentic Thai cuisine’. For other customers and chefs who claim more ‘expert’ knowledge, such dishes are considered to be bogus Taiwanese inventions, unconnected with the food eaten in Thailand (see Figure 3). So, for example, the Patara Thai restaurant did not originally serve *Jiao-ma chicken* but later modified

Fig 3: *Jiao-ma chicken* (left) and *Yue-liang xia bing* (moon shrimp pancake) (right)



their menus to suit local demand for such dishes:

At the beginning we did not serve the *Jiao-ma chicken*. I think *Jiao-ma chicken* is not Thai cuisine but Yunnan cuisine. You know there is a little fusion in Yunnan, Thailand and Myanmar cuisine ... As you know, Taiwan people like to eat those dishes so we added them to our menu items.

The owner of the New Bangkok restaurant told us that ‘many Thai restaurants are dominated by Yunnan people in Taiwan’, similar to the predominance of Bangladeshi proprietors of Indian restaurants in Britain. For many of our interviewees, offering ‘Thai’ food was a pragmatic marketing strategy rather than a reflection of their own daily cuisine. Here, for example, is the owner of the Oriental Thai restaurant which serves a mixture of Yunnan, Thai and Myanmar food:

We ate Bai-yi food at home. Absolutely different from Myanmar food ... Their food is stewed with oil ... Our education and character is Myanmar ... but my thinking is still Bai-yi, food is as well Bai-yi ... Thai food is more popular in Taiwan. After all, Thailand is a free country. Many Taiwanese tourists have been to Thailand, but Myanmar is a closed country. Taiwanese could not understand what is Myanmar cuisine.

Some restaurant owners and managers who had migrated from Myanmar or Thailand claimed to be able to distinguish particular national or regional styles, characterising Burmese cuisine as deep-fried, heavy, oily, pickled food with heavy use of *ngapi* (Myanmar-style fish or shrimp paste). Others identified *Mohinga* (rice vermicelli in fish broth with other ingredients) as a ‘national dish’ or *Lahpet thohk* (pickled tea salad) as the most famous appetiser in Myanmar. Others, however, pointed to specific dishes that demonstrated complex geographical origins: North Thai dishes such as *Kaeng hangleh* (a Burmese-style curry made without coconut milk), *Khao sawy* (a famous North Thailand curry noodle, originally from Shan or Yunnan) or *Khanom jiin naam ngiaw* (red curry sauce, with fermented yellow beans, meat and other ingredients). These dishes all demonstrate the transnational character of ‘Thai’ food, challenging simplistic ideas about culinary authenticity.

CONTESTING AUTHENTICITY

The question of culinary authenticity has been debated at length within cultural studies. In an early essay, Arjun Appadurai questioned whether the term should be applied to culinary systems at all, recognising its normative dimensions and a-historical nature.¹⁷ The term has also been debated within tourism studies where Dean MacCannell’s idea of ‘staged authenticity’ has been particularly influential.¹⁸ Commenting on MacCannell’s work,

17. Arjun Appadurai, ‘On culinary authenticity’, *Anthropology Today*, 2, (1986): 25.

18. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1973.

19. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Edward Bruner, 'Tourism', in, *Folklore, cultural performances, and popular entertainments*, Richard Bauman (ed), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p303.

20. *Ibid.*, p304.

21. Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine, 'The presentation of ethnic authenticity: Chinese food as a social accomplishment', *Sociological Quarterly* 36, (1995): 535-53; Ian Cook, Philip Crang and Mark Thorpe, 'Regions to be cheerful: culinary authenticity and its geographies', in *Cultural Turns/ Geographical Turns*, Lucy M. Long (ed), New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 2000, pages 107-39.

22. Jennie Germann Molz, 'Tasting an imagined Thailand: authenticity and culinary tourism in Thai restaurants', in *Culinary Tourism*, Lucy M. Long (ed), Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 2003, pp53-75.

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Bruner argue that 'authenticity is not given in the event but is a social construction'.¹⁹ From this perspective, the analytical focus shifts from judgements of authenticity to questions of authentication: 'who has the power to represent whom and to determine which representation is authoritative?'²⁰ This approach has been widely employed in subsequent studies of culinary culture.²¹ It also informed Molz's study of authenticity and culinary culture in Thai restaurants in the United States which employs the notion of an 'imagined Thailand' and focuses specifically on menus, ingredients and décor.²²

Décor and other elements of material culture are also used by Thai restaurants in Taiwan to accommodate a range of cultural imaginations and to make different kinds of claims to authenticity. Our fieldwork (observations and interviews) records a range of decorative elements from woodcarving and textiles to tin cups and other utensils, each of which signalled a different kind of Thai imaginary. More 'upmarket' restaurants like Patara used expensive teak wood and silk wall hangings while the ethnic/migrant restaurants like Sawadee included cheaper sculptures of elephants or portraits of King Bhumipol and other members of the Thai royal family (see Figure 4). Whether through portraits or crafts, culinary ingredients or specific dishes, the material culture of Thai restaurants in Taiwan provides a valuable means of tracing the complexities of transnational taste. At work here, we suggest, are very different notions of authenticity from those employed in more 'upmarket' restaurants, demonstrating the complex interplay of class and ethnic differences through the material and symbolic dimensions of culinary culture.

A very different attempt to authenticate Thai food occurred in 2006 with the introduction of the 'Thai select' trademark used by the Thai Ministry of

Fig 4: Interior of Sawadee restaurant (2008), with portrait of King Bhumipol



Commerce to promote ‘authentic Thai cuisine’ abroad (see Figure 5). The Ministry’s website explains that the label certifies not only the food but also the hospitality and atmosphere of the restaurant: ‘To enjoy Thai dining, you don’t actually need to be in Thailand. But how can you ensure that you get the real experience? Simply look for the “Thai Select” logo from Royal Thai Government’.²³ According to the website, the certification ‘assures you that delicious Thai cuisine is being served in a pleasant atmosphere, and with a famous Thai smile. It’s not just a meal; it’s a journey into Thai culture’. The lotus flower on the logo is a Buddhist symbol of reliability whose shape mirrors the Thai greeting ‘Sawadeka’, with the palms of the hands put together. The use of the word ‘select’ clearly designates status, serving as a marker of social distinction and good taste in the sense outlined by Pierre Bourdieu.²⁴ Twenty-one restaurants in Taiwan have been awarded the ‘Thai select’ trademark, mostly in Taipei city and mostly among higher status restaurants (including members of the Patara, Crystal Spoon and Thai Haven chains). Almost by definition, none of the Thai migrant/ethnic restaurants referred to above have this designation.

In setting themselves up as the arbiters of authenticity, the Thai Ministry of Culture distinguish themselves from those with less claim to culinary knowledge: ‘Most people think of spicy meals laced with chilli as the predominant factor in Thai food’, but, they confidently assert, ‘this is far from the truth’. Instead, they maintain, Thai Select restaurants must use genuine Thai ingredients, with a ‘Raw Material Purchasing Order’ produced on demand to authenticate that all their ingredients have been imported from Thailand. They have to use the right kind of rice, insisting that ‘Thai Hom Mali Rice is the centre of every [Thai] meal’, together with the appropriate herbs and spices which provide ‘a dazzling array of delicious and exotic tastes which make Thai cuisine so distinct’. To secure the Thai Select label, restaurants must also demonstrate that their chefs have a Thai Cuisine Training Certificate issued by the Thai government. Our interviews suggest, however, that these official designations are more important to restaurant proprietors than to their customers, none of whom mentioned the ‘Thai Select’ label when discussing where to eat.

Particularly in the more upmarket restaurants, however, claims to culinary authenticity are an important marketing strategy. So, for example, the owner of the Chiang-mai Orchid restaurant insisted: ‘Our cuisines are absolutely Thai. Everything comes from Thailand’. Likewise, the manager of the Patara Thai restaurant claimed: ‘We insist on authenticity - our cuisine is absolutely Thai’, unlike their major competitors, Mae-kung Thai who serve Thai-Vietnamese cuisine or Wa Cheng who serve Thai-Myanmar cuisine. Even in the case of Patara Thai, however, the manager conceded that he had employed a ‘localization strategy’, adjusting the restaurant’s cuisine to suit

23. http://www.thai-foodrestaurant.com/index.php?option=com_restaurant&view=historylist, accessed 16 April 2009.

24. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, Richard Nice (trans), London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.



Fig 5: The ‘Thai Select’ logo

their clientele:

We have surveyed consumers' opinions about the Thai restaurant market. I and a Thai consultant have tasted Thai cuisine at other Thai restaurants in Taipei. After that, we compiled our menu ... but I have some localization strategy. In particular, Taiwanese people could not accept authentic spicy food and the taste is also different with Thai people in Bangkok.

The owners of other restaurants, at all points on the price spectrum, were equally happy to describe how they adjusted their menus to suit local demand. Here, for example, is the owner of Sawadee restaurant: 'Normally, we serve the distinct flavour depending on [whether the customers are] Thai people or Taiwanese. The taste of Thai people is similar. I will reduce the amount, less spice and less sour, for Taiwanese customers'. A similar strategy was employed by the chef at the upmarket Sukhothai restaurant: 'I decrease a little flavour ... decrease the sourness and spiciness and seldom use fish sauce. For example, with the small green chilli pepper we would use 2kg in some cuisine in Thailand. We halve the amount of small green chilli pepper [in Taiwan] and use the big chilli pepper instead'. In some cases, as with the mid-market Sala Thai restaurant, the owner asserted that their food was authentic while simultaneously acknowledging that culinary adjustments had been made to suit their clientele: 'Our cuisine is authentic Thai. [But] you can tell me if you do not like heavy flavour. Otherwise, we will serve the authentic Thai cuisine'.

While authenticity was usually claimed and contested at the level of particular dishes (such as *Jiao-ma chicken* or moon shrimp pancake), claims were also made about specific ingredients. So, for example, the owner of the New Bangkok chain of Yunnan-Thai-Myanmar restaurants argued: 'We use ingredients [herbs] imported from Thailand. Even the frozen herbs are imported from Thailand. We think the flavours are stronger than others planted in Taiwan'. But such claims were disputed by others, such as the owner of the Sawadee restaurant who was perfectly happy with the quality of home-grown ingredients: 'We use ingredients from south Taiwan. The ingredients supplier is married to a Thai woman. They plant some ingredients in southern Taiwan. He delivers ingredients such as lemon grass and *ma-kheua* [Thai eggplant] every week'.

Some proprietors insisted that only Thai people could understand and cook 'proper' Thai food. So, for example, the Thai-Chinese owner of the long-established mid-market Sala Thai restaurant insisted that Myanmar-Chinese do not understand Thai cuisine: 'If you are not Thai people, you could not know how to cook green curry'. Such claims were most commonly articulated by culinary reporters and tourism experts, one of whom expostulated about a 'ridiculous Thai green curry', thickened with flour and potato starch, a 'crazy' culinary invention that had left him feeling 'cheated'. Another self-styled food expert decried a similar culinary innovation: 'and they mix ... green peas

instead of the small ones [*ma-kheua phraw*] ... into the Thai green curry. It is completely ridiculous [big laugh].

Some cultural critics were, however, quick to debunk these assertions of culinary authenticity. One culinary reporter pointed out that most Taiwanese people were unlikely to visit a Thai migrant restaurant and that her readers were not interested in reading about such 'ugly' restaurants, while the owner of Thai Hey restaurant accepted that most Thai restaurants change their recipes to suit the local (Taiwanese) demand: 'If you would like to insist upon authentic cuisine, I will tell you to go to Thailand'. He continued to challenge the imputed link between certain kinds of food and certain groups of people:

Some customers ask me: 'Are you Thai?' I say: 'I am not Thai. Shall I be Thai? Should the pasta be cooked by an Italian?' Serving delicious cuisine is my most important target. Not that some cuisine can only be served by some particular nationality. Would you ask the owner of a pasta restaurant: 'Are you Italian?'... To be honest, some customers applauded my cuisine as quite authentic. But I think, in my own mind, that is bullshit. Authenticity? Is my cuisine authentic? Are you crazy?

This is a refreshingly different account, heavy with irony and self-deprecation, compared with the assertively self-conscious branding of Thai Select as definitively authentic, reinforcing our argument about the contested nature of such claim-making.

TRANSNATIONAL TASTE

Recent studies of food have tended to reduce questions of taste to their symbolic dimensions, as markers of social distinction. Following Bourdieu, they maintain that a taste for particular goods is little more than a cipher for social status within a consumption hierarchy defined in terms of cultural rather than economic capital.²⁵ But our research suggests that symbolic markers of taste (as social distinction), particularly in a culinary context, are underpinned by more material or physical qualities, where the multiple meanings of 'taste' are particularly telling. When interviewees describe food as being 'spicy' or 'hot', for example, they are referring *both* to the physical qualities of food - based on specific ingredients such as chilli, garlic and ginger and specific sensations of bitterness, sweetness, saltiness and sourness - *and* to its cultural attributes - being socially valued as 'tasteful'. The multiple meanings of 'taste', we suggest, offer a valuable way of rethinking transnationalism, reinstating its material as well as its symbolic qualities. Like Elspeth Probyn, we think there are distinct advantages in approaching culinary culture 'through the gut' (or at least through the taste-buds).²⁶

That 'taste' is socially constructed is easily demonstrated through comparative and historical research. But its ready combination of the

25. For a critique of Bourdieu's argument about the relationship between consumption and identity, see Alan Warde, 'Consumption, identity-formation and uncertainty', *Sociology* 28, (1994): 77-98.

26. Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, op. cit.

alimentary and the cultural, the biological and the social, is equally pronounced. When someone describes someone else's food as 'disgusting' or complains about the 'stinking' smell of foreign cooking, these judgements create a distance between self and Other while simultaneously creating bonds of solidarity. As Probyn argues, uttering the phrase 'that's disgusting' represents both a pulling away from the object of disgust and a plea to establish common ground, calling upon others to witness our pulling away.²⁷ Miller's work on disgust also highlights the moral and social dimensions of the term.²⁸ Negotiating the 'spiciness' of Thai food in Taiwan raises similarly complex issues.

27. *Ibid.*, p131.

28. William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp243-4.

Our focus group participants were keen to engage with the question of 'spiciness' (more accurately translated, perhaps, as 'hotness': *là* in Mandarin Chinese; *phet* in Thai). These terms sometimes referred to specific ingredients and sometimes to less material qualities: 'Thai food varies from sour, sweet and spicy. It excites my taste-buds and appetite'. Differences in taste were often discussed in comparison with other 'national' cuisines: 'Thai food has a specific spicy flavour that is different from Chinese cuisine'; 'Thai cuisine is quite sour and spicy, and they use specific ingredients which you cannot eat in Chinese cuisine'; 'Our [Thai] cuisine is deeper in flavour and spicy; your [Taiwanese] dishes are insipid. No spiciness, no salt and no sourness'.

For some focus group members, differences in taste (sour, spicy etc) could be explained in terms of the commercial strategy of 'dumbing-down' authentic Thai food for a 'mainstream' market: 'It is not Thai cuisine, absolutely not. The taste is different. It is hard to find authentic Thai cuisine in Taipei'; 'Thai food in Taiwan is just like other foreign cuisine for me. The taste has been changed and adjusted to Taiwanese taste. They serve *Yue-liang xia bing* (moon shrimp pancake) and *Jiao-ma chicken*. It's not like the Thai cuisine I eat in Thailand. It's like a kind of foreign cuisine'. The same point was also acknowledged by the owner of Sawadee restaurant: 'The taste of spiciness is a distinction between Taiwan and Thai food. We can reduce the chilli, less spicy and sour for Taiwanese customers. But it is not good to eat ... we serve more spicy food for Thai people at the weekend. It is a lot more authentic food'. But these distinctions were only really important in the more 'cosmopolitan' restaurants. Thai migrant workers were much less likely to refer to differences in taste in this Bourdieuan sense. Authenticity was not a key concern in the 'ethnic' restaurants, catering mainly to Thai migrants, though they might refer to similarities with and differences from what they used to eat in their hometown.

For many Taiwanese consumers, however, the spiciness of Thai food was a big issue and culinary taste served as a particularly powerful marker of cultural distinctions. Several of our focus group participants identified spiciness as the difference between Thai and local tastes: 'Thai food makes a great impression with its spiciness. Obviously spicy! But I would not eat too spicy and sour. Hence, I usually request my friends or waitress to recommend me some dish which is not too spicy for me'. In answer to a question about how different

Thai and Sichuan cuisine is in terms of spiciness, one interviewee replied:

They are quite different even though both of them are spicy. They all have chilli but they also use their own different ingredients. We have different sorts of sour and spicy dishes but the Thai sour and spicy soup (*Tom Yum Koong*) is completely different from the local sour and spicy soup. Thai sour and spicy soup is the 'essence' of Thai cuisine ... While we eat Thai cuisine we always think about the sour and spicy soup. When I am going to estimate whether a Thai restaurant is good or bad it depends on the quality of their Thai sour and spicy soup.

Other focus group participants also referred to the spiciness of Thai food as different from the spiciness of Korean cuisine, the degree of spiciness revealing differences in cultural and geographical imaginations.

Complementing the discussion of spiciness in meat, fish and poultry dishes, the material qualities of rice provide us with another way of mapping the contours of transnational taste. Even though rice is consumed as a daily meal in both Thailand and Taiwan, most Thai restaurants in Taipei use Thai rice (particularly the high quality Hom Mali rice). For most restaurants, Thai rice is easier to get and simpler to cook than other Thai dishes. That Thai rice can be identified as a culturally significant transnational commodity is indicated by the insistence that Thai Select restaurants should only use Hom Mali rice imported from Thailand and also by the fact that Thai rice is a key signifier of 'authenticity' for many of our focus group's participants from Thailand who stressed that the taste of Thai rice is completely different from the taste of Taiwanese rice. A Thai migrant worker described Taiwan rice as 'not good to eat. It is quite sticky compared to Thai rice. Thai people do not like to eat and aren't used to eating that sort of rice at all' (see Figure 6). According to a Thai overseas student:

I like to eat the Thai rice separately [referring to separate grains] rather than the relatively sticky Taiwan rice. Thai restaurants in Taipei usually offer that sort of rice... I like to go to Thai restaurants for Thai rice rather than the sort of Thai food that suits Taiwanese taste.

This view was echoed by a Thai migrant worker who complained: 'Some Taiwanese food is too oily and the rice is too sticky for me. We do not like this rice and oily dish'.

As these examples suggest, it may now be possible to bring together the discussion of 'transnational taste' with the debate about 'contesting authenticity'. If taste involves the material qualities of food (such as the stickiness of rice or the spiciness of curry) as well as being an element of symbolic culture (such as the perceived authenticity and provenance of particular ingredients), then we can explain some of its social force through

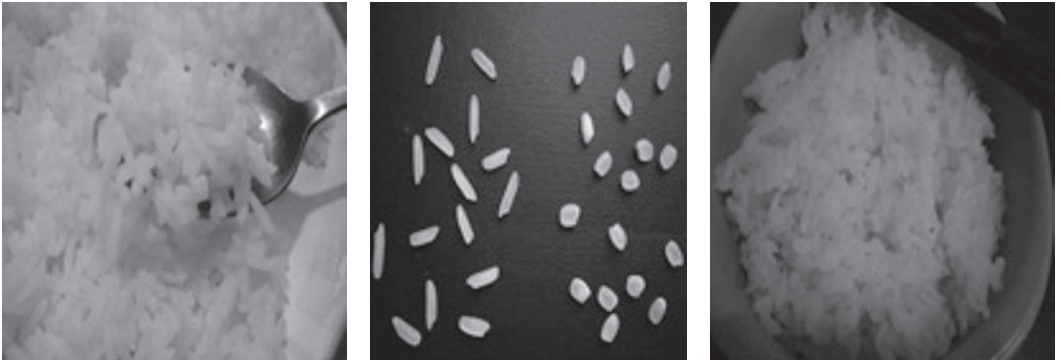


Fig 6: *Thai (left) and Taiwanese rice (right)*

exploring its visceral effects. This might involve the guttural sense of aversion and disgust explored by Elspeth Probyn. But equally (though less strikingly) it may involve the experience of ‘blandness’ where foods are described as insipid, lacking in spiciness or taste. From this perspective, notions of sweet and sour, hot and cold, spicy and bland are embodied experiences through which social and cultural distinctions are constructed and contested. Describing food as insipid, for example, implies that something has been ‘emptied out’ or ‘thinned’ to the point where it has lost all sense of content and meaning and is literally taste-less.

In this essay we have attempted to trace the contours of transnational taste, focusing on the growing popularity of Thai food in Taiwan, tracking the development of a wide range of Thai restaurants, focusing particularly on their food, décor and customers. We have argued against a singular view of ‘Thai food’, relating the diversity of Thai restaurants and Thai cuisine in Taiwan to the diverse streams of transnational migration from Thailand, Myanmar and mainland China. Even before it arrives in Taiwan, however, we have suggested that Thai cuisine is a hybrid product involving a mixture of different culinary traditions. Thereafter, a further process of hybridisation occurs, including the strategic adaptation of Thai culinary culture to suit the diversity of local demand where ‘spiciness’ is a key symbolic and material marker of cultural difference. Our evidence challenges the notion that ‘authentic’ Thai food can be identified in some objective sense. Instead, we have mapped how such culinary distinctions are important in marketing particular kinds of Thai restaurant (described here as ‘upmarket’ or cosmopolitan), while they are virtually ignored in other kinds of restaurant (described here as ‘ethnic’ or migrant). We have shown, particularly through our analysis of the Thai Select campaign, how the process of authentication operates in the case of Thai restaurants in Taiwan, with differently located stakeholders advancing,

defending and contesting claims to culinary authenticity. Meanwhile, 'ethnic' restaurants such as Sawadee, catering mainly to Thai migrant workers, employ different markers of culinary authenticity though, significantly, the language of authenticity is rarely encountered in this context.

Our analysis of this complex transnational social field repudiates the existence of any kind of essentialist link between particular groups of people and certain styles of cooking or eating, arguing for a more subtle and dynamic model of the relationship between people and food 'on the move'. We have shown how this transnational social field is occupied by a range of actors with a variety of interests and investments in Thai food and culinary culture. We have also suggested that a greater emphasis on the material culture of food and restaurants might pay great dividends in future work on transnationality.

We conclude by returning to the paradox with which we began this essay, noting the discrepancy between the growing popularity of Thai food in Taiwan and the lamentable conditions in which many Thai workers are forced to live, provoking the riots that occurred in 2005. Such paradoxes are a common feature of contemporary transnationalism.²⁹ But they may also tell us something specific about the current political moment in Taiwan. For the popularity of Thai food in Taiwan highlights the nation's desire to embrace a particular kind of cosmopolitanism, emerging distinctively from its colonial past rather than simply emulating Western-style democracy and consumer culture. From this perspective, Thai food in Taiwan represents a particular form of cosmopolitan culture, engaged in by tourists and the local elite. But it sits alongside other, equally modern but socially marginalised, forms of culinary culture, associated with Thai migrant workers, actively employed in the modernisation of Taiwanese society (working on construction sites or in factories, for example). It is these kinds of juxtapositions that lie at the heart of contemporary transnationalism and which, we argue, can be better understood through an exploration of the symbolic and material dimensions of culinary culture.

29. Compare the examples described in Ian Cook, 'Geographies of food: mixing', *Progress in Human Geography* 32, (2008): 821-33.