Summary of Dissertation

Embodying Nation in Food Consumption:
Changing Boundaries of “Taiwanese Cuisine” (1895-2008)

Chen Yu-Jen

This dissertation examines the transformation of Taiwanese cuisine, with the aim of exploring how nationhood is embodied in the context of food consumption. The first part of the dissertation presents a historical overview of Taiwanese cuisine during the twentieth century and shows how different notions of Taiwanese cuisine emerged under three different political regimes. In the Japanese colonial era, “Taiwanese cuisine” emerged as food for the elite and as haute cuisine. The “Taiwanese cuisine” presented in this era referred to the “food of the colony” served at banquets and “fine dishes enjoyed by the upper class” in restaurants. However, with the arrival of the Nationalist government and numerous migrants from mainland China, a condensed Chinese culinary map was transplanted to Taiwan through substantial changes in restaurants and symbolic changes in the representation of cookbooks. Under the authoritarian regime, Taiwanese cuisine was transformed into “small dishes” and was placed at a much lower level in the culinary hierarchy. Since the political transformation toward democratization and indigenization in the 1980s, Taiwan has increasingly been presented as a distinctive nation, and local delicacies and snacks have become representative of the Taiwanese culture. After the establishment of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government in 2000, Taiwanese cuisine was imbued with symbolic meanings and began to be viewed as a “distinctive national cuisine.”

The second part of this thesis focuses on the perceptions and the bodily practices of consumers with regard to Taiwanese cuisine, demonstrating the importance of cultural and bodily memory in the embodiment of nationhood. By examining the culinary writings focusing on the “tastes of home,” Chapter Four reveals that home is a place that provides the cultural memories that an individual identifies with and that these memories are the foundations on which group identity is formed. When individuals identify with specific cultural memories of a group, this identification serves as a link connecting the individuals to the group. On these grounds, a sense of distinction and unity can strengthen the group as a community. However, when customs and conventions change or hybridize, new experiences and memories can
surface in the minds of community members. This accumulation of new experiences and memories can be transformed into new cultural memories with the help of textualization or intellectualization.

While Chapter Four shows how textualization and intellectualization are crucial in the formation of cultural memory, Chapter Five suggests that bodily memory is influential in the formation of “sensibility,” which is a reference structure that people employ to make sense of their experiences. This chapter further shows that “Taiwanese cuisine” is not a category that all Taiwanese people can relate to. Nationhood, in the context of food, can render itself perceivable only to those who perceive the symbolic meanings of cuisine or those who embed meanings in particular dishes. Moreover, consumers have different definitions and interpretations of Taiwanese cuisine. The case studies used in this chapter illustrate that the growth of Taiwanese nationalism can not be translated into a rise of Taiwanese identity directly. The preference for Taiwanese cuisine cannot be interpreted as a pure expression of Taiwanese identity. On the basis of this research, I suggest that one’s sensibility consists of various social categories and that individuals differ from one another with respect to the degree of importance they assign to these social categories. Owing to the difference in priority assigned to different social categories, the nation is not necessarily an important concern for all individuals. The concept of “national cuisine” is a meaningful one for those consumers who have a relatively strong sensibility toward the nation and who regard food to be representative of the cultural values of the nation.

The exploration of Taiwanese cuisine shows that “national cuisine” is a relational and performative concept, as well as a commercial product. The definitions and features of “national cuisine” are in accordance with its relationship with other external political entities or internal groups within the nation. The ingredients of the performed “national cuisine” are chosen mainly by political and market actors who have the motives and the power to define; however, a national cuisine can be formed only when it is also defined, interpreted, and practiced as such by consumers. This research thus suggests that there are three stages leading to the embodiment of nationhood in food consumption and which together form a circle. First, specific cuisines are symbolized and performed as “national.” Second, the symbolized cuisines are commodified. Finally, only when consumers perceive and practice these cuisines as national, nationhood can be embodied in these particular cuisines.

On the basis of research carried out on Taiwanese cuisine, this dissertation provides an insight into the bi-directional interaction between nationhood and individuals. Nationhood is embodied in various material forms and attached to numerous aspects of everyday life. Through these embodied forms of nationhood, the
political and cultural elements of a nation operate in the corporeal grounding of everyday life. Since the corporeal grounding of a nation has various sensual dimensions, individuals can interact with the embodied nationhood through their sensual and bodily experiences within these dimensions. The interaction between the individual and politico-cultural elements of a nation can be understood as bi-directional. On one hand, the political and cultural elements of a nation influence an individual’s sensual and bodily experiences in the corporeal grounding of everyday life; these experiences contribute to the cultivation of an individual’s sensibility. On the other hand, sensibility functions as a mechanism by which individuals perceive incoming information and assign their own meanings to this information. In the process, various forms of embodied nationhood constitute the space where an individual’s sensibility is cultivated. In turn, individuals draw different meanings of the embodied nationhood based on their sensibilities. Through the bi-directional interaction between one’s sensibility and embodied nationhood, the “nation” is practiced and embodied in daily life.

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