3 Emerging consumerism and eating out in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

The social embeddedness of food sharing

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The Vietnamese proverb 'Enough food and warm clothing; delicious food and beautiful clothing'[1] brings to mind the overall socio-economic transformation experienced in Vietnam since the Indochina Wars and the opening up of its economy in the mid-1980s. Whereas people relate the first part of the saying to the hardship of fulfilling basic needs during and in the aftermath of the war-torn decades, the second – 'delicious food and beautiful clothing' – can be read as representative of a societal longing for an improved quality of life, and the growing relevance of consumerism in the context of the country's economic development. Accordingly, food and fashion have become expressions of taste and well-being and, fuelled by rapid economic growth and the modernisation of the country's food system, as well as the resurgence of the urban middle classes and their appetite for 'foreign' food, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has become a hotspot for eating out in Vietnam. More than just the financial capacity to purchase 'delicious food', eating at a diverse range of gastronomic locations – from indoor, air-conditioned, upmarket cafés to fast food outlets – demonstrates a person's knowledge and command of up-to-date lifestyle trends regarding how to socialise and consume 'properly' (see Welch Drummond 2012) and, by extension, offers a means of expressing a modern, urban lifestyle and 'middle-classness' (Bélanger et al. 2012; Bitter-Suermann 2014; Earl 2014).

This chapter approaches emerging urban food consumerism and the eating out trend from the perspective of sharing food as a social practice (note that several chapters in this volume pick up this trend, considering eating out from Manila in Chapter 4 to Melbourne in Chapter 6). By drawing on and redefining Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', it sheds light on two different but interrelated phenomena: the structural context of food consumption and its social embeddedness.

After the presentation of the conceptual framework and methodological approach, this chapter begins with an overview of the key features of Vietnam's food system's modernisation and the consumption landscape in HCMC. After a brief note on macro-level changes, it continues with a consideration of the actual social practices of sharing food outside one's home and how those practices are changing in terms of gendered and generational dimensions of identity

construction via food consumption. Vietnam's rapid economic integration and growing consumerism has led to increasing food sharing options, affective consumption of global consumer culture, and diverse forms of social distinction and belonging. At the same time, overall growing social inequality (see, for example, King et al. 2008; Taylor 2004) can also be observed in the food sector. The practices of food sharing will thus be discussed alongside the practices and structures of food waste, with the aim of drawing attention to the need for further sociological and anthropological understanding of the social inequalities embedded in the food consumption dynamics of one of Asia's mega-cities. Despite Vietnam's priority in terms of economic growth and development, the social implications of the growing eating out trend do not yet feature in contemporary debates in Vietnam and remain neglected in terms of scholarly inquiry into Asia's 'new consumers' and the country's development pathway.

Conceptual framework and methodological approach

According to Beardsworth and Keil (1997: 100–122), eating out options in general emerge in accordance with changes in the social organisation of work, urbanisation, and processes of social mobility and migration. Against such a background of structural transformation, eating is turned into a commercial transaction and thereby removed from its formerly exclusive framework of family- and kin-based social obligation and reciprocity. Nevertheless, eating together and food in general continue to constitute important markers of social solidarity: 'Sharing food is held to signify "togetherness", an equivalence among a group that defines and reaffirms insiders as socially similar' (Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 101; referring to Mennell et al. 1992). How this 'togetherness' is performed in contemporary eating-out settings will be the focus.

Launched in 1986, an economic reform programme called *đổi mới* facilitated Vietnam's recent history of (re-emerging) consumerism, framing the material context, the institutional setting and the actual practice of consumption by newly 'discovered' consumers, which had been quashed under communism (see below). Consumption in this chapter is conceptualised as integrating the structural context of consumption as well as the daily practices, routines and meanings ascribed to consumption by consuming actors. The latter relate to the affective-symbolic dimension, which has to do with ingesting and embodying (see also Coles 2013: 255) what is presumed to constitute, for example, 'food modernity' or 'global consumer culture' (on consumption and social practice theory see for example Warde 2014; for Vietnam see Hansen 2015).

The study presented considers both the structural context of the food system and the material availability of goods in Vietnam, as well as the everyday social practices of eating out. According to this understanding, emerging consumer markets and eating-out settings change the social landscape of eating (Julier 2013). In return, eating as a social practice has an influence on how consumer markets and culinary landscapes are shaped. By bringing together structure and agency in the tradition of Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984), this chapter

aims to understand how the modernisation of Vietnam's food system (in terms of provisioning products, supermarkets and gastronomic infrastructures, among other dimensions) provides the material conditions in which the socio-cultural practices of eating out take place. At the same time, it addresses how various gendered and generational food consumption norms are (re-)produced, negotiated and challenged through the everyday practices of sharing food, and vice versa. Furthermore, how the status-enhancing role of food and the practice of over-ordering affect the establishment of a modernised food system and its production-driven externalities will also be considered.

Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) helps to explain the saying 'People are what they eat', as it reveals the structural (class) and individual dispositions of certain consumption practices. Under the umbrella of 'taste', Bourdieu analyses, for example, the different values people ascribe to certain foods while tabooing others, and the manner and settings in which food is enjoyed. Accordingly, people's habitus of eating is more or less anchored in the existing structure of class relations and materialises empirically in the lifestyles of certain social groups and their corresponding practices of eating. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the habitus concept and its rather static and structural interlinkage between class and lifestyle falls short of fully capturing the strongly processual and fluid dimension of 'doing middle-classness', social differentiation and boundary-drawing observable in Vietnam. Hence, what is meant by 'class' in Vietnam in the first place constitutes a conflict-laden terrain of negotiation between the country's socialist legacy and the ideal of communist class structure, and current neoliberal economic forces fostering individualisation and aggravating social inequalities (see Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). The middle class in Vietnam cannot be identified by rigorous and clearly defined structural indicators (see for example King et al. 2008; Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012). Suggested here, therefore, is the perspective of 'doing middle-classness', which focuses on the *social practices* by which middle-class identity is (re-) constructed by the constant testing and manoeuvring of, for example, gendered and generational boundaries. The meaning of social class and lifestyle in such a dynamic development context as that of Vietnam remains in flux. To begin with, this contribution centres on the gendered spaces and inter-generational aspects of 'eating away from home' in the vibrant urban space of HCMC.

The research on which this chapter is based is mainly drawn from fieldwork carried out in HCMC over a total of seven months between 2013 and 2015 in the context of a broader research project on the body politics of eating and the transformation of food culture in Vietnam.[2] Observation was an important aspect of this fieldwork. The rapidly diversifying gastronomic scene served as a methodological entry point through which to approach broader societal changes, for example gendered and generational relationships as manifested in the social practices of food sharing. Practically, this meant spending time in different eating and drinking venues such as fast food outlets and coffee shops. Based on theoretical sampling and the decision to put the (re-)emerging urban middle class under the microscope, these observations focused on upscale

eateries and coffee shops that can be classified as geared towards entertainment, leisure and lifestyle purposes rather than the daily reproductive necessity of eating. As a certain affiliation of youth culture with fast food outlets and coffee shops emerged from these observations, two group discussions with female and male university students were conducted. These were then contrasted with oral history interviews in order to elaborate the generational and gender dimension involved in the transformation of food consumption contexts and practices. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with scholars of Vietnamese food history and education, a market research institute staff member, and a manager and waiter at two upmarket restaurants characterised by higher-priced menus, a business clientele and prime locations. The interviews focused on overall food culture changes and consumption trends. Certain dimensions of food waste as an aspect of food sharing implicitly emerged in the data collection process and were taken up in the theoretical sampling process through an initial exploration of Vietnamese (online) newspapers and social media, as well as a narrative interview with the founder of an urban food bank initiative in Hanoi.

Manoeuvring foodscapes and consumption in HCMC

The last few decades have been characterised by rapid economic growth in Vietnam. Initiated in 1986, *đổi mới* and its portfolio of economic reforms supporting privatisation, market liberalisation and the decollectivisation of agriculture, facilitated the shift from a planned to a market economy (Beresford 2001) and paved the way to global economic integration, as demonstrated by the country's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2007. This economic pathway has been accompanied by a dynamic transformation of the overall food system, which has transformed Vietnam's past experience of severe food scarcity into one of growing diversification of, yet unequal access to, food consumption options in urban centres.

Whereas the Food and Agricultural Organization, in its report *Food Consumption and Nutritional Status in Viet Nam* (1990), describes the country in 1990 as far from food secure, and the nutritional status of the population as unsatisfactory, the picture nearly three decades after *đổi mới* looks quite different. Export-orientated agricultural reforms stimulated a production surplus and, in general, facilitated unprecedented economic development (Beresford 2001; Bui Van Hung 2004). Besides growing global market integration, industrialisation and rapid urbanisation have played their parts in the modernisation of the food system and, of most relevance here, in the stimulation of the consumption patterns of the (re-)emerging urban middle classes.

HCMC makes for a particularly interesting case study as it is the most rapidly developing urban centre in Vietnam and in the Southeast Asian region (Earl 2014). After the French colonial defeat of 1954 and the separation of the country into the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and the US-backed capitalist Republic of Vietnam in the south, the southern government in Saigon promoted urbanisation and attracted and produced a

middle class engaged in the wartime capitalist economy. Conversely, Hanoi, as capital of the communist north, experienced a process of deurbanisation and ruralisation. When North and South Vietnam were reunited as the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam and Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in 1975, the southern urban middle classes at first experienced rapid downward social mobility in the name of communist egalitarianism (Earl 2014). Against this background, however, *đổi mới* provided the nurturing ground for the (re-) construction of HCMC's middle classes. Rural–urban migration (especially female) was stimulated by education and employment opportunities in the city, which eventually translated into new gains in assets, resources and social position.[3] Today, these forms of capital are invested in ever-growing consumption options. Food and eating out have become prominent markers of consumption for the performance of middle-classness (Earl 2014). In contrast to the Vietnamese middle class elite under colonialism, for which 'a[n exclusive] taste for new foods and culinary innovation was a way for people to highlight their cultural sophistication and social status' (Peters 2012: 43), food consumption today is a more mainstream way of performing middle-classness.

   Due to integration into the global economic system, HCMC's consumption options have multiplied with the mushrooming of supermarkets. Vietnam has been experiencing a so-called 'third wave' of global supermarket shares since the late 1990s and early 2000s (Mergenthaler 2008), and increasingly opening up to consumers with varying degrees of purchasing power (Cadilhon *et al.* 2006; see also Figuié and Bricas 2010). Vietnam's retail sector ranks among the top bracket of countries receiving foreign direct investment (Mergenthaler 2008) and foreign brands find their way onto the Vietnamese market via supermarket supply chains. According to a female representative of a HCMC market research institute conducting panel studies on consumption behaviour in Vietnam, pre-packaged food today constitutes a huge segment of sales and part of a household's expenditure. Being a white-collar worker and mother herself, the market researcher explained the time pressure on working mothers:

> The middle class especially likes to adopt a Western lifestyle and food. … We also have food from other countries, no longer only Vietnamese food, so that is why we adopt the new products. And also because we have less time as we are busier with work. That is why some consumers now adopt more ready-to-eat products and semi-processed products as well. So they buy and just need time to heat it in the microwave.
>
> (Interview, HCMC, 21 September 2015)

Besides the development of supermarkets, a similar investment boom that gradually followed market liberalisation can be observed in the gastronomic sector and its highly diversified range of indoor restaurants and coffee shops. Between 2008 and 2012, for example, the fast food sector in Vietnam showed a compound annual growth rate of about 17 per cent (about 14 per cent for cafés/bars) which is forecast to reach about 18 per cent (remaining at about

14 per cent for cafés/bars) between 2013 and 2017 (Agriculture and Agri–Food Canada 2014: 2, 5). Shopping malls increasingly integrate fast food venues with entertainment and shopping. On the subject of shopping malls, the representative of the market research company explained:

> It is not only about the store for us to buy things. It is also a better place for entertainment for the whole family. So we bring kids there. We go with the whole family, we can go there to some fast food restaurant, just located in some supermarket. So it's kind of an entertainment place as well.
> (Interview, HCMC, 21 September 2015)

This is consistent with personal participant observation – that supermarkets and shopping malls are especially packed on the weekends and have dozens of product promotions that strongly attract customers. Through diverse media channels, food retail and the gastronomic business have become symbolically omnipresent in people's everyday lives. Product advertisements are placed on TV shows and oversized street banners. A plethora of women's magazines discuss the latest food trends, diets and the city's culinary hotspots (see also Drummond 2004). En vogue restaurants and foodies' insider tips are communicated to friends and peers via social media networks, as one female informant in her mid-twenties explained. She selects the places to go through social media, from an otherwise overwhelming and very fast-changing gastronomic landscape (interview, HCMC, 13 October 2015).

Whereas opulent, conspicuous consumption and 'imperialist' foreign goods once contradicted communist egalitarian ideology, the government and the economy perceive the Vietnamese consumer as an important actor following the initiatives of market liberalisation (Figuié and Moustier 2009), bringing the communist ideal of economic equality gradually under pressure. Against this structural context, newly 'discovered' consumers aim to experience the culinarily exceptional, and search for new modes of social distinction and belonging. This ongoing process of identity construction by the consumer is quite aggressively pursued by the marketing strategies of, for example, the soft drink sector, which is also booming. For instance, in 2014 and 2015 consumers were extremely excited about Coca Cola cans customised with personal names or a characteristic such as 'shy' or 'good looking' (interview market researcher, HCMC, 21 September 2015). This hype can be read as a practice of symbolically embodying and ingesting individuality.

In general, consumption options in HCMC are diverse. Food consumption in Vietnam, however, has only recently been taken up by scholars, and only as one of the many indicators of middle-class lifestyles (Earl 2014). To fill this gap, this chapter focuses on food consumption understood as a constitutive element in the ongoing process of identity construction in Vietnam. Consumers find themselves navigating the urban eating-out landscape as the material context of food diversifies and is discursively backed by marketing and advertisement strategies promoting modern consumption. The question thus arises: How do

consumers actually appropriate this structural context into their own space? This leads from the macro-level context to the everyday social practices of food consumption, detailed as follows.

Eating out: changing social practices of food sharing

Food sharing in Vietnam is deeply embedded in family, kin and ancestral relations and incorporated in a dense script of having food together as a form of commensality (Avieli 2012). Norms of seniority, gender and hospitality, for instance, frame the social practices of sharing food. The growing trend towards eating and drinking out presented above, however, implies a shift from home-based commensality towards (or at least its complementation by) sharing food outside one's home with peer groups or co-workers, and eating on one's own alongside, but not with, strangers.

When one of the major multinational corporations, following other well-established foreign fast food chains, opened its first fast food restaurant in HCMC in 2014, customers – the young and the old as well as whole families – queued for hours to be among the first to experience this new gustatory and social event (BBC News, 8 February 2014).[4] In a group discussion about foreign fast food restaurants, male and female university students explained that the main reason to visit was not necessarily the food itself. One of the major reasons was that these places have air-conditioning and huge glass fronts. The students like to be seen through these large glass windows by others from the outside, thus displaying and communicating modernity to and social distinction from the world outside the restaurant (group discussion students, HCMC, 28 March 2013). The motivations of customer groups, especially professionals and white-collar workers, young couples and teenagers, as well as families curious about the culinarily 'foreign', have been documented in, for example, the case of Western-style fast food restaurants opening in late 1980s Beijing, offering what was at that time an unknown food experience contrasting with the common socialist canteens (Yan 2008). Not unlike the students in HCMC, most of the customers Yan interviewed reported that they did not like the taste of the imported fast food in particular but enjoyed the style of eating and the experience of being there: 'Most customers spent hours talking to each other and gazing out the huge glass windows onto busy commercial streets – and feeling more sophisticated than the people who passed by' (Yan 2008: 87).

Obviously, eating out constitutes a social practice that goes beyond socialising among peers. It also serves to delineate one's belonging to one group rather than another through the demonstration of a command of dining etiquette and social skills. In the case of Vietnam, the studies of, for example, Bitter-Suermann 2014, Welch Drummond 2012, Earl 2014 and Higgins 2008 similarly identify eating out and spending time in gastronomic locations as an expression of social status aspiration; it is the demonstrated capacity to align oneself with and adapt to what is perceived as modern global consumer culture, as well as to locally embed it (see Bitter-Suermann 2014: 38).

The following therefore looks into how this connection with and adoption of global consumer culture actually unfolds in the concrete social practices of drinking and eating out in HCMC, particularly in terms of gendered and inter-generational relations. In general, by sharing food and drinks outside the home, actors 'engage in [new] forms of sociability, delineating lines of intimacy and distance' (Julier 2013: 339). The argument proposed here is that this delineation is not a mere demarcation in terms of Bourdieu's class structure. Instead of applying the habitus concept as enshrined in more or less fixed class dispositions, the following starts from the very practices of creating those lines of intimacy and distance. As will be shown, gender and generational dimensions as well as social status are at play in the construction and negotiation of distinction and belonging.

Gendered spaces of drinking and eating out

Whereas coffee shops and beer halls used to be predominantly frequented by men, Welch Drummond (2012: 88) observes a rise since *đổi mới* in the number of public spaces in Hanoi that facilitate socialising among women, thus increasing their visibility. As documented above, the landscape and popularity of upmarket cafés and fast food outlets that Welch Drummond describes in Hanoi (2012: 88) can also be found in the indoor, air-conditioned locations of contemporary HCMC. The following narratives of two older female informants in their late fifties and sixties, Anh[5] and Ngoc, recall the restrictions put on women in the past in terms of spending leisure time and socialising in public. Their oral history perspective complements the younger generation's perception of the way being female or male continues to structure food-sharing practices.

Anh, during an interview in a coffee shop, told me that many years ago it would not have been possible for her to meet in such a location. Referring to Confucian legacies and pre-*đổi mới* times, she recalled that women never went out and spent time in coffee shops but simply stayed at home. She illustrated this through the example of her mother:

> My mother, she never goes out – even now. She is eighty-five years old and when she got married she was eighteen. Whenever I visit my parents, I always see her in the kitchen. And she never goes out without her husband – my father. But my father can go out anywhere. He only takes her out about five or six times a year. When friends come to visit her at home, while talking she always has to do something – some cleaning, some vegetables, some cooking. No sitting and talking [only] – no!
>
> (Interview, Anh, HCMC, 5 October 2015)

Anh's personal account echoes that of a Vietnamese food historian discussing the influence of Confucianism on the gendered social norms around eating and drinking in Vietnamese society prior to the communist egalitarian ideal after 1975. According to Vietnam's Confucian tradition, men and women in public

ate separately and, when receiving guests, the woman did not join the feast: 'In the family, it was never the case that women had a meal with the guests; she just said a word of greeting, and [was responsible for] cooking after that' (interview, food historian, HCMC, 29 August 2014).[6]

Ngoc, the other female informant in her sixties, recalled her own upbringing and the food and drinking socialisation she experienced from childhood until she got married. As a girl she was told that she must not drink coffee in public as this was the behaviour of an 'unserious girl'. When she later went out with her husband and his male friends she had to order orange juice in order not to receive 'unfriendly looks' from the latter. In the same vein, men used to refrain from having, for example, orange juice in public, as this was highly associated with feminine drinking behaviour and did not comply with the 'correct' behaviour of men enjoying black coffee and cigarettes in coffee shops (interview, Ngoc, HCMC, 29 August 2014; see also interview, Anh, HCMC, 5 October 2015).

Comparing Ngoc's gendered socialisation with the conditions of the younger generation, those gendered norms of femaleness and maleness associated with certain drinking habits in the private and public spheres are gradually changing. Some of her female grandchildren and nieces actually like the taste of black coffee but are still taught that Vietnamese women who like black coffee are generally considered 'manly'. Girls are still educated to refrain from drinking black coffee in public. Based on my own observations in such coffee houses, they drink fruit juices and smoothies instead. Some would order the typical *café sữa đá* – iced milk coffee, consisting of coffee, ice and sweet condensed milk to make the bitter coffee sweeter, milder, softer and more 'womanly', thus embodying femininity. The popular *café sữa đá* works as a door-opener to the formerly male-dominated public café culture in as much as it merges feminine as well as masculine associated qualities – sweetness and bitterness. In this way, formerly gendered public spaces seem to have become gradually more and more porous and reorganised since *đổi mới*. However, another group discussion conducted with female and male university students in HCMC showed how Confucian principles concerning what and how to eat 'correctly' depending on one's being a man or a woman are still perceived as somehow obligatory.

Complementing the accounts of the older female informants, the younger female generation perceived certain female-ascribed characteristics such as frugality and empathy as being expected of them when sharing food with others (see also Avieli 2012). Whereas men can 'make themselves feel at home' at the table, young women reported being concerned with eating more moderately and gently (group discussion students, HCMC, 16. September 2015). Self-control is inscribed in female body figures (see Drummond and Rydstrøm 2004b) and was also described by the female students as a way emphatically to pay attention and cater to, before their own, the desires and needs of the other people with whom they eat. This is expressed in the assertion: 'When you eat, check the pots and pans' (group discussion students, HCMC, 16 September 2014). The female students expressed that they feel responsible for the

convenience and comfort of others when sharing meals, explaining that they (the female students) would 'see the whole meal'. This means that they are supposed to be ready to anticipate the others' desires at any time. In formal meal situations, especially with guests, the female students feel required to follow the correct order of who to invite and serve first, relating this internalised meal practice to norms of seniority, gender and hospitality. Women are expected to know and act according to this script for sharing meals with other people.

The subjective accounts of the two older female informants document the historical development of the infrastructure of drinking and eating out, and how public social spaces for women have been facilitated in the context of economic reform and food system transformation since *đổi mới*. From a more global perspective, Julier asserts that '[r]estrictions on women's public eating dissipated as restaurants and eateries recognized their power as a consumer market' (Julier 2013: 342). Similarly, whereas strong Vietnamese ground coffee was exclusively reserved for men, the coffee industry, especially the instant coffee sector, discovered female consumers as a high-potential target group through the promotion of the sweet and less strong *café sữa đá* (interview, staff market research institute, HCMC, 21 September 2015). However, although these assessments suggest that the provision of female public space proceeded in a top-down manner due to capitalist market expansion, the subjective accounts of Anh and Ngoc referred to gendered socialising over food and drinks as an actual social practice conquering and acquiring newly emerging space in HCMC. The social norms of correct drinking patterns for women and men in public space are in the process of being renegotiated by the very social practices of women and men frequenting such places for leisure and recreational activities. In his study on Western-style fast food restaurants in Beijing, Yan shows that women were especially attracted to such venues because table manners were seen as more relaxed than the strict, gendered etiquette of male-dominated formal Chinese restaurants. In fast food restaurants women were explicitly expected to order their own food individually and to participate in conversations (Yan 2008: 92–93). Similarly, a comparison between the older and the younger generations' perspectives shows that public space for female entertainment and leisure has certainly widened. At the same time, the younger generation described how certain gender norms 'at the table' persist. This ongoing process of negotiation, which is constituted by the very practice of sharing food, echoes Bitter-Suermann's conclusion that '[w]omen in Vietnam are tasked with walking a line between modernity and traditional femininity, partly represented through what they eat [and drink]' (Bitter-Suermann 2014: 4).

Generational dimensions of commensality

In general, commensality refers to eating together as well as sharing food together at the same table. In Vietnam, the preparation, display, and consumption of food constitute highly sensory social practices that aim to

stimulate sensual delights as well as foster commensality as a form of social bonding (Avieli 2012). A nutrition teacher sums this up when talking about Vietnamese food culture: 'The Vietnamese attach special importance to eating style, and … use all of their senses to enjoy the food, including sight, hearing, smell and taste' (interview, nutrition teacher, HCMC, 22 August 2014). As will be discussed below, eating out is the frame within which the social practices of commensality are dynamically changing, and food sharing and drinking out in public exhibit a strong generational dimension (see also Chapter 9 on generational issues and how this relates to food waste in Shanghai). The social practice of eating with peer groups, co-workers and friends as a way of spending leisure time together shapes a process in which commensality is starting to shift slightly away from family and direct kin groups. This again will be elaborated by contrasting the older informants' perceptions and practices of eating away from home with the accounts of the student generation.

To begin with, Anh, the informant referred to above, discussed the role of the family in commensality by contrasting past and present:

> In Vietnam many, many years ago, I mean before 1975, we used to live as a family. A big family – with grandparents, parents and children. Three generations in one family. So food was very important for everybody in the house – food for the elderly, food for adults and food for the kids. The cooking was done by the housewife. After 1975 most women got a job and went to work. At noon nowadays they stay in the office. So they do not have time to care for the children. Today we seldom have lunch together. We have lunch at school or lunch in the office. So we just have dinner together and sometimes we do not even have dinner together because after school, children go to evening classes. They also go to school during the weekend. … In the past, every young lady was educated in how to cook a lot of recipes and how to serve them. And nowadays most girls don't know how to cook. They go out [for food] or their mothers cook for them but they cannot cook a meal.
>
> (Interview, HCMC, 5 October 2015)

According to this statement, the changing labour market following the socialist reunion of the country in 1975[7] had an effect on the family as the main caregiving institution. Intended to break with Confucian patriarchal hierarchies, socialist egalitarian gender ideals promoted female labour and not only had an effect on female professional opportunities but also rearranged the everyday sphere of the family meal and the reproductive roles involved. The changing structural context of professional and educational opportunities after 1975 and the subsequent economic developments reconfigured the ways in which people share food together. Involved in this structurally driven development of eating out are the social repositioning of the female and the transfer of reproductive knowledge and everyday food skills from generation to generation (for the case of Cambodia see also Feuer 2015).

Besides the growing irrelevance of certain food-related knowledge and skills depicted, the micro-practices of food sharing related to gendered and seniority-based norms are also changing due to the increasing adoption of Western-style meal formats. Returning to the examples of fast food restaurants and upmarket coffee shops, the female students from the group discussion above described the eating behaviour of women their age as more relaxed and less moderate when eating out and socialising among peers. While eating out with friends in fast food restaurants they would not care so much about, for example, rules such as the correct sequence of whom to invite and serve first, something that was mentioned earlier on as part of a detailed script regarding norms of seniority, gender and hospitality when sharing food. They related this perceived norm relaxation to the aforementioned emic expression 'check[ing] the pots and pans'. The need felt by young women to 'see the whole meal' (group discussion students, HCMC, 16 September 2014) has become less relevant to commensality among equals because in such locations a more Western-style meal culture is followed in which individual plates are more common than the multitude of shared dishes characteristic of Vietnamese cuisine. Eating finger food instead of eating with chopsticks and ordering individual plates instead of serving and being served from shared dishes tend to favour the development of individuality in the context of eating 'together'. This eating style requires less of the empathy and consideration of others' gustatory needs indicated by 'checking the pots and pans'. The social obligation inherent in food sharing seems to be shifting increasingly from family-based commensality and female reproductive care towards another sort of obligation: the doing of middle-classness through the performance and embodiment of individuality and modernity.

The postulated Vietnamese ideal, initially referred to by the nutrition teacher, of enjoying food by 'eating with all one's senses' stands in sharp contrast to the social practice of eating out in fast food outlets. Visiting a fast food restaurant seems to be less about the gustatory act than it is the affective experience: 'modern' consumption of entertainment, youth culture belonging, 'doing middle-classness', and social status aspiration (see also Yan 2008: 91). The signifiers of 'togetherness', belonging and distinction become less centred on the mere act of eating and sharing food together. Instead, commercial and individualised food orders constitute a prerequisite for hanging out together for hours pursuing a perceived middle-class lifestyle and global consumer culture.

In this regard, the market researcher talked about middle class families and also presented her personal account:

> [W]e [middle-income families] have money and we just want to make our kid[s] happy and, you know, it is a good place for a family catch up, for a family hang-out. So [the] kids can play together and we have some time together and everyone is happy. … From middle class up they can go there often, but even for the lower income groups, they know it is [something their kids want]. So if [a] kid achieves something, behaves nicely, it is a reward for them to go there. For example, after the semester, with a good

result they take the kid there to have some fun, have fast food, so everyone is just happy.

(Interview, HCMC, 21 September 2015)

Socialising over food and drinks becomes a minor matter and takes on different qualities. Anh, one of the older informants, observed similar attitudes among the young: '[They] like pizza, they don't like to eat rice nowadays. Because when they eat, they can look at this [mobile phone] and they can play games with one another or surf the internet. This is not socialising as in the past. This is socialising with the machine' (interview, Anh, HCMC, 5 October 2015). Data collected through participant observation in various locations suggest this is a common phenomenon: the younger generation, occupied in groups or individually with online chatting, checking social media and posting selfies taken in the coffee shops or fast food outlets, constantly communicate to the world that they are at this very moment part of global consumer culture.

Hospitality, social status and the habit of over-ordering

So far, this chapter has presented diverse examples of food sharing as a means of identity construction. In the rapid development context of post-*đổi mới* Vietnam, the (re-)positioning of oneself as consumer and as woman or man is, alongside the crafting of youth culture, intimately connected to everyday food practices marking distinction and belonging. Hospitality is also a feature of this, as exemplified by the emic remark about 'checking the pots and pans'. Avieli (2012) has documented the inevitable link between food sharing and hospitality as a common form of reciprocal obligation in Vietnam. Hospitality in the context of having meals together relates not only to quantity but also to sharing the best pieces of food. General observations in upmarket restaurants showed that customers tend to order many dishes when having food together in a bigger group. Participant observations in respective restaurant settings during lunch service were sometimes followed by an opportunity to talk to waiters or restaurant managers after the peak lunchtime rush. One such opportunity arose with the manager of a Thai restaurant who explained that, especially during office lunch breaks, small groups of two to three office mates usually order individual plates, whereas bigger groups of five or more tend to order a variety of dishes to share together. A similar opportunity emerged at an upmarket vegetarian restaurant. Drawing on his work experience of nearly twenty years in the hospitality sector (the hotel business in particular) in HCMC, the waiter, Mr Huu, observed that due to recent decades of economic growth, people nowadays go out for dinner, lunch and leisure much more often than compared with twenty years ago. Today, customers can afford to spend a whole night out in a restaurant enjoying drinks, food and having fun together. According to him, the young generation especially enjoys going out to socialise, and young females enjoying drinks and food in restaurants and bars are a common sight today (interview, HCMC, 13 October 2015). Prompted by my general

observation that customers tend to order many dishes when having food together in a bigger group, he explained the following:

> You know, the Vietnamese, they like to order too much food when they organise a party … They order everything, too many dishes, and the whole menu.
>
> (Interview, Huu, HCMC, 13 October 2015)

According to Huu's experience, this kind of food ordering practice mostly applies in the event of a 'party', for example a birthday party, and is also prominently practised in the context of a business meeting:

> If they invite people for [a] business lunch or dinner they try to order as much as possible. They do that because they want to show off and they want to treat their customers well [to encourage] good business in the future. So they don't care for money. All they want is the best and what is expensive [on] the menu.
>
> (Interview, Huu, HCMC, 13 October 2015)

The social obligation of a business dinner or lunch was similarly mentioned by Vietnamese friends and colleagues informally talking about their experiences (field notes, HCMC, 1 October 2015). Generosity in the context of business meals was experienced many times first-hand by the researcher herself. Besides the idea of caring for and treating others well, over-ordering can also be read as a demonstration of social status or aspiration:

> Vietnamese people like to show off when they have a party. They like to show their wealth and they order [for] more than the expected guests. This depends on the money you have but in general we always try to avoid running out of food.
>
> (Skype interview HCMC/Hanoi, 13 October 2015)

This quote is attributable to the founder of one of the first food bank initiatives in Hanoi, a woman and former student in her early twenties. As the project addresses the social implications of over-ordering – an excess of food on the one hand and, on the other, unequal access to food – it will be discussed in more detail below. At this point it can be noted that over-ordering as a food sharing practice arising from hospitality norms is not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the social meaning ascribed to this practice in the midst of change. Besides extending hospitality, ordering a lot of food of the best quality, highest price, and of the culinary 'non-ordinary' demonstrates a social status–enhancing quality. Not only providing 'enough' food but enjoying and, especially, sharing 'delicious' food – as the proverb cited at the outset suggests – comes into play again in the performance of middle-classness.

Social inequality and emerging 'counter-cultures'

This habit of over-ordering caught the attention of a student group in Hanoi, prompting them to initiate a food project called *Hà Nội Đủ* ('Hanoi Enough')[8] in the city in the summer of 2013. A narrative interview with the founder and an introduction to the project through the *Viet Nam News* article, 'Student-run food bank helps to feed poor people in the capital' (*Viet Nam News*, 10 September 2015)[9] communicate the rationale behind the idea. Through frequenting restaurants herself, the project founder realised that much food goes to waste, especially in venues where buffets are served, as well as due to the aforementioned practice of over-ordering. At the same time, wandering around Hanoi, she observed poor and homeless people who search for food in public bins. The project developed from this manifest mismatch between two parallel societal phenomena: on the one hand, the wasting of food and, on the other, food scarcity experienced by poorer groups. The group wanted 'to balance the gap between the [food] surplus and the ones who need it' and to address very practically the widening inequality gap in Vietnamese urban society (Skype interview HCMC/Hanoi, 13 October 2015).

The implementation of the project, however, still faces many challenges. For instance, the target group – 'the poor' – at first refused to take food that was thrown away or leftover by others:

> They don't want to be looked down on because of being poor. At first we fought hard to persuade them to use the food. Because they thought that we were thinking of them as poor, as weak. They felt ashamed of themselves.
>
> (Skype interview HCMC/Hanoi, 13 October 2015)

This hesitancy to accept such food donations intriguingly demonstrates the close connection between food and identity, as eating 'food waste' symbolically embodies and demonstrates poverty and inferiority, going against one's concept of the Self.

A search of social media and local newspapers for further food waste management projects revealed but a handful. Most commonly they take the form of informal practices such as the direct reuse of leftovers in piggeries,[10] the distribution providing an income source for poorer groups in society. The aforementioned waiter Mr Huu explained that restaurant leftovers are commonly eaten by the restaurant staff, whereas the hotel business in which he worked for many years followed a very strict policy of throwing everything away. More ambitious waste management projects that hold a clear vision of social equity and environmental sustainability are rather scarce, one being the aforementioned project *Hà Nội Đủ* and another the social media campaign *Ăn hết rồi* ('Eat Up Food')[11]:

> Vietnam and other South-East Asian countries focus on economic development and they forget the environment or helping others because we [Vietnamese society] are moving forward in terms of economic development. Maybe this is why not too much … attention is paid to social services and all the food projects were led by students. And when their student lives end, the projects … end [as well].
>
> (Skype interview, HCMC/ Hanoi, 13 October 2015)

This quote from the founder of *Hà Nội Đủ* indicates the reflexive capacity of consumers and a growing distaste for food waste among the younger population who want not only to be party to a perceived modern lifestyle and global consumer culture, but also to connect with the goals and discourses of global consumer criticism, for example environmental sustainability and growing social inequity within the food system. Food waste is thus gradually becoming a material subject of social and inter-generational negotiation regarding the 'obligations' attached to middle-classness, for example performing social status by over-ordering versus taking on societal responsibility to alleviate growing inequality in terms of food excess and food access. Food waste as a characteristic of the global food economy is thus becoming embedded in local social practices of 'doing middle-classness'.

Conclusion: practices and structures of food consumption and social inequality

This chapter has shown that the diversification of the food system and emerging consumerism in Vietnam have reframed broader societal negotiation processes that go beyond narrow understandings of consumerism among 'the' urban middle class. The examples of changing food sharing practices presented here highlight the manoeuvring of gendered social spaces and inter-generational norms of reproduction towards new forms of 'togetherness' bound by a need to perform middle-classness through the demonstration of 'modern' lifestyle knowledge and the performative skills connecting the individual with global consumer culture.

As it opens up dynamic micro-processes of identity construction, Vietnam's development and macro-level transformations are highly enabling. At the same time, however, the downside of growing inequality is also manifested in the food sphere. In a context of economic growth that is not equally distributed but has led to new forms of poverty including food scarcity, the food practices of eating out and over-ordering come to represent the growing inequality and exclusion of those not benefitting from the economic developments.

Backed by rising purchasing power and the growing social obligation of consumption (of entertainment, of 'modernity', of the 'foreign'), food-related practices of social distinction and boundary-drawing reproduce the structural context of the food system. In the long run, the production-driven food system creates not only new consumption needs but also growing externalities in terms of social inequality. The presented practices of sharing and wasting food

show that food is increasingly becoming a social marker of middle-classness. At the same time, eating or recycling the food waste of others clearly symbolises the ingestion of poverty and an inferior identity. Environmental sustainability and food-related health considerations are but two of the further indications that urban food consumerism in Vietnam prefigures. The explorative foray into urban food projects and discourses featured above shows that not only are forms of 'modern' consumption globalising but also that certain aspects of global counter-cultures, social responsibility and resistance to consumerism are also beginning to be embedded locally.

Notes

1 Free English translation from 'cơm no, áo ấm; cơm ngon, áo đẹp'.
2 The project 'A Body-Political Approach to the Study of Food: Vietnam and the global transformations' is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for a three-year period that started in January 2015. For further information see: http://ie.univie.ac.at/en/research/projects/a-body-political-approach-to-the-study-of-food-vietnam-and-the-global-transformations/
3 For a more detailed introduction to female labour under late Vietnamese socialism see, for example, Bélanger and Oudin (2007).
4 BBC News (2014): McDonald's opens first outlet in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26101009 (accessed 25 January 2015).
5 All informants' names are anonymised throughout the text.
6 For a more detailed discussion of the role of women in Confucian thinking, see for example. Drummond and Rydstrøm (2004a) and Ngo Thi Ngan Binh (2004).
7 For a more detailed introduction to female labour under late Vietnamese socialism see, for example, Bélanger and Oudin (2007).
8 See also https://vi-vn.facebook.com/hanoidu/ (accessed 19 January 2016).
9 Viet Nam News (2015): Student-run food bank helps to feed poor people in the capital. http://vietnamnews.vn/society/275579/student-run-food-bank-helps-to-feed-poor-people-in-the-capital.html (accessed 14 December 2015).
10 In this model, food waste from public canteens, for example, is collected for free and brought to sub-urban piggeries. Offering a minimal but stable income, this job is often done by poorer groups in society. See for example: http://hanoimoi.com.vn/Tin-tuc/Nong-thon-moi/748911/thoat-ngheo-tu-tan-thu-thuc-an-thua-de-chan-nuoi (accessed 19 January 2016); http://m.cadn.com.vn/news/nuoi-lon-hieu-qua-tu-thuc-an-thua-loi-ca-doi-duong-8432-64 (accessed 19 January 2016).
11 See https://www.facebook.com/AnHetRoi (accessed 19 January 2016).

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