

## DOG MEAT POLITICS IN A VIETNAMESE TOWN



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**In 1999 there were only two semi-clandestine dog-meat restaurants in Hoi An, a town in Central Vietnam. In 2004 there were dozens, serving mostly men of the new middle class. This article explores the sudden popularity of dog meat in Hoi An and discusses its meanings. Based on traditional forms, eating dog meat expresses masculinity. While class distinctions, religious propensities, and processes of modernization shape local attitudes regarding this culinary trend, the overarching theme that explains the sudden proliferation of dog-meat restaurants in Hoi An is political and has to do with the diners' attitude towards the regime: eating dog meat expresses political allegiance, while avoiding it indicates disdain. (Dog meat, politics, masculinity, Confucianism, Vietnam)**

Dog-meat restaurants and eating dog meat have long been popular in the North of Vietnam, but not in the Center and South. In 1999, there were only a couple of places serving dog meat in Hoi An, a town in Central Vietnam. One was hidden in a maze of alleys beyond the town's ancient quarter; the other was located outside the town, by a small country road. The signs for both restaurants read "*Thit Cay*" and not "*Thit Cho*" (dog meat). *Cay*, according to my Vietnamese language teacher, "is a kind of fox and a euphemism for dog meat in the Center and South, used to camouflage places selling dog meat." But in 2004, there were dozens of eating venues throughout the town announcing "Thit Cho."

This rapid development of a culinary fashion stimulated exploring why dog meat became popular so quickly, and if any meanings were attributed to eating it. In Hoi An, it turns out, eating dog meat is a contested praxis, interpreted differently by people. Some say that dog meat is desired as a male aphrodisiac, is a means of class distinction, or an expression of cosmopolitanism and modernity. The rejection of dog meat was usually explained in religious and cosmological terms. Most intriguing, both dog-meat eaters and disdainers attributed this culinary fashion with political meaning.

This recent culinary trend is not merely a new mode of middle-class consumption, but is an act that expresses the diners' political disposition toward the national regime. Confucian ideals are an important component of contemporary Vietnamese masculinity, and political meanings applied to male culinary practices derive from the notion of Confucian masculinity, which emphasizes political engagement.

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The data presented in this article are based on anthropological research conducted in Hoi An since 1998, and derive from two fieldwork periods of three months each in 2004 and 2005. The research methods include participant observation of food events (Lupton 1996; Ashkenazi and Jacob 2000) in commercial food venues in town, talking to restaurant owners and patrons, and attending religious, social, and civic events and rituals. I conducted semi-structured interviews in Vietnamese and English with people who eat dog meat and held conversations on dog-meat eating with acquaintances and with people I met in various social circumstances. For deeper layers of meaning, I relied on longstanding key informants.

It is important to note that dog meat consumption in Hoi An occurs only in restaurants that specialize in dog meat. While ancestor worship rituals in the North include having dog meat, I have never witnessed or heard of dog meat being served at rituals or in private settings in Hoi An and its surrounding countryside. In Hoi An, it exists only in the male setting of *thit cho* restaurants.

This long-term research in Hoi An is also aimed at engaging with one of the alleged shortcomings of anthropological research, “the Orientalizing gaze of the ethnographic present” (Prost 2003; cf. Sanjek 1991). The time span allows witnessing processes of development and change which a short-term ethnographic research design would not allow. The study also differs from my other research projects in one important respect: I did not try eating dog meat. When asked why when offered some, I explained that having had dogs as pets, I could not eat their flesh. This was a common explanation with Hoianese who avoid dog meat and was acceptable and sensible in local terms.

### MASCULINITY AND VIETNAMESE MEN

Studies of masculinity have been drawing increasing attention in books and articles. Much of this work was initially focused on white Western men (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Seidler 2007; Herzfeld 1987), straight or gay (West and Lay 2000), or their “significant others”: North American black men (Collins 2004), Latin machos (Gutmann 1996), colonial/ex-colonial subjects (Sinha 1997; Roy 2002). One of the key concepts in this body of literature is “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987, Donaldson 1993), which defines masculinity as emphasizing physical power, emotional inexpressiveness, detachment, and competitiveness (Bird 1996). Hegemonic masculinity

was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832)

Though hegemonic masculinity was developed with studies of white Western men, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:832) say this is an abstract rather than descriptive concept, and is based on the assumption that gender relations are context dependent and subject to change: “Hegemonic masculinities ... came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones.”

As it became clear that masculinities were not monolithic or static but context-dependent, increasing attention was paid to non-Western cultural constructions of masculinity. Gilmore’s (1990) cross-cultural comparison of masculinities was followed by research on men in different geographic regions (e.g., Gutmann 2003 on South American masculinities; Ghousoub and Sinclair Webb 2006 on manhood in the Middle-East; Chopra, Osella, and Osella 2004 on South Asian masculinities; Ong and Peletz 1995 on Southeast Asian men and women; Cleaver 2002, Inhorn 2009 and Jacob 2011 on Egyptian masculinity; Sasson-Levy 2002 on Israeli masculinity; Morrell 1998 on South African men; Lancaster 1992 on Nicaraguan machismo; Peletz 1994 on Malay men; Louie 2002 and Geng 2004 on Chinese masculinity; Louie and Low 2003 on Chinese and Japanese men; and Elmhirst 2007). These texts depict a variety of masculine practices that capture nuances such as “blue collar” and “white collar” in the Israeli army (Sasson-Levy 2002), “sword” (wo) and “pen” (wen) masculinities in China (Louie 2002), “tiger” and “gangster” manliness in Indonesia (Elmhirst 2007), or machismo in Latin cultures. Hegemonic masculinity, however, is a reference point with which other forms of masculinity correspond in many of these texts.

Hegemonic masculinity across cultures is therefore depicted in much of this literature as composed of a set of common characteristics, such as a powerful sex drive, corporeality, physical strength, emotional avoidance, competitiveness, and a variety of local features and practices that characterize different cultures, social classes, religions, etc. This theoretical framework accommodates the universally common perception that all men are alike (also phrased as “boys will be boys”). An example of this is found in Doyle’s (2002) study of Vietnamese masculinity. Its title, *Why Do Dogs Lick Their Balls?*, insinuates that men (across cultures), like dogs (across breeds), are mainly motivated by sexual gratification. Doyle says that men are all the same (2002:190) and also that men are all different (2002:197). Regarding his male informants, he argues, “What we had in common was much more than what differentiated us ... a bond of ‘sexual desire.’ As one informant put it after confiding to me about a weekend he spent away from his regular partner with a sex worker, ‘Well, we’re men, aren’t we?’” (Doyle 2002:187).

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With much recent research on Vietnamese male sexuality (Ghuman, et. al 2006; Martin 2010) and on health risks incurred by extra-marital sexual activities (Phong 2008; Phinney 2008, 2009; Ta 2010), particular attention is paid to the ways in which Vietnamese men engage with professional sex workers. Nguyen-vo (2008), for example, relates sex and neoliberalism via widespread contacts with professional sex-workers, while Ta's (2010) study of Vietnamese miners explains that paid sex offers relaxation and reward for risk and hard work, and strengthens identity, social networks, and group membership. Sex workers are also confidants with whom men may share feelings and worries that they are reluctant to reveal to male friends or female partners. Rydstrom's (2001, 2002, 2003a, 2004) analyses have the transformation of the penis into a phallus to symbolize masculine power.

Vietnamese ethnographic research often focuses on men from the North, mainly Hanoi and the Red-River Delta, with less attention to men elsewhere in Vietnam. This article highlights aspects of Vietnamese masculinity that are distinctive for men from Central Vietnam, where the political meaning of dog meat, as in Hoi An, stems from its specific cultural and political context and is hardly applicable to the North or the South.

### MEAT, POWER, AND MASCULINITY

Anthropologists have long noted the strong links between meat, physical power, social dominance, and masculinity. Fiddes (1991:65) argues that eating meat is above all symbolic: "Killing, cooking, and eating other animals' flesh is the ultimate authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature." Beardsworth and Keil (1996:202) also suggest that eating "red meat is seen, in a sense, as the ingesting of the very nature of the animal itself, its strength and aggression." Stavick (1996:25) points out that the British Royal Guards were named "Beefeaters" because of their food, designed to ensure their physical strength as well as to reward them with high-status food otherwise reserved for the upper classes.

Meat eating also represents socioeconomic and political power. In his classic essay on political types in Melanesia and Polynesia, Sahlins (1976) says that pork sharing in public feasts is a key physical and symbolic resource in the political game. Far from being exclusively an act of generosity and cooperation, meat is a token in the competition for status and prestige. Twigg (1983:21) suggests that "meat is the most highly prized and culturally significant of foods," while Elias (1978) mentions Medieval Europe members of the higher classes consuming prodigious amounts of meat, while peasants ate very little of it. Bourdieu (1984) also notes that meat is indicative of wealth and high social status, and that eating certain kinds of meat expresses economic, cultural, and symbolic capital.

Eating meat is clearly a gendered practice. Meat is central to the meal of every Cretan who considers himself a man (Herzfeld 1985), while Twigg (1983) suggests that the blood that gives red meat its color indicates power, aggression, passion, and sexuality—attributes desirable for men but considered offensive for women. Willard (2002:12) thus concludes, “Because physical power is historically associated with masculinity and virility ... meat has been perceived as a masculine subject.”

Feminists (e.g., Adams 1997) suggest that symbols related to meat are situated in a hierarchy, with culture above nature, humans above animals, and men above women. Twigg (1983) adds that the association of vegetarian and dairy foods with femininity indicates weakness and passiveness. For Fiddes (1991:210), “meat exemplifies, more than anything, an attitude: the masculine worldview that ubiquitously perceives, values, and legitimates hierarchical domination of nature, of women, and of other men ....”

#### MEAT, HOIANESE MEN, AND BEER GIRLS

Hoianese establishments that specialize in dog meat belong to the culinary category of *quan nhau* (liquor shops), which are drinking establishments where men consume alcohol and *duong* (Chinese *yang*) charged meat dishes. In the late 1990s, most Hoianese *quan nhau* were dingy makeshift sheds in back alleys serving cheap rice alcohol (*ruou gao*) and meat dishes, mainly to blue-collar men. The dishes were of pork and poultry, though a few places specialized in the expensive dishes attributed with power and sexual potency, such as he-goat (*de*),<sup>1</sup> snake-headed mullet (*ca loc*), or forest animals (boars, monkeys, lizards, and even tigers and bears), commonly referred to as *thit rung* (jungle meat). The power embedded in these meats is further enhanced by *nong* (hot), libido-enhancing spices such as chili, lemongrass, ginger, and *rau ram* (rice paddy herb), with which they are cooked and served. (On the hot nature of men see Rydstrom 2003b; Horton and Rydstrom 2011.) These venues serve beer and liquor, making them relatively expensive, even though the setting is simple.

McNally (2003), Nguyen vo (2008), and Horton and Rydstrom (2011) call similar establishments *karaoke om* (hugging karaoke), where “girls serve food and drinks to customers, select the songs that they wish to sing, and allow the men to touch, hug, and kiss them” (Horton and Rydstrom 2011:552). While *karaoke om* are common in Vietnam, authorities in Hoi An have been effective in curbing them. Dog meat restaurants and other Hoianese *quan nhau* differ from *karaoke om* in their emphasis on food and drink rather than *karaoke* and explicit sexual services. Specific kinds of meat are therefore the attraction of these places, although alcohol and sex are a part of the parcel.

One result of the increasing affluence and emergence of a middle class in Hoi An is the proliferation of an upgraded version of quan nhau: the open air or “garden” (*vuon*) restaurants. These, located at the town margins, overlooking countryside, river, or beach scenery, offer a variety of expensive power-, libido-, and status-enhancing dishes and local and imported alcoholic drinks. While the cheaper quan nhau are for men only, these new culinary establishments attract couples and families, who uneasily share space with a majority of male groups, often drunk, loud, aggressive, and rude.

The new garden restaurants are mostly owned and managed by women and most have both waitresses and *gai bia* (beer-girls). The waitresses are employed by beer companies and are paid a commission for the beer they sell. The waitresses in these venues, and especially the beer girls, dress in daring and sexy outfits (at least by Hoianese standards), wear heavy makeup, and offer a variety of extras. They pour the drinks, light cigarettes, feed the customers, wipe their faces with cold towels, and even sit on their laps. They often drink and smoke with the clients, flirt with them, and allow different measures of physical contact. Some of them engage in paid sex, while others double as kept mistresses. *Gai bia* in Hoi An are only a notch above *gai om* (hugging girls or prostitutes).

Women are pivotal for the masculinity enhancement that takes place in these establishments. They encourage the consumption of *duong* charged food and alcohol, and excite their clients with a combination of feminine submission (lighting cigarettes, wiping sweat, using respectful female grammar, speaking in a childlike high-pitched tone) and assertive sexuality (in dress, drinking, smoking, and flirting). These women also serve as receptacles for this excessive masculinity: by having sex with their male clients, they literally incorporate the excessive *duong* into their bodies.

Until 2002 there were only two dog-meat restaurants in Hoi An, both small and marginal. As dog meat was not cheap, these places were of the more expensive category of exotic meats, and a dog-meat meal, despite the dingy setting, was not a casual affair. The dog-meat restaurants that expanded rapidly by 2004 belonged to both types. Some were where blue-collar workers consumed dog meat and cheap alcohol, while others were upgraded to garden restaurants where elaborate dog meat dishes and expensive alcoholic drinks were served by beer girls to men of the new middle class. Unlike other garden restaurants, dog meat restaurants attracted almost exclusively male clientele, where “a man would not take his wife or girlfriend to eat dog meat, but might take his mistress,” a male friend told me.

Hoianese dog meat venues are masculine spaces where men recharge and boost their masculinity and sexual prowess with food and drinks and where they display and perform it with the female staff. Although dog meat is a male

aphrodisiac in neighboring China and Korea (Podberscek 2009), it is not described in Vietnam as an aphrodisiac in the same way as he-goat meat. Eating dog meat is expensive, especially in garden restaurants where it is always accompanied by costly alcoholic beverages, with additional money spent on waitresses, beer girls, mistresses, and their sexual services.

Before 2004, dog meat was not popular in Hoi An and eating it was rarely mentioned. However, by 2004, not only did the number of dog-meat establishments soar, but public discourse surrounding this culinary practice became pronounced and heated. Raising the subject brought strong emotional reactions. In most conversations, the initial reaction was negative and critical, with faces twisting in contempt and disgust, although the verb commonly used was *so* (scared) rather than *ghe* (disgusted). The explanations for this rejection was that most of the dog meat served in Hoi An was from stolen dogs, the belief that eating dog meat incurs bad luck, and the moral and religious transgression related to the close ties between humans and dogs. But as conversations developed, other explanations regarding eating dog meat were suggested.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the increasing popularity of dog meat in Hoi An is dog theft, which plagues the town due to the sharp rise in demand. While many town dwellers and most farmers in the Hoi An district own dogs, they are not pets in the Western sense, and certainly not quasi-family members. Dogs are not allowed indoors, are fed leftovers, and none of the dog owners that I know spends money on pet food. Hoianese dogs are not bred for meat as they are in the North, but are working animals intended to guard the house. This does not mean that Hoianese dog owners are not fond of their dogs. When dogs are injured in traffic accidents or when they get sick, the owners are upset and try to nurse them and alleviate their suffering (though there is no veterinary service for dogs in town.) When I was told that dogs were lost, the owners usually recounted how they tried to find them. One man, for example, told me that his parents' new puppy disappeared. When I asked how, since the dog was kept in a fenced yard, he said that the dog was stolen, then added bitterly that it was probably eaten.

Until the recent surge in demand, trade in dog meat was handled by dog peddlers that roamed the countryside on old bikes and motorcycles in search of surplus dogs and puppies, which were exchanged for home utensils. These traders, however, were unable to supply enough dog meat for the demand. The outcome was higher prices and a huge increase in dog thefts.

During 2004 and 2005, I was told at least a dozen times that dogs of my acquaintances or their neighbors had been stolen. In the summer of 2005, there were two dog thefts that almost ended in lynching the thieves. In one case, a pair of dog thieves was caught in a neighboring village by the locals, who beat them severely. A week later, I came across some policemen, three

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dead dogs, and a burnt motorbike. I was told that professional dog thieves poisoned a few dogs during the night in order to steal them, but someone awoke and called for help. The angry dog-owners and their neighbors caught the thieves, beat them, and burned their motorbike. Had someone not called the police, the thieves might have been killed.

An aspect frequently brought up when discussing dog meat was bad luck: eating dog meat brings misfortune. A 30-year-old university graduate and businessman from Da Nang said:

I have eaten dog meat six times, and had a traffic accident each and every time. Well ... you do drink too much when you have dog meat, and I thought that this might be the reason. So when I had dog meat the last time, I drove home very carefully, but some woman crashed into me.... I won't eat dog meat anymore!

A 23-year-old cake-shop owner recounted:

[P]eople in Hoi An believe that eating dog meat causes accidents .... Did you not hear what happened to my brother? He had dog meat, and when he came home, our dog bit him ... and our dog never bites!

In this case, there was a gap of a month between the meal and the biting event; but the important point, of course, is the link made between eating dog meat and a mishap. Another belief is that eating dog meat does not necessarily inflict bad luck, but rather reverses it. A Vietnamese colleague pointed out that "If your luck is good, you wouldn't want to eat dog, unless it's the end of the lunar month, when it doesn't matter, because everything starts fresh at the beginning of the new month." This connection of dog meat and bad luck explains why people kept using *so* (the term for scared) when explaining their avoidance of dog meat, which is not merely repulsive but also dangerous for it might incur misfortune. Fear was the feeling most commonly associated with the idea of eating dog meat.

In some of the interviews and in many casual conversations, dog meat avoidance was explained by the close relations between humans and dogs. I was often told "I love dogs, how could I eat them?" or "I have a dog at home...." This canine-human intimacy was supported by the suggestion that dogs are like humans. A recurring claim during interviews was that dogs cry when they are slaughtered. A hotel receptionist said, "If you would see only once how dogs are being killed, you would never eat them.... The dogs cry, literally shed tears ... they know that they are about to die." An elderly acquaintance explained that he avoids dog meat because he was born in the year of the dog, implying that those born under the dog zodiac have a close affinity with dogs. The idea that dogs and humans are somehow similar, and that eating dog meat verges on cannibalism, is in line with Sahlins's (1976)

analysis of dog meat avoidance in the U.S. This notion of cannibalism can also be discerned in a conversation with the 16-year-old sister of a friend, who overheard us discussing dog meat eating:

- Thuy: Nir, have you ever eaten dog meat?  
 Nir: No, for me it is like eating human flesh (*thit nguoi*).  
 Thuy: Yes. You know, the Chinese eat human flesh!  
 Nir: Who told you that?  
 Thuy: A friend of mine told me.... She read about it in the internet.  
 The Chinese take three- [or] four-month-old embryos from the womb and eat them.  
 Nir: But a three-month-old embryo is so tiny. There is nothing to eat!  
 Thuy: Well, maybe six months old.

Dog meat has long been a sought-after delicacy in Northeast Asia, and its popularity in North Vietnam is probably an outcome of thousands of years of cultural contact. This identification of dog meat with the North also hints at a political dimension because the People's Republic of China is perceived in Hoi An as the source of power and inspiration for the current regime.

A common explanation for the rejection of *thit cho* has to do with Buddhism. When I asked why dog meat was not consumed in Hoi An in the past or why an interviewee avoided it, I was often told, "We are Buddhists and, therefore, we don't eat dogs" or "Buddhists don't eat dog meat." Buddhism and Buddhist practices are resurfacing in Vietnam after years of oppression (Do 1999; Soucy 2007). As opposed to the North, where Buddhism was forbidden and oppressed for over two generations, a serious attempt to curb Buddhism in Hoi An took place only between 1975 and 1986, a relatively short period in which religious feelings were not eradicated and practices not forgotten, as they were in the North. Moreover, while communist ideology gained support in the North, this was not the case in Hoi An, where many sided with the Southern regime and did not reject religion or Buddhism.

Second, institutional Buddhism in Hoi An has been flourishing since 2000, with temples renovated and extended, new temples built, and an increase in the number of monks and nuns. Personal involvement in Buddhist practices is on the rise, in view of an increased participation in Buddhist ceremonies and festivals and in the increased consumption of vegetarian food on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month.

Finally, whether or not the Hoianese are fervent Buddhists, Hoianese interviewees repeatedly connected dog meat avoidance with Buddhism. Buddhism is therefore an important component of the Hoianese attitude toward eating dog meat.

Dog meat is one of the ten forbidden meats mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures, along with human, elephant, horse, snake, lion, tiger, leopard, bear, and hyena (Tambiah 1969). While some of these are forbidden for their royal

status (elephants and horses), or their food preferences (hyena), the dog is forbidden due to its closeness to human beings. This proximity, however, is ambivalent. While some Buddhist sources put forward that the dog is man's best friend and eating it verges on cannibalism, Tambiah (1969:435) points out that dogs in Theravada Buddhist Thailand are tolerated but loathed. The Thais, he argues, perceive of the dog as humanlike in many ways, but they breach two of the most fundamental human taboos: they are incestuous and they eat their own excrement. Dogs are therefore considered in Thailand as sort of degraded human beings that lack moral restraint and indulge in forbidden practices. In Mahayana Buddhism, commonly practiced in Hoi An, dogs are perceived as lowly creatures. Buddhists refrain from eating dog meat either because they like dogs or loathe them as morally degraded creatures. In short, the dog is problematic because it is loyal and brave, but also immoral and incestuous. In any case, Buddhists should not eat dog meat. Moreover, interviewees not only attributed religious meaning to Buddhism, they added regional and political implications. They repeatedly claimed that the Hoianese avoid dog meat because the people of the Center and South are Buddhists, implying that the Northerners are not. For instance, an elderly man said, "People in the Center and South are Buddhists and, therefore, don't eat dog meat." When asked whether the Northerners are Buddhists, he explained, "They are Communists, not Buddhists.... In the past, no one ate dog meat in the Center and South, but many Northerners came here after 1975 and they taught us how to eat dogs." This statement suggests that Buddhism and Communism are competing ideologies, and associates eating dog meat with Northerners and Communism.

When I inquired about the sudden proliferation and popularity of dog meat restaurants, the explanations had a more pronounced political edge. The practice as well as the diners and patrons, I was repeatedly told, are Northerners or somehow related to the North; and eating dog meat was associated with Northern political bureaucracy. Quite a few informants insisted that the owners of the dog meat restaurants in Hoi An are all Northerners. Though I couldn't verify the regional identity of all the proprietors, every owner whose restaurant I visited or discussed with my interviewees had some kind of Northern connection: some were immigrants from the North, while others were Hoianese who moved to the North and returned with Northern customs. When I inquired about the customers in these venues, I was also told that they were mostly resident officials from the North or their descendants, or tourists from Hanoi. When I pointed out that many of the clients were from Hoi An, people suggested that these are Hoianese who visited the North or lived there and acquired a taste for dog meat.

When asked to describe their first dog meat experience, the stories were similar and always involved an element of seduction by a Northerner. A 42-year-old businessman recounted, “On a business trip to Hanoi, an acquaintance invited me to have dog meat. I refused, but he insisted: ‘try some ... just a bit.’ So I tried ... and I liked it ....” A Northern figure appeared in most of these stories—someone who was a government official or a local friend who was a descendant of one of them. Others recounted a trip to Hanoi, usually for political purposes or for business, and being invited (or seduced) by their Northern hosts to try some dog meat. Many of them admitted to being scared at first, but felt compelled to eat food so as to establish good social relations and indicate political and economic allegiance. Some developed a liking for dog meat and went on eating it without further encouragement.

#### THE MEANINGS OF DOG MEAT

Hoianese interviewees suggested a few additional reasons for the proliferation of dog meat venues in Hoi An, which go beyond male potency, class distinction, and conspicuous consumption. For some, eating dog meat stood for modernization and secularization, as it involved the rejection of Buddhist conventions and the adoption of new culinary choices unbound by tradition or religion. For others, it expressed cosmopolitanism, sophistication, and freedom, as a taste for dog meat indicated that the Hoianese can now freely travel around the country and acquire new exotic tastes. Cosmopolitanism was also expressed in the assertion that Hoi An was now frequented by tourists, who bring their own customs and foodways, which the locals are eager to experience and, at times, adopt. Therefore, dog meat restaurants stand for modernization and for the town’s connection to the national fabric.

However, the overarching explanation for the sudden popularity of dog meat, a point mentioned by virtually everyone, had to do with the attribution of this culinary custom to the North. And as the North is the political and ideological center of the country, the ascription of this preference to the North has a strong political sense; interviewees saw eating dog meat as a public manifestation of one’s political inclination toward the North, while the rejection of dog meat expressed a negative attitude toward the regime.

While it could be suggested that dog meat might simply be a regional culinary custom, and people try dog meat just as they tend to try food from other regions or countries, the interviewees stressed the political context, recounting time and again how the invitation to try dog meat was not merely done in the North or by a Northerner, but always while interacting with government officials, either colleagues or those in position to make decisions and grant favors. There was always a sense of power in the description of these events (“I refused, but he insisted”), while the setting required

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compliance, as the whole meeting was about bonding with the political and administrative elite.

One interviewee, an ex-Viet Cong, resents bitterly the fact that despite his allegiance with the North during the war, he was sent to a re-education camp and along with his family members suffered great hardships during the late 1970s. He too explained that the Northerners introduced dog meat to the Hoianese, but insists that he never eats it “because dogs are loyal friends.” After a brief reflection he added: “You see, this is how they are, they even eat their friends.” His statement implies a connection between dog meat and political ethics: eating dog meat is immoral because the dog is a loyal friend. But the Northerners eat dogs, and by doing so they expose the problematic morality underlying the ideology that they have imposed on the country, which includes the abuse of former Viet Cong, who were their allies in the Center and South. It also implies that sending a Viet Cong to a re-education camp is like eating one’s friend.

### HOIANESE MASCULINITY

Latin-American machismo, the “expression of male-centered privileges and the ways in which they [men] foster chauvinism against women (or other men),” is also a way of “enrich[ing] the examination of heterosexual masculinity in patrilineally organized Vietnam,” according to Horton and Rydstrom (2011:543). Welsh (2001, quoted in Horton and Rydstrom 2011: 546) used the concept of machismo in his study of Nicaraguan men, but pointed out that the term might also be useful “when attempting to capture particular types of gendered privileges, even in settings other than the Nicaraguan one.” Machismo, the authors suggest, may be applied to the Vietnamese case because it is not culture specific, but is rather “a phenomenon which accrues particular meaning in specific contexts ... [and] provides an overreaching perspective for studies of the social reality of women and men in particular sites” (Horton and Rydstrom 2011:546).

However, applying machismo to the analysis of Vietnamese masculinity could blur the singularity of the Vietnamese case. If Vietnamese men do feature macho qualities, how are they different from Nicaraguan men and macho men of other cultures? In other words, applying terms such as machismo for different cultural contexts implies that “all men are alike” even when, as Horton and Rydstrom (2011) do, the local particulars are repeatedly emphasized and a warning is issued against the tendency to portray a “fixed, trans-historical model such as that which has often been erroneously used within discussions about hegemonic masculinity” (Horton and Rydstrom 2011:546).

The use of hegemonic masculinity, machismo, or other terms coined to depict masculinities elsewhere tends to de-emphasize the unique characteristics which set Vietnamese masculinity apart from men in other cultures. One mode of recognizing the unique nature of Vietnamese masculinity is to frame it in Vietnamese terms. This can be done by turning to one of Vietnam's most influential social theories: the teaching of Confucius. Viewing Vietnamese masculinity through a Confucian lens is sensible for several reasons. First, Confucian thought is male oriented and patriarchal (Louie 2002; Geng 2004), being a product of a pre-Confucian androcentric social order and the ideological scaffolding upon which patriarchy was later consolidated. Scholars of Vietnam have long argued that Confucian thought, norms, and values shape the ways in which Vietnamese male and female roles and relations are understood, constructed, and enacted (Marr 1981; Jamieson 1995; Young 1998; Pham 1999; Drummond and Rydstrom 2004; Rydstrom 2004; Horton and Rydstrom 2011).

It is also well established that this Chinese social theory was reworked by Vietnamese scholars who "tended to detach Chinese thoughts and practices from their original contexts ... picking and choosing whatever met their fancy as Vietnamese ..." (Marr 1971:18). Alternatively, "Vietnamese reality incorporated aspects of this orthodoxy [Confucianism] into a different cultural matrix" (Young 1998:137). Whether we accept Marr's view of an opportunistic Vietnamese approach or Young's more reserved reading of this process, it is clear that the Vietnamese developed a distinct version of Confucianism. As opposed to notions of hegemonic masculinity developed for the analysis of men in other cultures, and of machismo, developed within Latin-American cultures, the Confucian conceptualization of masculinity is finely-tuned to the Vietnamese context. Last, Confucianism is a political theory (Tu 1993) and therefore appropriate for understanding the political context that underlies dog meat eating in Hoi An.

#### THE CONFUCIAN GENTLEMAN

Confucius devised a political theory that addressed the most pressing problem of his era: how to rule a state during times of social and political upheaval. Public affairs and politics were at the core of his teachings. Confucius suggested that the relations of men, society, and the state are the foundation of the social order, and he viewed the state as an extension of the family, with citizenship modeled on kin relations. The private was not set apart from the public but subordinated to communal affairs, with the family "politicized as a public domain" (Geng 2004:91). In short, "Confucian Doctrine does not distinguish between state and political relations, on the one hand, and social and family relations, on the other. The subjects governed by

the ruler ... [are] analogous to the members of the household, who are governed by a senior male” (Drummond and Rydstrom 2004:7).

Confucianism is a male oriented social system. Women are considered inferior by nature and therefore bound to the domestic sphere (Geng 2004:90). Yet Confucianism is not simply a patriarchal system. Among men, the theory defines the ideal of *Quan Tu* (*Junzi* in Chinese), the ideal Confucian Gentleman. The Confucian ideal man followed the four virtues of filial piety, love of sons, loyalty to ruler, and reliability. To be an ideal gentleman required mastering the five arts: ritual, music, calligraphy, carriage-riding, and archery. Most important, the ideal man had to be involved in public affairs (Jamieson 1995:21). Such men were obliged to be in the civil service in order to contribute to the stability, efficiency, and viability of the regime. In the Confucian system, “the worth of a man lies in his success in public vocation; commitment to political affairs and lofty political aspirations constitute the touchstone of the Junzi” (Geng 2004:91). Confucian education was therefore intent on producing civil servants, men of letters that by virtue of their learning were the scholar elite and held bureaucratic positions.

This model of masculinity was not restricted to the upper classes. Geng (2004:90) points out that “[t]his politicized notion of masculinity has not only become the established value of the elite class, but had also been widely disseminated and deeply rooted in the minds of the uneducated common people, and therefore became a ‘master narrative’ for ideal men in the society.” He also says that Confucian ideology was so hegemonic that “there existed an internalized link between being masculine and being Confucian” (Geng 2004:90), meaning that across social classes, masculinity was all about being educated, knowledgeable, and politically involved.

Interestingly, dog meat is historically associated in neighboring East Asian cultures with masculinity, Confucianism, and politics. Walraven (2001) points out that Confucius himself was so fond of dog meat that it was nicknamed “Confucius meat.” It is interesting that dog meat was popular in Korea during periods when Confucianism was the state religion, while its consumption declined whenever Buddhism was popular (Ann 1999, 2003, quoted in Podberscek 2009:619).

### HOIANESE DOG MEAT POLITICS

The sudden craving for dog meat among male members of the new Hoianese middle class is political in essence and echoes the political engagement expected of Confucian gentlemen. It is hardly by chance that dog meat has become popular among them. These men belong to a state-created socioeconomic echelon, composed of government officials and businessmen educated and trained by the modern state system. Many of them accumulated

their initial capital as state employees and managed to increase their wealth through contacts with members of the ruling elite. They owe their prosperity and social status to government policies and feel obliged to express loyalty and commitment to the regime.

One way of expressing their loyalty is by incorporating the cuisine popular among the members of the ruling elite and which is identified with their province of origin and culinary culture. This is very important because eating dog meat is a transgression of local custom and therefore a public expression of a rejection of local moral standards and the adoption of Northern ones. By eating dog meat, Hoianese men respond to the Confucian ideal of political engagement and demonstrate their political loyalty, and the introduction to eating dog meat is always expressed as being accompanied by a sense of fear and guilt.

However, Hoianese men who eat dog meat harbor ambivalent feelings about doing so, and the same men who admit privately to eating dog meat and enjoying it criticize the practice publicly. The association of dog meat with violence, crime, drunkenness, and illicit sex indicates that while eating dog meat might be enjoyable, it is also considered problematic, immoral, and shameful—even by the practitioners themselves.

Concomitantly, the association with Northern cadres when sharing dog meat is deemed shameful and immoral. Indeed, many of the Hoianese men who told me they regularly have dog-meat meals were critical of the regime, its local representatives, the economic and social policies, the lack of freedom and democracy, and the rampant corruption. They often declared that members of the ruling elite are not motivated by ideology, socialist or other, but by greed and the quest for power. A common complaint that accompanies these criticisms concerns the exclusion of people of the Center and South who fought for Vietnam independence from positions of power and influence.<sup>2</sup>

The affinity of these men with the regime is partial and tainted by self-interest. They engage with representatives of the political elite in order to gain economic advantages and not because of the deep sense of identification and loyalty advocated by Confucianism. Eating dog meat is a perfect way to express these complex feelings precisely because the culinary practice that articulates engagement with Northern politics and politicians in Hoi An is openly criticized and is treated ambivalently even by its very practitioners.

## CONCLUSION

During the first decade of the twenty-first century men of the emerging Hoianese middle class acquired a taste for dog meat. This new culinary practice is attributed by its practitioners as having political meaning, for eating dog meat expresses affinity with the current regime and its representatives,

while avoiding it expresses rejection and disapproval. Eating dog meat is therefore a meaningful political act that reflects the traditional Confucian principle that men should be politically involved.

Hoianese middle-class men, however, differ significantly from the Confucian scholars of imperial Vietnam, the *Quan Tu*, who were members of a scholar-elite class, defined and ranked by their level of education. The men discussed in this article belong to a socioeconomic class where status is achieved by individual enterprise and income, and defined by consumption. While age was a crucial factor in the Confucian system, it plays no important role for political maneuvering at present in Hoi An. Moreover, the way in which contemporary members of the Hoianese middle class enact the Confucian script is remarkably different from the traditional pattern. While Confucian scholars were expected, first and foremost, to engage in politics out of loyalty and commitment, the political engagement of contemporary Hoianese men is subtle, ambivalent, and morally tainted, as expressed in eating dog meat. In this sense, their choices are opportunistic and self-serving, and hardly the expressions of high moral standards and social commitment advocated by Confucius.

It could be argued that this is the Hoianese version of the postmodern condition, characterized by compression (Harvey 1989) and collapse (Lyotard 1984), and where the production of knowledge is replaced by the consumption of goods, and when time and space (as with age and social hierarchy) lose their meaning, as ideologies and moral systems collapse into senseless confusion. It seems, however, that this argumentation misses an important point. Though *Quan Tu* (Confucian Gentlemen) were ideally knowledgeable, righteous, and moral, and would have applied themselves to the strategy that would best serve the sovereign, nation, and justice, Vietnamese (and Chinese) Confucian scholars were notorious for their sophisticated political maneuvers for personal power and profit (Marr 1981:54) and were often Machiavellian as well as corrupt. The Vietnamese sayings regarding success in the Confucian examinations: “glory for oneself and wealth for one’s family” and “when a man becomes a mandarin, all his relatives have recourse to him” (Le 2005:44) express the widespread conceptualization of *Quan Tu* as opportunistic, and nepotistic. In this sense, contemporary Hoianese men are not transgressing sacred traditions but actually enacting the traditional cultural script quite accurately, and like the Confucian literati, using political alliances to manipulate the system for personal benefit.

As this is the case, the phenomena described in this article suggest a cultural continuity and persistence of traditional patterns despite the radical change of ideologies/metanarratives (from Confucianism to Communism to post-Socialism) and of production modes (from subsistence rice farming to

industrialization and consumerism). It therefore seems that contemporary Hoianese men have a lot in common with the Confucian gentlemen of the past. Hoianese dog meat restaurants are social spaces where Vietnamese masculinity is experienced. There, men consume libido-enhancing foods, get drunk, and purchase sexual services. Doing so, they perform hegemonic masculinity as outlined by Connell (1987) and by the scholarship that stresses the physical and sexual aspects of Vietnamese masculinity. Concomitantly, they perform political masculinity, an essential component of the Vietnamese man as defined by Confucian teaching. The popularity of dog-meat restaurants in Hoi An is about Hoianese masculinity no less than about the taste of dog meat.

## NOTES

1. *De* (he-goat, ram) is the common term for oversexed in contemporary Vietnamese. The “he-goat walks around with 50 females ... and he is potent enough to mount them all,” said one informant. The snake-head mullet is a hardy river fish much sought after in Hoi An during Tet (Vietnamese New Year) because of its great virility.
2. In 1975, after the Northern victory and reunification of the country, Northern cadres were sent to run the liberated/conquered Center and South.

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