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Cultural Identity and Cuisine in Taiwan

by

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### Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between food, culture, and national identity in the Taiwanese context. Beginning with a review of relevant Taiwanese history, this paper then shifts into a theoretical discussion on the topics of hybridity, globalization, identity formation, and how cuisine impacts cultural and national identity. In order to understand how these theories operate in Taiwan, a discussion of three topics is then presented: Aboriginal culture and cuisine, Japanese colonial history and its impact on Taiwanese identity, and Taiwanese-specialty foods as a symbol of national identity. Taiwan has created a unique cultural heritage using cuisine (among other cultural elements), and understanding the Taiwanese perspective on their own identity is crucial in order to fully understand modern international relations in East Asia.

*Keywords:* Taiwan, national identity, food culture, cultural identity formation

## Cultural Identity and Cuisine in Taiwan

On a rooftop garden surrounded by butterflies and friendly retired women tending to their flourishing lettuce and green onion plants, nineteen stories above the bustling streets of Xindian District, I sat overlooking Taipei, Taiwan, and I reflected on the events that led me here. In September of 2012 I entered my first Chinese language course at Portland State University knowing very little about Chinese culture and nothing about its language. In August of 2014 I arrived in Chengdu, China beginning what would be a year and a half long study abroad there. In August of 2015 I landed in Taipei during the sweltering typhoon season, and the city, with its tropical climate, mouthwatering food, and traditional culture, captivated me—I knew that I had to come back, so I began studying everything I could about Taiwanese people and the island's geography. Now, it is April 2017, and I am back in Taiwan, attempting to write a thesis on Taiwanese culture that can do justice to the incredibly diverse and friendly island nation I now call home.

Now, I must preface this paper with two points: the first being that nothing can be written about modern day Taiwan without a certain level of political implication. Taiwan is claimed by China as another province, yet most Taiwanese believe they have a culturally, socially, and politically distinct nation. I err on the side of the latter, which will be evident as this paper progresses. However, I have always strived to avoid political-based conflict, so I will not be making a claim for Taiwanese independence here. Rather, I will discuss what makes Taiwanese culture unique and worth investigating. The second issue that I must preface this with is

that I do not have the time, resources, or expertise to do a complete analysis of Taiwanese culture in an undergraduate thesis. Instead, I will limit the scope of this paper to a discussion of one specific aspect of culture: Taiwanese cuisine.

This leads me to my research questions, and the core of this thesis: Cultural identity is partly formed by one's own familiar, cultural cuisine, yet Taiwan's multicultural society has a clearly defined cuisine inspired by their diversity. How does this combination of cultures (as expressed through their food) work together to create the identity of one place? How has globalization and imperialism served to highlight what is and isn't Taiwanese through the process of hybridity?

In order to answer these questions, I will examine the historical background of Taiwan, which has not only created an extremely unique and diverse island nation, but has served to define the parameters of Taiwanese identity. I will examine what national and cultural identity is (in a broader sense) and how it is formed, using the culturally constructed cuisine of Taiwan as a means to limit the scope of my research on the subject of identity and Taiwanese culture. I will then look at three specific elements of Taiwanese cuisine that encompass some of the most important aspects of modern Taiwanese identity: Aboriginal cuisine, Japanese fusion cuisine, and "Taiwanese-specialty" food culture. By examining my research questions using the above outline, I hope to prove that Taiwan's turbulent and diverse past has formed a unique identity and food culture on the island—one that reflects the uniqueness of Taiwanese people and culture in general. In doing so, I hope to give Western readers, no matter how few, an idea about the culture and history of this island that is often ignored in favor of political ties with China.

Ultimately, however, I hope to show just how special this overlooked nation is, how warm and welcoming its people are, and how delicious, meaningful, and varied its cuisine is.

### **A Brief History of Taiwan**

In order to think about the concept of Taiwanese identity, one must first understand the basics of the island's tumultuous history. The relationship between all social groups present on Taiwan (both past and present) has formed a unique culture and identity, and must be presented before discussing modern Taiwanese identity. Taiwanese culinary and societal history begins, as far as we know, with the indigenous groups of primarily Austronesian descent. There are ongoing debates as to the exact origin of these groups (which I will discuss the political implications of later in this paper), but most anthropologists agree that the Aboriginal tribes came to Taiwan from more than one location and settled all over the island (Manthorpe, 2005). Currently the Taiwanese government officially recognizes sixteen distinct tribes: The Hla'alua, Kanakanavu, Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiat, Sakizaya, Seediq, Thao, Truku, Tsou, and the Yami (CNA, 2014). However, there are many other tribes that have either died out, merged with the above tribes, or were forced to assimilate by the external powers who took control over Taiwan throughout its history (Roy, 2003). In addition, there are at least seven tribes that exist (in the sense that they have members who are pushing for official recognition) that are either recognized as part of the aforementioned tribes or not currently recognized at all by the Taiwanese government (Foster, 2015). Needless

to say, the cultural diversity that was already on the island was great, even before other national powers claimed Taiwan.

The first such power to officially claim possession over the island were the Dutch, though Portuguese explorers discovered the island in 1544 and gave it the name many westerners still know Taiwan as: *Ilha Formosa*, or beautiful island. The Dutch built Fort Zeelandia and Fort Provintia near Tainan in 1624, and while never having a sizable population on the island, they were responsible for the first large-scale development in Taiwan, as well as instating laws that would have a lasting impact on the geographic distribution of the many ethnic groups that inhabit Taiwan today. In the time of Dutch rule, and primarily due to colonial development on Taiwan, small villages of mainly Fujianese and Guangdongese settlers from across the Taiwan Strait had established themselves along the western coast and began to work the plains leading up to the Central Mountain Range (Rubinstein, 2007). Hakka settlers also migrated to the island as a means to escape political persecution in China, and since racial tensions were already high between them and the racially Han Chinese settlers from Fujian and Guangdong, the Hakkas were forced to establish themselves in the higher elevations, closer to the Aboriginal settlements that were already threatened by the presence of newcomers. Of course, these four major groups of people clashed (in addition to the already oft-warring tribes who frequently practiced headhunting), and violence often occurred (Roy, 2003).

The Dutch rule, however, did not have entirely negative consequences. They never intended to populate Taiwan, but instead their goals “were geared toward

enriching and strengthening the home state, creating opportunities for Dutch businesses, and sheltering the work of Dutch missionaries” (Roy, 2003, p.7). This led to taxation of the local Fujianese and Hakka population, as well as the Aboriginal populations who were geographically closer (located in the Central Mountain Range) and recognized the benefit of trade, wealth, and development that the Dutch and migrant groups from China brought with them. The Dutch, in turn, “provided Chinese settlers with land, oxen, seeds, implements, and money...[and developed] water conservancy facilities to support the growing of rice, sugar cane, hemp, and wheat,” all of which are still cultivated on the west coast and form a major part of Taiwan’s agriculture industry and culinary traditions (Rubinstein, 2007, p.12).

In 1661, the Dutch were cast out of Taiwan by the Ming dynasty loyalist, Zheng Chenggong (also known as Koxinga), and the Zheng (also written as Cheng) “dynasty” began. Zheng Chenggong himself died the following year of Malaria, however, the Zheng dynasty continued under his son’s rule (Roy, 2003). This “dynasty” was run in direct opposition to the Qing dynasty’s Manchurian rulers in China, and Zheng himself had initially arrived in Taiwan not to defeat the Dutch, but because he was fleeing the Qing rule. His supporters formed an army that was able to defeat the Dutch easily because they were members of the Ming military, whereas the Dutch were primarily traders, businessmen, and politicians. Zheng used this advantage to take Taiwan and use it as an outpost where other Ming dynasty loyalists could flee. It was during this short Zheng dynasty that many more Chinese migrated to Taiwan and were encouraged to “move away from the coast into wilderness areas in order to reclaim new land. [Zheng] troops themselves were



deployed in a military colonization effort that brought much of the Southwestern Coastal Plain under cultivation,” which furthered the agricultural tradition on the island and cemented the geological areas in which both aborigines and the ethnically Chinese settled (Rubinstein, 2007, p. 13). The former occupied the east coast and Central Mountain Range, while the latter settled along the west coast and in the northern Taipei Basin—an arrangement that can still be seen today.

The Zheng dynasty officially ended in 1683 when the Qing dynasty finally perceived the government on Taiwan as a threat instead of as simply a nuisance, and sent forces to officially take over the Chinese-occupied settlements on the west coast of Taiwan. Denny Roy, a scholar of East Asian politics and Taiwan history, gives the following reasoning for the Qing acquisition of Taiwan:

“The imperial capital finally sent a token administration to the island less because of perceived opportunities than because of the problems Taiwan caused: it had become home to a large community of settlers who had illegally migrated there; pirates and political and military enemies of the [Qing] government found haven there, and foreign powers threatened to claim it as a colony, which would have further compromised China’s strategic position vis-à-vis the imperialist powers” (2003, p. 8).

Once the Qing had defeated the Zheng government it ruled over Taiwan for over two hundred years—until 1895. This was not a peaceful time, however, and 159 rebellions took place during the Qing’s rule over Taiwan. Additionally, this time further cemented ethnic tensions between the Han Chinese, the Aboriginal tribes, and the Hakka. While this currently isn’t a cause of any violent conflict, tensions can

still be seen today through subtle alienation of the minority groups (ethnically Han Taiwanese currently make up about 70% of Taiwan's population and are considered the majority) (Roy, 2003). However, current government led campaigns to be more inclusive to all Taiwanese ethnic groups are apparent: announcements on public transportation systems are given in four to five different languages including Hakka, Mandarin, Taiwanese dialect, and English. In addition, culturally significant museum exhibitions and artwork is often displayed or advertised in public spaces, and traditional Taiwanese culture seems to be a uniting cultural factor in the modern Taiwanese mindset.

This appreciation for all ethnic groups, however, is a modern political device. After the Qing dynasty crumbled, and rulers in Beijing ceded Taiwan to Japan after the Sino-Japanese war in 1895, ethnic separation and conflict continued to rise. The Japanese, however, viewed the acquisition of Taiwan as an excellent economic, strategic, and agricultural opportunity. In addition, the Japanese empire sought "acknowledgement from America and European powers that an Asian nation could merit admission to their club of imperialism" (Manthorpe, 2005, p. 165). They desired to expand further into South East Asia, and the occupation of Taiwan provided a strategic jumping-off point for their military campaigns further south.

Dealing with the aborigines and Chinese settlers on Taiwan was a task that the Japanese empire undertook with an iron fist, and while extremely brutal measures were often taken against the Taiwanese (especially during the early 1900's in which six uprisings, an anti-Japanese campaign by the Hakkas, and frequent and deadly fighting with Aboriginal tribes took place), Japanese

involvement on the island effectively launched Taiwan into the modern 20<sup>th</sup> century. Infrastructure on the island was greatly expanded: roads, harbors, hospitals, railroads, irrigation and sewage systems were all built. Banking and monetary systems, news media, sanitation practices, health campaigns, modern agriculture practices, and new, heavy industry facilities were established. I will discuss the cultural impact of the Japanese occupation later in this paper, however, the economic and population booms that occurred during the latter part of the Japanese rule set Taiwan on the path to being a relatively wealthy and prosperous East Asian nation (Roy, 2003).

Between the Japanese occupation and the current, democratic government of modern Taiwan, was the tumultuous, often violent, political reign of the Guo Mindang (abbreviated as KMT). After the Japanese were defeated in WWII, they were forced to give up any claim they had to Taiwan, and Chiang Kai-Shek fled with his Nationalist Army from China to the island. Initially, the KMT used any wealth and resources that Taiwan had to try and rebuild his battered army in the hopes of returning to China to defeat Mao Zedong's Communist regime. However, in 1949, the KMT officially lost any control over Mainland China, and they returned to Taiwan with many scholars and Nationalist Party loyalists (who would likely have been killed during Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign) to establish their own government. Initially the KMT rule under Chiang Kai-Shek was an authoritarian-style regime—a police state that responded brutally to protests and resulted in civilian deaths (i.e., the 2/28 incident). However, in time, the KMT realized their rule over the Taiwanese needed to change in order to suit their ideals and continue

Taiwan's economic prosperity. In the 1980's, the political situation in Taiwan became liberalized, a true democracy with fair elections and representation was introduced, and tensions were eased between the Taiwanese and their government (Roy, 2003; Manthorpe, 2005; Rubinstein, 2007).

Currently Cai Yingwen, a member of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), is president, and her policies and ideals are in line with the majority of the population who voted her in, namely ideals that reflect Taiwan's national identity and call for independence. The preceding account of Taiwan's history is by no means its entire history. However, the regimes that I have discussed and the way that they ruled over Taiwan have heavily impacted today's concept of Taiwanese national identity. This identity is diverse and characterized by the nation's historical diversity. Keeping this history and diversity in mind, the following pages will look further into how Taiwanese identity has been impacted by Aboriginal culture, Japanese influence, and modern relations with China; I will research this through an examination of Taiwanese cuisine and food culture. However, in order to understand the importance of food on Taiwan's cultural identity, I will first discuss the basics of what cultural identity is, how it is formed, and how food plays a role in defining it.

### **Cultural Identity Formation Theory**

While trying to understand Taiwan's cultural identity, the ideas often found in academia concerning cultural imperialism and the negative impacts of globalization never seemed to fall in line with what I understood about Taiwan. It

didn't seem correct to view Taiwanese identity solely from the viewpoint of imperialism vs. Aboriginal culture, settlers vs. colonial masters, or even Eastern vs. Western culture. Taiwan's cultural identity stems from the culmination of its history, and while that history had many violent and unjust episodes, one can't ignore the island's current identity by dismissing what they deem as unjust. As John Tomlinson writes, "Cultural identity, [when] properly understood, is much more the *product* of globalization than its victim...[globalization] has been perhaps the most significant force in *creating* and *proliferating* cultural identity" (Tomlinson, 2003, p.269-270). Considering that modern Taiwanese identity clearly has been influenced by its Aboriginal past, Chinese settlers and their culture, Dutch land reform, Japanese culture and policies, and modern relations with outside influences (primarily in the form of pop-culture from Western European countries, the USA, South Korea, and Japan), Tomlinson's words ring true. I began to view modern Taiwanese culture as a result of human interactions on the island, and the concept of hybridity (as identified by Marwan Kraidy, John Tomlinson, and Kevin Robins) seemed to be the most pragmatic approach when considering modern cultural identity.

To begin my discussion on cultural identity formation, an understanding of the concept of hybridity must first be established. As Kraidy defines the term in his chapter "Cultural Hybridity and International Communication:"

"Hybridity' refers mostly to culture but retains residual meanings related to the three interconnected realms of race, language, and ethnicity... [it] involves the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders

as well as across cultural boundaries...[it] reflects the existence of a variety of historical, economic, and cultural forces whose enmeshments with one another are as manifest at the local, national, and regional levels as they are visible globally” (2005, p.1-5).

In the Taiwanese context, cultural aspects of each social group throughout its history (namely Aboriginal, Hakka, early Han Chinese settlers, imperial-era and modern Chinese immigrants, and Japanese culture) have been either retained or rejected by the overarching “Taiwanese” society. Today, elements of the aforementioned cultures can be seen in the mainstream architecture, religious, social, and culinary practices, all of which is being promoted as distinctly Taiwanese by the government, Taiwanese people, and tourism industry. As noted earlier, this thesis will not discuss all of these cultural elements in detail, but a discussion of culinary practices will be presented in the following sections of this paper. It is important to understand, however, that cultural hybridity has affected all aspects of Taiwanese culture, not just culinary culture.

Hybridity and the resulting identity formation uses, as Manuel Castells writes in his book *Identity and Meaning in the Network Society*, “building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory...and from power apparatuses” found in any culture (1997, p.7). It is a “shared history” between two encountering groups that form the “trans-cultural experiences [which] constitute the material out of which new pluralist, hybrid cultural forms of expression are being wrought” (Kraidy, 2005, p.10). Taiwan has a unique history, just as any place does—no two cultural

experiences are alike. As such, its identity formation (which has resulted from the shared history of native and foreign actors) is also unique and a direct result of hybridity. As mentioned above, many scholars seem to argue that hybridity is a result of “cultural domination,” and those who discuss hybridity are “being complicit with structures of inequality”. However, knowing that isolated cultures are a rarity and understanding that “cross-cultural encounters are historically pervasive,” makes the reality of hybridity the only historically logical way to view cultural identity formation—especially on an island that has had so many historical actors, like Taiwan (Kraidy, 2005, p.2-3).

This is not to say that the results of cross-cultural contact, while a historical reality, are always beneficial to the cultures involved. Frequently “hybridity reflects uneven development within societies...where some social groups are caught in relations of ‘discriminatory interdependence’” (Kraidy, 2005, p.6). As discussed in the ‘Brief History of Taiwan’ section of this thesis, both Hakka and Aboriginal groups in Taiwan have experienced this sort of “discriminatory interdependence”—these groups would participate in trade, benefit from the development on the island, and gain employment and access to better medicine and education from their cross-cultural contact. However, these groups were certainly discriminated against, and even today many do not experience the same opportunities as members of the urban majority groups. As Kevin Robins writes, “With mobility, comes encounter. In many respects, this may be stimulating and productive...[however] the encounter between cultures can produce tension and friction” (2003, p.240). This conflict, however, does not necessarily destroy the culture that it affects. Instead, “new

global elements coexist alongside existing and established local or national cultural forms” (Robins, 2003, p.241).

Modern Taiwanese culture exhibits both hybridity and the building (instead of destroying) effect that globalization has on cultural identity. The overarching cultural identity in Taiwan has accepted some cultural elements from historical interactions with other cultures, and these are contrasted sharply with the cultural elements that haven't been accepted. To use a culinary example: a popular chain of Hakka cuisine called 客家精緻麵食館 (or “Hakka fine noodle restaurant”) can be found throughout Taipei. This cuisine is considered to be traditionally Taiwanese because Hakka culture has been established in Taiwan as part of the island's history and culture. Here we can see hybridity at work. However, the equally popular and widespread McDonald's has never been considered culturally Taiwanese, and while many choose to eat here, there is an understanding that McDonalds is foreign food.

Globalization, while bringing the American-born McDonalds to Taipei, is not working to destroy Taiwanese culture (as those who argue for “McDonaldsization” seem to suggest). Instead, it serves to highlight what is and isn't culturally Taiwanese—no Taiwanese citizen eating a hamburger will ever stop and consider McDonald's to be local fare. To quote Robins again, “We should not think of globalization in terms of homogenization, then, in line with what is commonly believed and feared...What globalization in fact brings into existence is a new basis for thinking about the relation between cultural convergence and cultural difference” (2003, p.245). Looking at the cultural differences between what is already accepted as part of the Taiwanese national identity and what has been brought to Taiwan via



globalization allows us to see what is widely considered to be ‘Taiwanese’ and what is considered to be foreign. As John Tomlinson (who is often quoted in discussions of hybridity and globalization) writes:

“Cultural identity is not likely to be the easy prey of globalization. This is because identity is not in fact merely some fragile communal-psychic attachment, but a considerable dimension of *institutionalized* social life in modernity...Of course, this is not to deny that nation-states are, to varying degrees, *compromised* by globalization in their capacity to maintain exclusivity of identity attachments...but notice that [this doesn’t] conform to the scenario of the general *destruction* of identities by globalization. Rather, they attest to an *amplification* of the significance of identity positions in general produced by globalization” (2003, p.270-271).

Of course, cultural identity is always shifting: In the sixteenth century, no one living on Taiwan would have considered Chinese cultural elements to be part of Taiwan’s national identity. In the nineteenth century, no one would have considered Japanese cultural elements to be part of Taiwanese culture. Cultural identity is not static, and future Taiwanese cultural identity will likely incorporate more elements of western culture (brought to Taiwan through globalization) via the process of hybridity. However, when examining *modern* cultural identity on the island, there is a clear demarcation of what is and isn’t part of the collective national identity, and it is through this division that we can begin to understand the historical impact of cultural interaction on the island and the current impact of globalization.

### **The Impact of Cuisine on Cultural Identity**

Before discussing the specific examples of Aboriginal, Japanese, and “Taiwanese-specialty” cuisine (which analyze the relation of cuisine and modern Taiwanese cultural identity), I will first present how cuisine impacts cultural identity as a whole. Roland Barthes defines food as “not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (1961, p.24). Barthes goes on to explain that food preparation, presentation, and the very differences between cuisines all contribute to a sort of identity-communication. By communicating these differences through regional ingredients, nationally and culturally constructed recipes, traditions and celebrations, and the historical heritage of food, an extremely important (and prevalent—for one is always surrounded by food) aspect of cultural identity is formed. “One could say that an entire ‘world’ (social environment) is present in and signified by food” (Barthes, 1961, p.26). When this much about one’s identity is present in their cultural cuisine, it makes sense to study cuisine as an indicator of cultural identity.

As Kwang Ok Kim discusses in the introduction to an entire volume dedicated to the study of cuisine and its implications on cultural identity (titled *Re-Orienting Cuisine, East Asian Foodways in the Twenty-First Century*):

“Food, however, is laden with much deeper meanings than simply providing necessary nutritional and medicinal results. It is a space for social and cultural practice...Numerous studies have approached food as a mechanism

to materialize modes of thought and to express a group's identity, cultural system, or social classificatory system...These studies have shown how particular social and historical conditions determine the forms of certain foods, the specific ways foods are prepared and consumed, and by extension, how food practices have evolved in adapting to the changes of those conditions" (2015, p.2).

With this in mind, food's impact on cultural identity falls in line with the impact of hybridity and globalization discussed above. Historical factors, cultural hybridization, national cuisine, and even simple food preparation all contribute to the cultural identity of any given place. As both Bessiere and Kim imply in their respective writings, cuisine is worthy of studying because it tells researchers so much about the cultural history of a society—one that is always changing, and is simultaneously as representative of a historical national heritage as it is susceptible to outside influence, just like any other aspect of cultural identity.

Claude Fischler continues the discussion of this idea in his article "Food, Self and Identity": "Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently" (1988, p. 275). In this sense, food not only defines cultural identity, but it also highlights what is and isn't culturally distinct. As Jacinthe Bessi re, a French scholar who has researched food's impact on heritage and national identity writes:

"Eating is the integration or adoption of the qualities of the food you eat. On the other hand, 'the eater becomes part of a culture.' Both food and cooking,

as they are culturally determined, place the eater in a social universe and a cultural order. Eating habits are the foundation of a collective identity and, consequently, of alterity” (1998, p.24).

In this sense, cuisine serves as a strong indicator of the uniqueness of cultural identity and is deeply engrained in the collective memory of individuals.

Fischler’s article further discusses this concept by highlighting how cuisine is a cultural expression, which is not easily forgotten. When cultural groups undergo changes (either through hybridity, group movements, or disbursement—all of which ethnic groups in Taiwan have encountered), cuisine is often remembered as a way to bring members of that culture together. “It has been observed that certain features of cuisine are sometime retained even when the language itself has been forgotten” (Fischler, 1988, p.279). Considering this, it seems that cuisine is one of the most well-preserved and legitimate ways to study cultural identity. Cuisine is an expression of the natural world where a culture is living; it ties members of a society to their land. It signifies what is and isn’t socially acceptable through taboos, thoughts about health, and culinary traditions. It brings people together for celebrations, holidays, and other events in which a shared meal is not only culturally significant also culturally distinct. The old saying, “You are what you eat” in this sense not only applies to the physical properties of food, but is deeply intertwined with cultural identity (Fischler, 1988;Bessiere, 1998). If you eat what your culture eats, if you partake of all of the traditions and fully understand their cultural impact, then you are a member of your culture with a shared cultural conscious.

### **Taiwan-Specific Examples**

Following my discussion of the basics of Taiwanese history, relevant theories of cultural identity formation, and how cuisine plays a part in that formation, I will now examine several Taiwan-specific examples using my own observations while traveling around Taiwan and short interviews that I conducted at various food establishments (including food stalls, restaurants, and markets). These observations and interviews can be divided into three distinct categories: Aboriginal cuisine, Japanese influenced cuisine, and Taiwan-specialty foods. Of course, the following examples are not comprehensive, due to time constraints, and only begin to discuss the relationship dynamic that Taiwan has with the above categories. In addition, there are many other complex relationships that Taiwanese people have with other aspects of their food culture, and I could spend many years compiling volumes of information on this topic. However, the following examples do fall in line with the above discussion of cultural identity formation, and highlight how three distinct eras of Taiwanese history have impacted cuisine and cultural identity today.

#### **Aboriginal Identity**

Embracing Aboriginal identity on Taiwan and the appreciation for the island's native heritage is one of Taiwan's strongest arguments for distinct cultural and national identity. Considering that Taiwanese researchers claim 60% of the Taiwanese population has Aboriginal ancestors, and that Taiwanese Aboriginal groups could have been the genetic origin for most of the world's widespread Polynesian tribes, a distinct and ancient Aboriginal presence on the island would

indicate that Taiwanese people with Aboriginal blood have different ancestors (and therefore, different cultural identity) from other nations—specifically the Chinese (Rubinstein, 2007). In addition, “Taiwanese have a well-known saying: ‘Taiwan has Tang-shan (Han) grandfathers but no Tang-shan grandmothers,’ indicating that no Han women came across to Taiwan during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” and that most Taiwanese aren’t fully genetically and culturally Chinese (Lee, 2014, p.90).

As I learned on my tour of the Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines, since the founding of the Alliance of Taiwan Aborigines in 1984, the Taiwanese government has increasingly touted Aboriginal culture (and specifically cuisine) as a means to connect to Taiwan’s Aboriginal roots and to promote tourism to, and the preservation of, Aboriginal villages. The phenomenon of promoting native cuisine, and tourism to the villages in which it is produced, is not unique to Taiwan. However, Taiwan uses the phenomenon as a blatantly political way to separate itself from the Chinese national identity being pushed upon them by Chinese officials while defining its own cultural identity. As Kim mentions in *Re-Orienting Cuisine, East Asian Foodways in the Twenty-First Century*, often “native intellectuals [seek] to rediscover and to elaborate the purportedly unique local cuisines as a venue for reclaiming the national cultural identity” (2015, p.3). In addition, society often has an interest in seeking an “*appartenance sociétale*, a feeling of belonging to a social group, or a quest for sociability, unity, and original *communitas*, alterity and thus an identity” (Bessière, 1998, p.22). Taiwanese frequently travel to native Aboriginal villages to seek this unifying cultural identity. In this sense, observing Aboriginal

cuisine is one of the primary ways to see the marked difference between what is “Taiwanese” and what isn’t.

In order to experience this first hand, I traveled to a small village named Wulai, about fifteen miles outside of Taipei’s southernmost suburbs. Wulai is a center for the Atayal (or the Taiya) tribe, which is the third largest Aboriginal tribe in Taiwan at over 80,000 official members. They are the most widespread tribe, primarily living in the northern mountains, and are known as the tribe who has best resisted the assimilation campaigns of the various national authorities that have ruled Taiwan (Foster, 2015, p.396). For this reason, many (myself included) have traveled to Wulai to find authentic Aboriginal culture and traditional cuisine. On the bus to Wulai, I asked a middle-aged couple with hiking backpacks at their feet why they were going to visit the village. *My wife is Atayal*, said the man, *and she visits the mountains often, but I haven’t seen Wulai for many years (even though it is so close to Taipei). On a nice cool day, she wanted to bring me to see the mountains and take a hike...* The wife interjected: *And to eat some Atayal food! It’s delicious!* I replied that I hoped it was delicious, considering the primary reason for my trip was to visit “Taiya Po Po”—an authentic Atayal restaurant serving many of the classic dishes common in the region.

Upon arriving in the town, with many homes and shops overlooking the river and tourists enjoying the scenery, I made my way to Taiya Po Po to find the bamboo-lined restaurant packed. Out front, there was an older chef chopping mountain vegetables, and I asked her where they came from. *From the mountains*, she replied, *they are local, and that is why we eat them here.* A waitress came up and I ordered a

mountain boar dish, bamboo tube rice (stuffed with mushrooms), and some local mountain greens. Aside from being delicious, all of the dishes were made with local, unique ingredients. As Lijie Chen writes in “Embodying Nation in Food Consumption: Changing Boundaries of “Taiwanese Cuisine””:

“Aboriginal dishes are truly natural...Aborigines seldom eat the main ingredients used by Han Chinese...owing to the different lifestyles between the plains-based Han Chinese and the mountain-based Aborigines. Concerning cooking methods, there are no complicated cooking skills in Aboriginal dishes; Aborigines tend to cook by steaming, grilling, and boiling instead of stir-frying and stewing, which are often adopted by the Han. Therefore, Aboriginal dishes are described as ‘simple and original’” (Chen, 2010, p.121-122).

Of course, Taiya Po Po did have some stir-fried dishes, and did use Han-introduced foods (like rice), but the majority of the actual ingredients were locally produced and cooked using traditional methods. When I asked the waitress why it is important that Taiwanese people eat and know about local, Aboriginal foods, she replied:

*Many Taiwanese have Aboriginal ancestors. They come here and they can eat the food like their ancestors did. It is very important that Taiwanese do this because it is our real culture. It is not Chinese food, it is not Hakka food, it is real Taiwanese food. All of the vegetables and all of the meat we use here are Taiwanese. They come from this place like the people who are born here. I think*



*it is very important to eat this and know the Taiya (Atayal) flavors. Now you know the real, original Taiwan!*

Clearly, experiencing traditional Aboriginal food is a way for Taiwanese to learn about their heritage and separate their own culture from the “other” (the “other” was often defined, as I learned during my interviews, as being Chinese). Aboriginal culture is most easily accessible to the average Taiwanese through Aboriginal culinary traditions, and for this reason, restaurants like Taiya Po Po have emerged as a means to access the “real, original” cultural and national identity of Taiwan.

### **Japanese Influence**

Since Aboriginal cuisine is one of the prime examples of distinct Taiwanese identity, I will now look at hybridity at work in the Taiwanese context. As discussed in the history section of this paper, Japanese colonialism created widespread Japanese cultural influence in Taiwan. Education reforms further distinguished Taiwanese culture from Chinese culture through language learning, mannerisms taught in the classroom, history and government classes, and a “break down [of] many of the clan and family divisions that plagued Taiwanese society during the Qing period” (Manthorpe, 2005, p.169). These were all, of course, based on curriculum in Japan. The result of this education was that it created a new sense of national identity, as Taiwanese viewed themselves as distinct from their colonial masters and led culturally distinct lives from their Chinese counterparts. Additionally, the children raised through the Japanese education system are now

elderly, and have since raised children and grandchildren of their own with the values that they learned through their Japanese education. Jonathan Manthorpe, in his book *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan* explains how Japanese influence has created a sense of national identity and, as a result, a call for independence from China:

“Many Taiwanese of the older generation are inclined to view [the Japanese colonial] period as, on balance, beneficial to the island...there was the benefit of dramatic social and economic development on the island in the half century of rule by Japan. It brought the island standards of efficient and clean government against which the Qing administration before and the Kuomintang after compared poorly” (2005, p.177).

Of course, the hybridity of Japanese and Taiwanese cultures on Taiwan has manifested itself through Taiwanese food culture. The fondness with which the older Taiwanese generation views Japanese culture has been passed down, and now Japanese trends, specifically food trends, have been embraced in Taiwan. “Colonial encounters” often stimulate “a radical and rapid process that constitutes multiple kinds of alternative or new dietary trends,” and the colonial experience on Taiwan is no exception (Kim, 2015, p.3).

The emergence of these new culinary trends, created through cultural hybridity, have come about in all major cities in Taiwan (especially in the western and northern regions where Japanese influence was strongest), and have emerged at different stages in Taiwan’s history. The first phase appeared in the initial stages of Taiwanese assimilation into the Japanese education system and through the

introduction of Japanese infrastructure, agriculture, and cuisine to the island. As mentioned above, many were eager to be culturally separate from China, and accepting Japanese cultural influence into daily life was the first step in doing so. Rice and sugar crops were widely cultivated on Taiwan as part of the Japanese land reforms, and Japanese short grain rice, the appreciation of sweets, and the use of sugar in food preparation became widespread in Taiwan (Roy, 2003). Restaurants created to cater to the Japanese elite in Taiwan were established serving fine Japanese cuisine, and as a result, the food served at these restaurants became idealized as “fine dining” in the minds of many Taiwanese. Restaurants in major cities began to put signs up entirely in Japanese, using Japanese-influenced flavors and ingredients in their cuisine, and recreating Japanese recipes using cheaper, local Taiwanese ingredients (Wu, 2015). These types of restaurants and signage are common today, and can be seen on a stroll through the central and wealthy districts of Taipei (especially Da’an and Xinyi districts) and in upscale malls all over the city. Japanese high cuisine is still considered fine dining in Taipei, and Japanese characters on signage seems to either imply that the restaurant offers a nostalgic ambiance or offers expensive, quality cuisine.

After the KMT took control of Taiwan from the Japanese, however, many of the original Japanese restaurants had to close due to the KMT’s “anti-Japanese cultural policy” (Wu, 2015, p.108). Thus the second phase of Japanese-cultural hybridity began in Taiwan. Since the authoritarian regime of the KMT was widely considered a violent and oppressive period in Taiwanese history, Japanese rule was soon romanticized, and Japanese language, culture, and food was still widely

appreciated as a form of resistance in Taiwanese homes. This kept Japanese recipes alive and part of the Taiwanese cultural conscious. During an interview that I conducted at a busy Japanese tempura restaurant in the upscale “Miramar” mall (located in the wealthy Jiannan neighborhood of Taipei), I asked the elderly waitress if tempura was considered to be a new, foreign Japanese food item or a common, familiar Taiwanese food. Tempura is a common menu item in Japanese style restaurants all over the city, and many of these restaurants are filled with regular local customers. She thought for a while and replied:

*I think Tempura is Japanese food, not Taiwanese. But it is very common for us. We Taiwanese eat Japanese style food so much, many of us speak Japanese, many of us know how to cook Japanese food at home. This tempura restaurant is a Japanese restaurant (that's why we say Japanese words when customers come in and leave), but tempura is a food that Taiwanese are very used to and are comfortable eating.*

Considering the young, trendy customers that occupied the Tempura restaurant, it was clear that the popularity of Japanese cuisine has not waned since the KMT rule. The fact that the anti-Japanese culture policy has been lifted for decades has encouraged the third phase of Japanese cultural hybridity to take place on Taiwan: The idea that Japanese food is modern and trendy because Japan itself is a cultural trendsetter in East Asia, and is considered by Taiwanese to be the most developed and refined culture in the region. The familiarity with Japanese cuisine since the Japanese occupation has encouraged this, however, the explosion of Japanese-style restaurants, cafes, and food stalls in the past twenty years indicates a

recent large-scale acceptance of Japanese cuisine into Taiwanese food culture. In my immediate neighborhood in Xindian district (an outer district of Taipei with a relatively lower density of upscale Japanese restaurants), I counted a total of 22 Japanese style eateries within eight square blocks around my apartment building. These included four Japanese bakeries, three sushi stands, four Japanese-style restaurants (offering various Japanese foods), two ramen restaurants, three Japanese style café's, one high-end Japanese restaurant, two shabu-shabu (hot pot) restaurants, and two Japanese-style dessert stalls. My count doesn't include the Taiwanese owned chains of shops that offer Japanese items, such as deep-fried potato croquettes, tonkatsu (fried pork cutlet), Japanese-style fried squid and chicken, or Japanese convenient store chains (such as the Japanese style 7-Eleven or Family Mart). Clearly, Japanese cuisine is common in Taiwan and can be found nearly anywhere in major cities. I spoke with a sushi chef at a sushi stand in the French superstore (akin to Walmart), Carrefour, about the integration of Japanese food into Taiwanese daily life:

*It's so common: look at me! Look at what I do everyday! Taiwanese people love sushi, they love a lot of Japanese-style cuisine. I don't think Taiwanese people even consider what I make to be Japanese. They just think I'm a Taiwanese chef who makes Taiwanese sushi with fish from Taiwan! He laughs: Taiwanese really love Japanese food, and they love fish, so I'm happy because I think I will have a job here for a long time! A lot of people eat this everyday.*

It has been clear from my interviews and personal observations that Japanese food (and Japanese influenced food) is nearly as common in Taiwan as traditional

Chinese style food. Japanese cuisine is so integrated and normalized in Taiwanese society that it has become a part of Taiwanese daily life and a large part of their cultural and national identity. Having personally lived in China for nearly two years, it is clear that Japanese cultural influence is one of the most obvious distinctions between Taiwanese and Chinese culture. Mannerisms, style, technology, loan words, education, family structure, and most obviously, cuisine has been influenced heavily by Japan, and as a result of cultural hybridity, has created a unique social and cultural landscape in Taiwan. This hybrid uniqueness has been a major politicized argument in Taiwan for independence from China, since Chinese culture is very much distinct from Japanese culture. This, of course, seems to anger Chinese officials even more, considering the ongoing tensions with Japan and Taiwan that the CCP faces.

### **Taiwanese Specialty Foods**

Ingredients and food traditions unique to Taiwan are also frequently touted as a reason for cultural uniqueness, and therefore, as a reason for independence from China. Because Taiwan (on the whole) wishes to be recognized as a distinct nation, it distinguishes itself from other nations using cultural, historical, and linguistic differences. In the book *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, Hsiau writes:

“The politically-inspired construction of a particular Taiwanese national culture has relied heavily on pro-independence humanist intellectuals’ efforts in reclaiming history, reviving language, and creating collective

symbols. This kind of cultural construction involves a lot of rhetorical discourse which symbolically marks the difference between 'us' (Taiwanese) and 'them' (Mainlanders/Chinese)" (2000, p.184).

This distinction between Taiwanese and Chinese is one of the most politically charged topics in East Asia today, yet the desire for independence is not a phenomenon unique to Taiwan. Frequently nations who desire independence use culture as a means to claim that independence. As Manuel Castells writes, "In short, cultural nationalism is concerned with the distinctiveness of the cultural community as the essence of a nation" (1997, p.31). In Taiwan, because cuisine is such a defining part of Taiwanese culture, and because food culture is so important to everyday life, the "distinctiveness of the cultural community" is often highlighted through food. The cultural symbol that food creates, the appreciation of national identity through local ingredients and traditions, and the rural heritage that Taiwanese find through eating these foods all contributes to Taiwan's sense of individuality, culture and independent nation (Chuang, 2009; Hsiao, 2015). In order to investigate this further during my time in Taiwan, I sought out Taiwanese specialty-foods (defined as foods unique to a specific region of Taiwan). The first encounter I had with this type of cuisine was at a hot pot restaurant in Taipei called Sister Amie's Ginger Duck. As the name suggests, the specialty of the restaurant was a hot pot with a ginger and duck broth base. The owners of the restaurant noticed us as soon as I walked by, and immediately offered to show me the soup boiling behind the counter.

*This one is a beef base, and this one is a chicken soup—both of these are Chinese, the wife of the head chef, and owner, said to me. But THIS one (she opened the lid of the giant pot with a flourish) is special. This one is traditional Taiwanese. It is made with local ginger all mashed up, and with lots of good duck. You should get this one; it is real Taiwanese food and the best to eat.*

I couldn't refuse the ginger duck broth, and she produced a list of ingredients to choose from. *All of these are Taiwanese vegetables, and these are the best with the ginger duck.* Again, I couldn't refuse. At this point the husband gruffly spoke up from in front of his wok: *You should order some noodles with this on top,* gesturing to his wok. When I asked what he was cooking he laughed and slapped his belly. *It makes you fat is what it is!*

The wife shook her head and said they were special Taiwanese fried onions, and that a noodle dish would complete the meal nicely. I agreed and proceeded to sit down to one of the most delicious hot pots I've ever eaten. What was most memorable about the meal, however, was how enthusiastic the entire staff was about their Taiwanese-specialty dishes. Without me even mentioning the differences between Chinese and Taiwanese food, they brought up the fact that they were most proud of their Taiwanese dishes because they believed they were the most nutritious, delicious, and special at their restaurant. In fact they actively discouraged me from ordering the Chinese dishes because it wasn't "real Taiwanese" food.

Most Taiwanese that I have encountered in the food industry seem to share this sentiment. Along a hiking trail frequented by both Taiwanese and Chinese



tourists, I stopped and asked the fruit vendor at the trailhead what I should buy and where his fruit came from. *You should definitely buy the guava; it comes from Taiwan! And it is the most refreshing fruit to eat while on a hike.* We continued to speak at length about my trip to Taiwan and about other foreigners who visit the island. While the man was choosing his words carefully so as not to be rude, our discussion revealed that he was apparently not fond of Chinese tourists:

*They don't respect me or my job. They don't ask where my fruit comes from, they don't care if it is organic or not. They try to barter the price down on my organic, local fruits. Taiwanese would never do this. They would appreciate that the good fruit from Taiwan was the best! They would want to eat the best food, not like the fruit from China...I'm glad that you want to know what is the best too! I've finally made a foreign friend!*

We laughed and shook hands as I continued on my way with a box of sweet and refreshing guava in my bag.

Not far from this trail is the coastal town of Jiaoxi, where I stayed for several nights. I went there to see how the government promoted the idea of unique Taiwanese food culture through a project called 'One Town, One Product' (OTOP). The OTOp's primary goal is to help local economies and form cultural identity though assisting "local industries in finding their unique cultural products...Food, as the major cultural resource in many locations, is considered to play a key role in this remaking of communal culture" (Chuang, 2009, p.101). Jiaoxi's "one product" is the hot spring water tomato, which is grown in the mineral rich water flowing underneath the town. I went to a store specializing in these hot spring tomatoes and

soon found out why they are considered to be a Taiwanese specialty. The tomatoes were so flavorful and fresh (with a unique, almost herbal aftertaste), that I bought a bagful to bring home to Taipei with me. *They really are the best in all of Taiwan*, the vendor assured me, *and that means they are the best tomatoes in Asia!* When I asked why Taiwan has such good produce she replied: *Taiwanese produce is so good because we take care of our land. It isn't polluted on the East Coast, and Taiwanese people love good food from good land. It isn't like China at all—it is so polluted there and the Chinese still eat the vegetables [grown there].*

Again, without my prompting, the differences between Chinese and Taiwanese people were brought up using food as means to discuss cultural uniqueness. The OTOP project seems to amplify these feelings because the vendors, craftsmen, and tourists to sell, make, and consume these “products” recognize that they are unique to Taiwan, and therefore, are a defining characteristic of Taiwanese local culture. Culinary tourism in Taiwan is promoted by the government, engaged in by the locals, and noted by visitors. And, as Hui-Tun Chuang states in his essay on culinary tourism in Taiwan, “while the phenomenon of culinary tourism is becoming more popular in Taiwan, its continued growth requires conditions favorable to a new appreciation for local culture, one that is emerging in response to an increasingly global society and a developing Taiwanese national identity” (2009, p.84). Taiwanese specialty foods are emblematic of this appreciation for Taiwanese food culture, and therefore, are now a symbol of Taiwanese national identity.

## Conclusion

Through the above examples of distinct Aboriginal cuisine, the hybridization of Japanese food, and the presentation of Taiwanese-specialty foods (as illustrative of unique Taiwanese culture), one can see that Taiwan embraces its cultural distinctions as a means to show that Taiwan is a nation with an individual national identity. Its unique and diverse identity has been created through the process of hybridity: a fusion of multiple cultures, blurred ethnic boundaries, and the creation of new national identities. Globalization has served to introduce new cultures to the Taiwanese, colonization has forced new cultures into the Taiwanese mainstream, and in both cases, hybridity has caused cultural elements to be accepted by the Taiwanese. This has worked to create the unique culture on the island, and has also served as a way to distinguish what is and isn't distinctly Taiwanese. That which hasn't been accepted by Taiwanese culture as "Taiwanese" (through the process of hybridity) is now used to highlight cultural differences, often for political reasons.

More often than not, the Taiwanese that I interviewed juxtaposed their national and cultural identity with Chinese identity to highlight just how different the two cultures are and to further distance Taiwan from China. Taiwanese culture is a unique product of its history and its environment, and since cuisine is such a symbolic (and frequently encountered) part of culture, Taiwanese food can be examined to understand cultural identity on the island. To quote Fischler's article, "Food, Self, and Identity" once more, "Thus, cookery helps to give food and its eaters a place in the world, a meaning...The culinary act, as we have seen, sanctions the passage of food from Nature to Culture" (1998, p.283). Cuisine is a means of identity-communication, and as such, is important to study to understand how

cultures view their own identity and how that identity is represented in the political realm. In Taiwan's case, the relationship between China and Taiwan, between Aboriginal Taiwanese and the nation, and between Japan and Taiwan is easy to explore through observing each group's food traditions on the island and how these traditions have formed a uniquely "Taiwanese" identity.

The argument for a distinct Taiwanese cultural identity is a highly political one, yet the argument itself is important to understand because the fate of Taiwan is tied up in U.S.-China relations: The U.S. openly approves of Taiwan's democratic government and is engaged in large-scale arms deals to Taiwan (though the U.S. is still an unofficial ally of the nation), while China claims Taiwan as a province (using the saying "one country, two systems" to justify the differences in government). An official decision on Taiwanese independence one way or the other would have an enormous impact on diplomatic relations, the global economy, and stability in the East Asian region (Roy, 2003). In this paper I have aimed to highlight the Taiwanese perspective on an issue that often ignores their voices in favor of focusing on the relationship between China and the United States. Ultimately, however, I found much more than just the Taiwanese call for national independence and cultural distinction. I found an island full of people who were warm and welcoming, happy to share their food and culture with a foreign student, and pleased that someone from the outside would listen to their perspective while enjoying the delicious cuisine Taiwan has to offer.

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