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Film and TV School**

Photography

08. Bún bò Nam Bộ

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Thesis supervisor: Tomáš Dvořák, Ph.D.

Awarded academic title: MgA.

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Fotografie

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Abstract

This is an inquiry into photography's role in mediating dissimilar cultures through ordinary images of noodles in Czechia. Centered on the dish, Bun Bo Nam Bo, this research explores the interplay of display and production through the media of pixels and ingredients. Larger networks that connect identities and distribute schematics of unfamiliar geographies are the basis of studying images of mass culture where advert images are charged with political and historical flavors. Stories from the Vietnamese Diaspora in Central Europe are the source of inspiration for examining a global connection of representations and identities entangling images and geographies. (slurp)

Abstrakt

Jedná se o zkoumání role fotografie při zprostředkování odlišných kultur prostřednictvím obyčejných obrazů nudlů v Česku. Tento výzkum se soustředí na pokrm Bun Bo Nam Bo a zkoumá souhru zobrazování a výroby prostřednictvím médií pixelů a ingrediencí. Větší sítě, které propojují identity a distribuují schémata neznámých geografí, jsou základem studia obrazů masové kultury, kde jsou reklamní obrazy nabitě politickou a historickou příchutí. Příběhy vietnamské diaspory ve střední Evropě jsou zdrojem inspirace pro zkoumání globálního propojení reprezentací a identit zaplétajících obrazy a geografie. (slurp)



08. Bún bò Nam Bộ

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00. Preamble

From what we see to what we taste, the subject of this research is on the low-brow photographic images of Vietnamese Bistros in Czechia that are typically found on the restaurant menus and their public-facing signage. These visuals, under a larger category of food images, are of an ordinary nature that sit at a distance from the fine-art photographs that are coveted and standardized for display and archive within cultural institutions. At a personal level, I am neither Czech nor Vietnamese, rather a distanced observer to both cultural identities and geographies, or as the Czech Ministry of Interior finds most adequately defined: an alien.

This state of European outsider-ness, combined with a family history of multiple migrations abroad within the time frame of two generations from our home country of 400 years has instilled a heightened awareness of transplanted culinary experiences beyond their origin. On weekend excursions in places that are not quite home, my family and I searched for experiences that might remind us of it; other fellow immigrants in the restaurant business sometimes presented these dishes of treasure that trigger a sensory excitement that often resulted in disappointment when we realize that while the images of ethnic food appear to look familiar, our taste buds alert us otherwise. In our quest to find oyster omelets, stinky tofu, beef noodle soup, and the perfectly shaken bubble tea, my siblings and I developed a knack for deciphering food representations with advert intentions. What is the glossy factor of the bubbles, in respect to how they might hint at a correct level of chewy tapioca texture? What is the accompanying text description, and how might the wording or even language form suggest the cultures they come from, or the heritage of the restaurant operator? It is common for one group of immigrants to present culinary dishes of another to a foreign audience - perhaps even a case of Orientalism.

Without any formal culinary education, we based our standards on our recollections of how dishes should appear in representation and physical form to what we have tasted earlier at home. After a while, this resolute determination grew tiring, nothing is exactly as it should be from these stringent standards that outline our own biased sense of authenticity. This became a valuable experience that encouraged us to go with the flow of dynamic culinary transformations where cultural celebrations of mash-up differences became the new source of foodie excitement.

This question of culinary authenticity relative to our memory, and their advertised image of associated origin was a lesson of cultural appropriation and transplantation. Forgoing a binary attitude of real or fake, distant or close, good or bad, I embraced their transformation and elements of unfamiliarity as a natural shift in cultural reflection and acceptance of ethnic food when they travel, and settle, with new identities in foreign locales abroad.

All of a sudden, American-Chinese cuisine starts to make a lot of sense as its own category, separate from whatever unified idea of authentic Chinese food is. It opened an understanding on the influences of global dynamics that brought SPAM to Polynesian diet, and East Asian dining tables. These grotesque and sodium packed cans are adopted by local cuisines that more typically

would emphasize regional flavor and freshness, rather it all points to the incidental spread of mass food culture in the wake of U.S. imperial events and the imagery of consumables left behind. With the privilege of being deemed an alien to Czech society, my status becomes an advantaged position to examine how culinary images metamorph cultural ongoing while encoding norms to both local and foreign groups in events of invisible mediation - that at the surface level, remain partial to binary notions of what is authentic and what is watered down.

This research on representation cast by Vietnamese Bistros is inspired by frequent trips to Prague-4's SAPA, which is simultaneously a distribution center, market, and cultural hub of Czechia's Vietnamese Diaspora. Aside from slurping noodles with friends and learning flavors from Northern Vietnam, I also came across an advertising studio specialized in advertising signage for casual bistros in Czechia.

01. Bún bò Nam Bộ Images

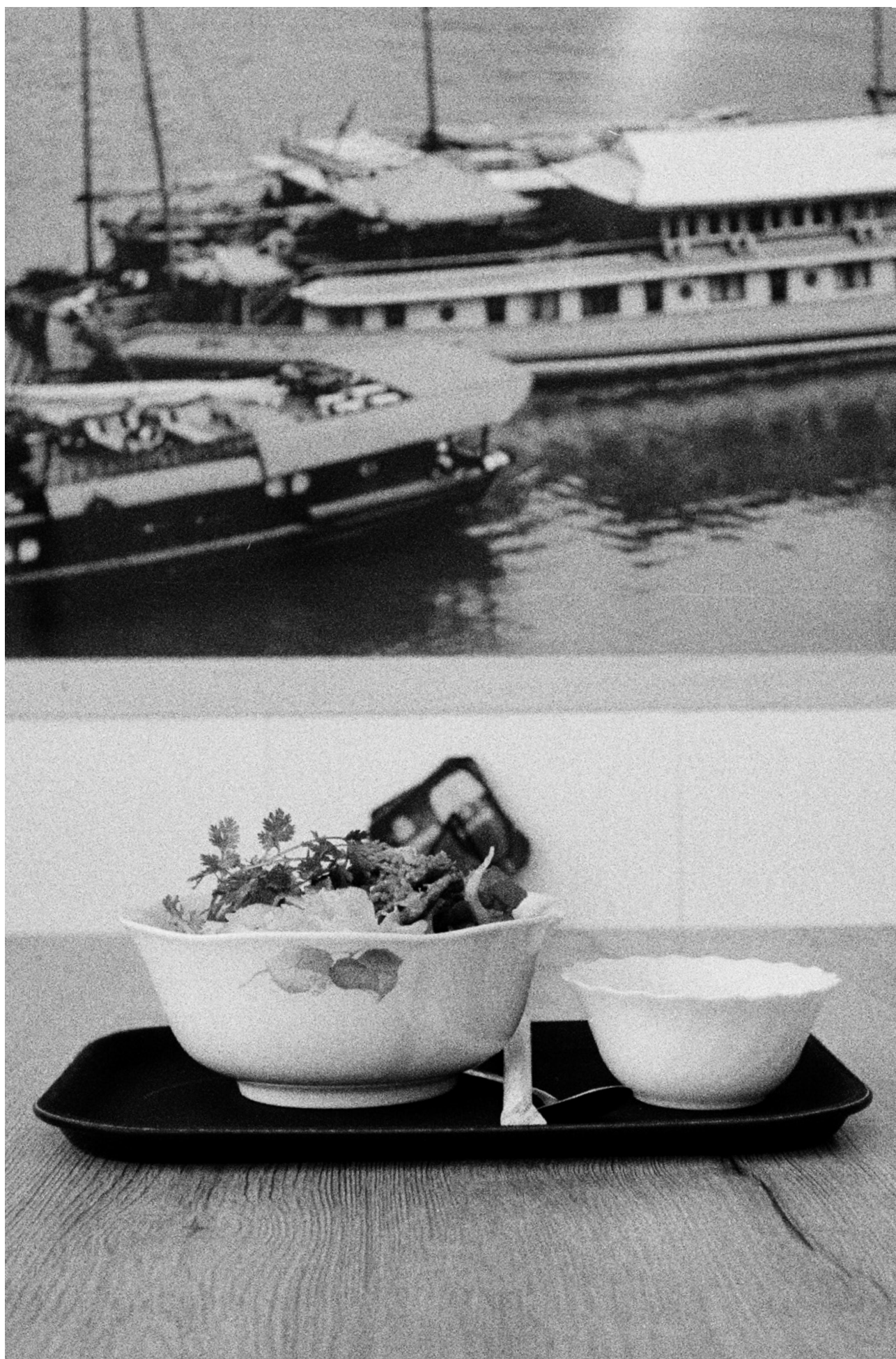
Casual restaurants that emphasize speed and standardized fixes are classed by the dining industry as its own category. Bistros, diners, joints, and eateries largely differentiate the low-brow affair of enjoying a quick bite with an air of relaxation in contrast to fine-dining restaurants that pronounce formality through a process of professional training and etiquettes of properness.

In the U.S. there are diners that serve staples of American culture with food that stems from the dietary standards of European descendants, such as: hamburgers, pizza, milkshakes, apple pie, and spaghetti. Sometimes these diners might promote a particular specialty from the generic menu of American food, but even with these distinctions their responsibility is to offer hearty sustenance at a fast paced, and low-brow way. Or as might be more colloquially described - no frills. These American diners existed in conjunction with other notable U.S. cultures, particularly - the automobile and its roadway infrastructure. Grabbing the sight lines of drivers, signs and other images of culinary seduction and spectacle encourage traffic towards off-ramps and parking lots of these establishments in the form of a convenient service stop for the bellies of the vehicular humans. There is a heightened pop cultural appeal to these places, as we can see from cultural critic Reyner Banham's professed love for Los Angeles in 1972, where the Englishman is seen enjoying the delight of a soft serve ice cream in his rented convertible while excitedly gawking at the stylistic environments of these places.¹

Googie is a postmodern form of commercial architecture, that formally and functionally, manifests physical forms of attraction between the automobile's windshield and diner fronts.² Without doubt, this was seen as American West Coast horseplay embodying the stereotype of a liberal-radical and progressively expressive California, deeply frowned upon by any standard of Modernist dogma and conservative institutions. While Reyner Banham portrays an Anglo-commentator enjoying the casual affair of American culinary episodes, his car-centric vision selectively sees through

1 Banham, Reyner . "Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles," March 11, 1972. <https://vimeo.com/22488225>.

2 Alan Hess,. Googie.(California: Chronicle Books, 1986)..



European-descendent culture and only superficially examines the landscape of Los Angeles's ethnic demographics, which by this time was experiencing an influx of Vietnamese migrants as a result of social and political instability instigated by American militarism in Southeast Asia.

Bún bò Nam Bộ is a dish loaded with bean sprouts, beef slices, herbs, and identity confusion - even to Vietnamese people. "Bún" refers directly to the round rice noodles that are served as base in dry form, while "bò" defines the topping protein ingredient of beef. "Nam Bộ" contributes to the cultural confusion that is missed by non-Vietnamese speakers, as it refers literally to Vietnam South. The geographical association with this dish spawns confusion that can only be understood by examining the division of Vietnam through its struggles with occupying powers that further split the country, in the modern era, at the 19th parallel between North and South through a separation of politics, economies, and ideological associations. As far back as dynastic China, Vietnam struggled with foreign powers imposing their version of utopia and military influence in the region. While each of these entities were resisted and eventually eradicated, their fingerprints remained in language, rituals, and culinary composition. In the case of Vietnamese Bistros in Czechia, the more direct and obvious influences trace back to French colonialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries before staples such as Phở, Bún bò Nam Bộ, and Bánh Mì migrated to Czechia, and are consumed as images of decontextualized authenticity.

Bún bò Nam Bộ is far from a popular dish in Vietnam as compared to other staples that export well³, including: Phở (rice noodle in clear broth) or Nem cuốn (rice paper rolls). This is in heavy contrast to the prevalence of Bun Bo Nam Bo images that can be seen in Czechia, where the dish remains the top seller that brings in the most profit for its relative ease of preparation. The origin of this dish is contested in the informal channels of online blogs that are decorated with images of different plating aesthetics of the dish. Each foodie blogger expresses with conviction of their believed origin of the dish before elaborating in great detail on the most authentic methods of preparation. How to make sense of this origin, if it isn't formally documented, and its knowledge seems to be vaguely transferred in soft culture by word of mouth?

I reflect on my own experiences of tasting in the Vietnamese diaspora towards the inclination of agreeing with tales that Bún bò Nam Bộ is a Northern Vietnamese dish, pointing to the capitol - Hà Nội. On the West Coast of Canada and the United States, the Vietnamese diaspora was established during and following the American War in Vietnam with a large demographic mostly from the South where its version of statecraft was backed by and aligned with Western countries of the Global North. In places such as Vancouver, San Francisco, and San Jose, bistros of the Vietnamese diaspora lean towards heavy flavors in comparable ways to what sommeliers might describe as full body. This is not to generalize that only Southern Vietnamese culinary culture is exclusively found in these geographies, but that the dominant forms of the transplanted flavors are inspired and sourced from Southern cooking habits. It is rare to see a clear denotation of what is Southern or Northern

3 While there are other forms of dishes called Bun Bo in Vietnam and within the Diaspora elsewhere, they are assembled completely differently with varying details within preparation methods, the category of Bun Bo Nam Bo in this research is described in the following paragraphs.

CƠM RANG - SMAŽENÁ RÝŽE - GEBRATENER REIS

1. **Cơm rang gà** 159, -
Smažená rýže s kuřecím masem
Gebratener Reis mit Hühnchen
2. **Cơm rang bò** 179, -
Smažená rýže s hovězím masem
Gebratener Reis mit Rindfleisch
3. **Cơm rang tôm (2)** 189, -
Smažená rýže s krevetami (2)
Gebratener Reis mit Garnelen (2)
4. **Cơm rang thập cẩm (2)** 199, -
Smažená rýže s kuřecím, vepřovým, krevetami (2)
Gebratener Reis mit Hühnchen, Rindfleisch
und Garnelen (2)
5. **Cơm rang vịt** 219, -
Smažená rýže s kachnou
Gebratener Reis mit Ente



KARI - CURRY

(s rýží / mit Reis)

6. **Kari gà** / Kuřecí kari / Hühnchen-Curry 169, -
7. **Kari bò** / Hovězí maso kari / Rindfleisch-Curry 179, -
8. **Kari tôm** / Krevetové kari (2) / Garnelen-Curry (2) 189, -
9. **Kari vịt** / Kachní kari / Enten-curry 209, -



BÚN - RÝŽOVÉ NUDLE - REISNUDELN

10. **Bún bò Nam Bộ** 179, -
Rýžové nudle se smaženým
hovězím masem, salátem a omáčkou
Reisnudeln mit gebratenen Rindfleisch,
Salat und Sauce
11. **Bún chả nướng** 179, -
Rýžové nudle s grilovaným
vepřovým masem, salátem a omáčkou
Reisnudeln mit gegrilltem Schweinefleisch,
Salat und Sauce
12. **Bún nem** 179, -
Rýžové nudle se smaženými závitky,
salátem a omáčkou
Reisnudeln mit frittierten Frühlingsrollen,
Salat und Sauce



Vietnamese cuisine in the diaspora, but the case of the diner ‘Turtle Tower’ in San Francisco provides a notable contrast⁴. Prior to being shuttered in late 2023, Turtle Tower dishes were prepared in a Northern method where their prized menu dish of steamed chicken pho and rice dishes presented much lighter flavor profiles than competing bistros in the Bay Area. This difference became a notable experience in the largely Southern flavor profiles in the Tenderloin area of San Francisco, which is concentrated with Vietnamese bistros that have been operating for multiple decades. This does not quite explain the explicit ‘Nam Bộ’, Vietnam South, reference in the name. Following tales of Hanoi’s street food culture, it is likely that the moniker was inspired by Mrs. Can, a cook, whose business was primarily focused on selling the Northern Bún chả dish. Upon request from a customer to replace chả (pork) with bò (beef), she realized Bún bò.⁵ Even in Czechia now, these two dishes are prepared in similar ways with only the variation of protein and its cooking method (grilling versus stir-frying). The location of her food stall in Hà Nội was on the street “Nam Bộ”, named as a tribute to the south after Vietnam’s reunification in 1976. Nowadays Mrs. Can is retired, but food stalls selling Bún chả and variations of Bún bò Nam Bộ continue to operate on this street, which has since been renamed as ‘Lê Duẩn’.⁶ An equally popular alternative story is linked to the train infrastructure with a station nearby Lê Duẩn street. This tale associates the movement of Bún bò Nam Bộ as a Southern Vietnamese dish brought to Hà Nội by train, and catered towards the cooking methods and flavor profiles of the North.

The eateries on Lê Duẩn street are aligned with the casual affair of street dining in the region. From the public walkways, oversized signage and building scale billboards fill the spaces of facades, we see sculpturally projected marquees (sometimes back lit with an array of fluorescent fixtures) with text that announce the name of the eateries and their specialty dishes on offer. At a closer proximity, the kitchens are also on full display with the cook’s workspace and prepared ingredients fully visible to potential customers as they pass by. The visuality here is cluttered, and inadvertently so, as compared to the visually intentional designs of Googie diners. The seemingly lenient urban regulation is part of the dining experience on Lê Duẩn, where pulling up to a table and slurping noodles also places the customers on display - momentarily becoming an unscripted actor of the street elevations.

The contested claims of Bún bò Nam Bộ’s origin from either Southern or Northern Vietnam reinforces the point that culinary dishes of this informal type are, in their presentation, in constant motion of conceptual modification and association. Where catching a freeze-frame of them is, at a cultural level, comparable to earlier forms of photographic endeavors that were tasked to capture bio-mechanical motion that cannot be seen with the unaided eye. Operating at this level of cultural consciousness, photographic images of Bún bò Nam Bộ do not present authentic notions as their images of symbolic realism might impress upon consumers in Czechia,

4 De Guzman, Dianne. “Vietnamese Restaurant Turtle Tower Closes Its Last San Francisco Location in SoMa.” Eater SF, November 28, 2023. <https://sf.eater.com/2023/11/28/23979825/turtle-tower-closes-last-san-francisco-location-pho-restaurant>.

5 See Appendix 3, Interview - Tùng.

6 See Appendix 3, Interview - Tùng.

but instead it portrays only fragmented moments of its transplantation and continued alteration.

Although Bún bò Nam Bộ is served in a variety of methods with varying quantities of its ingredients, it generally entails the following: sliced beef (marinated with garlic, fish sauce, lemongrass), cooked mung bean sprouts, round rice noodles, roasted garlic, fried spring onions, lettuce, coriander, pickled carrots, perilla leaves, and if genetics permitting - coriander.⁷ Of significant character to this dish, the marinated beef and mung bean sprouts must be fried in a wok, over a gas stove - in similar fashion to Chinese stir-fry methods. The base of the dish is the round rice noodles (served warm), with toppings of the fresh vegetables that are layered with the stir-fried beef and mung bean sprouts. At this point, the presentation of Bun Bo Nam Bo is near completion as it resembles the advertised images. The condiment dressing composed of low-heat boiled fish sauce, vinegar, sugar, and minced garlic is provided on the side for the customer to drizzle into the bowl before tossing the ingredients for even coverage. For those less adept with chopsticks, the fork and spoon method is a convenient alternative for slurping cautiously over the bowl.

Images of this plating are directly represented on bistro menus, signage, and flyers. At these three print scales, before the fresh edible version of Bún bò Nam Bộ is served, its photographic portrait is first presented as a visual offering. The resolution between the three scales vary, but the technical quality of the image remains the same: just good enough in detail to distinguish if the noodles are submerged in broth or served dry. Below the food image, are the names of the dishes that are shown in the Latin alphabet, more often without the Vietnamese adaptation of the letters from the French Colonial era.⁸ With only the portrait and the title, the Bun Bo Nam Bo might remain a mystery to a new consumer - which is alleviated with further anchoring text in European languages that list the ingredients of each dish. Within the bistros' operation, these food portraits and text are drawings and specifications presented to both prospective and seated customers for detailed consideration, while the exterior signage announces to the street front the type of culinary establishment. The direct pragmatic photographic processes involved in Bun Bo Nam Bo images are: documentation, selection, alteration, and distribution. Within the class hierarchy of images, Bun Bo Nam Bo fits under the 'poor' category. For the customers, gazing in from outside the bistro and seated in anticipation of a meal, the Bun Bo Nam Bo images exist momentarily in a curatorial imagination. If they wish to have more than one dish, any other accompanying possibility can be visualized as a complete meal set before placing their order. While these Bistro images are intentionally deployed as a visual intermediary between the chef and the customer, each bistro that fashions these graphics continuously volley the image and visual association of cultural authenticity imported to Central Europe - and perpetuating a visual narrative of something other.

Past the street facing storefront displays of light box signage or printed foil on window glass, the interior decor of Bistros presents a visual experience that deepens the culinary association of an exotic and far away geography. These decorations sometimes include large format digital prints

7 See Appendix 2, Interview - Chu.

8 In the same manner as Vietnamese text in European context, names of dishes and places of Vietnam are simplified to European characters.



that fill entire wall surfaces with scaled-up photographs of tropical beaches populated with wooden transportation and fisherman boats on glassy clear water, a strong contrast to the geographies of a land-locked Czechia. Next to the cash register, there might also be statues of buddhas placed between tropical indoor plants and other objects that hint towards eastern spirituality such as ancestral shrines that the owners pray to for safety and good fortune. Of bistros where there is more upfront cost investment, the chairs and tables are furnished in ways that are reminiscent of southeast asian millwork, a departure from the more rugged carpentry of local pubs and eateries. For customers, the experience of an exotic dining experience extends from the streets to the interior where their seated views of these foreign artifacts continue to bolster a simulated experience of faraway flavors until the dishes are served, and they must choose between using forks or chopsticks.

These bistros exist wherever restaurant business and health licensing are permitted in environments ranging from urban-medieval streets, to crossroads of peripheries, and even next to the central pubs of small villages that are distanced from the Capitol with rural agriculture and industries in between. This spread across the Czech lands is pragmatically developed within the webs of inter-european transportation infrastructure, with focal nodes of distribution centers flowing with both import and regional products for a web of small businesses across Czechia.

Through time and established economic dependence, these central distribution centers are more than mere trading grounds where products exchange hands; the Vietnamese labor and entrepreneurs who make the logistics possible also establish supporting services and communities - embedded as conveniences around demanding work life. Later, we will learn that this form of community development was present within the Vietnamese diaspora even during the foreign worker exchange program of Czechoslovakia's socialist era. In these ports of distribution, we can also find travel agencies that organize for low-cost flights between Czechia and Vietnam, parcel delivery services that guarantee personalized packages are sent to immediate and extended family in Vietnam, dry-cleaning services handling outsourced orders and individual requests, offices of construction contractors specialized in interior fit outs of neighborhood convenience stores (potraviny)⁹ and bistros, buddhist temples, and even advertising studios that cook up bun bo nam bo images. While the largest and most geographically central distribution center is in Prague's Libuš neighborhood, SAPA, secondary hubs in separate regions develop within the network of transportation routes that bridge the end of Czechia's national borders with adjacent states, namely Germany's.

While the focus of Bun Bo Nam Bo images in this research is of the first generation when Vietnamese bistros were established around 2010^F when the exoticism of the unfamiliar cuisine became agreeably popularized for Czech palate, the current trends show that these images have transformed in presentation as the eateries and their staple dishes have become familiarized to both the taste buds and eyes of the dominant demographic.

9 In Czech language Potraviny and Večerka are often used interchangeably to signify brick and mortar convenience stores.

1.1. Images of the Unfamiliar

The creative event in Northern Vietnam that led to Bun Bo Nam Bo's creation occurred in the 1980s, at a time when Czechia's existence was in its last decade of being part of the state of Czechoslovakia, when most of Central Europe was cloaked by the economic and ideological fabric of the Iron Curtain. Information, along with goods and product exchanges were limited by a political structure that employed containment as public policy, wary of the outside influence of cultural notions from geo-political competitors. However, even in societies of limitation, images behind the confines of the curtain can still slip through - refreshed in a new context appearing as representations of abstract ideas that embody somewhere else, something else, and even of some-bodies else.

1.2 Empirical and Theoretical Knowledge of Imagined Fictions

In the book *Stranger*, Tony Morrison's essay utilizes an anecdotal recount of a unique meeting with a fisherwoman from outside her daily routine and without any record or familiarity to neighbors within her own community.¹⁰ This encounter leaves Morrison grappling with how we might make sense of things other than what is locally familiar to us as she conjures ideas of how she might relate and engage with this stranger upon their next encounter. The communicative process of this is with images and language, with special note on images playing a role that is distinct from genuine knowledge and earlier definitions of truth portrayal. Images shape and provoke language in a hierarchy, its influence and role is not immediately guaranteed as informational knowledge, rather charged up with suggestive cultural messages that tell more than they show. Often, flip flopping between emotional spectrums of fear, or exotic desire - rarely, immediate acceptance. Morrison highlights this as something to be wary of, and also to resist as one of the resulting effects of receiving images from a larger visual culture is the narrowing calibration of vision as it is tied to thought. Beyond Morrison's case of handling images of strangeness from the individual's perspective of dealing with outside forces mediating abstractions of the unfamiliar, receiving images also exists at a collective level where public opinion (similarity in agreeable attitudes) is an additional layer of information that is fixed on what and how we see. The emotions and imagined representations of the stranger in Morrison's experience is mostly triggered by empirical experience, directly absorbed through her senses with signals leading to her impressions and imaginations; whereas public opinion is the contrary where images lead to collective senses through theoretical knowledge. With decades of global events and state-level justification of actions backed moral goodness, absorbing mass communication

10 Toni Morrison, "Strangers," in *Strangers Within: Documentary as Encounter*, ed. Therese Henningsen, Juliette Joffe (London: Prototype, 2022) 18-21.

demonstrates the need for critical awareness of images placed in our heads, that are intended to affect our senses. In *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann, this is examined as the dynamics of media production and how idea-images are constructed to build group consensus around abstract ideas.¹¹

Lippmann's ideas of public opinion are described with many keywords that imply human intervention linked to cognitive massaging. Pseudo-environment, portrait, fictions, address the constant ether in the spaces around us as being assembled streams of thoughts and ideas presented through man-made image forms. Gathered over time, our thoughts are also conditioned by the limitations, or even intent, of these types of information. The 'images in our head' suggests more than what we think based on its link to visual senses, perhaps in a less passive voice, the statement would directly remind us that there are actors involved with placing the images in our head.

1.3 Stereotype: Reproductions to Conditioning Preconceptions

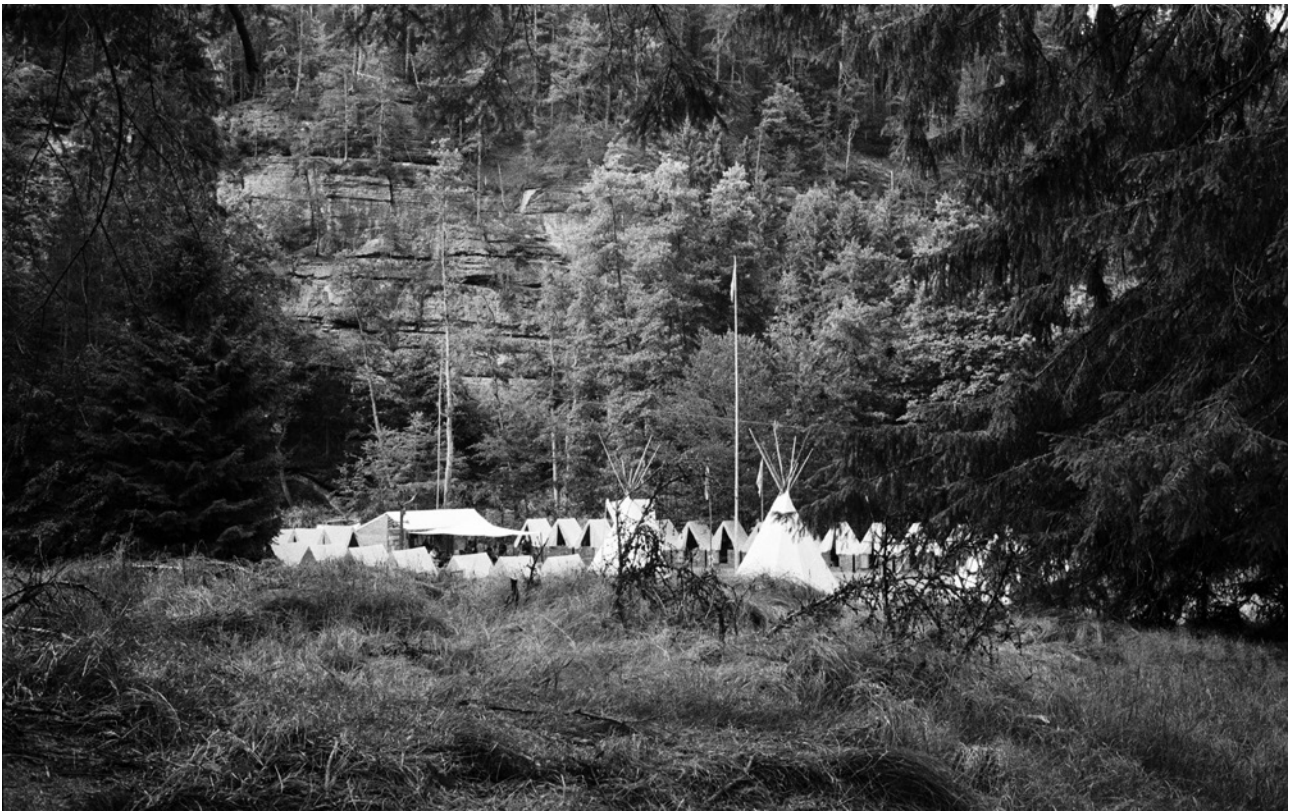
"For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, bussing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture."¹² From this sequence, our processing of information forms from repeated representations that illustrates for our imaginations a theoretical view of the world. The lack of direct certain knowledge is compensated and even replaced by fictions, or information that has already been defined. Lippmann draws anecdotes from historical and current events of the time to analyze the influence of theoretical experience with how we contemplate environments that are far from the familiarity of our immediate senses. The group of European nationalities on an island that is slow to receive mass media communication highlights the happy bliss of not knowing of a world at war between their countries as they continue to interact collegially. The case of the US public and their representative politicians who are in uproar at the rumor of a European general commanding American forces to action in the Adriatic sea, whether true, or inappropriately reported by the media, seemed to be unimportant as public opinion roared in outrage.¹³

Stereotypes, in a previous technological era of printing reproduction, suggest hardcopy metal plates that are monolithically cast to repeatedly imprint the positive form onto impressionable surfaces. In this mechanical reproduction, the original is a durable metal object shaped to visually echo its content en masse. This has been enveloped into a culture metaphor that has since shed its early printing association from linguistic consciousness, as it symbolizes a more charged up category of attitudes towards theoretical knowledge. Stereotypes are identifiable reductions of a system of information largely outside the senses of empirical experience. They are ideas, typed into images, and in action - exist as policy that governs the parameters of how we can choose to exist.

11 Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (Brunswick:Transaction Publishers, 1998), 17-32.

12 Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 81.

13 Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 17-20.



Categories of moving images can also generate stereotypes conveying fictions of distant cultures. Even before the Iron Curtain was drawn around Central Europe, theoretical images of American conditions were already imported to then Czechoslovakia. Western films that portray archetypes written by predominantly European-descent writers of Hollywood showed a version of the U.S. where nature's mystical qualities are to be admired through domination, while maniacally remaining on guard of the inferior pre-inhabitants' temperament.¹⁴ Balanced with macho-ism and intimacy between characters of European immigrants, the dynamic of settlers and land clearing is romanticized into its own canon of fiction staged as cultural stereotype plates. Consumption of these foreign images grew to a level of literacy that even local parodies could be produced with anticipation that the theoretical knowledge of a foreign Wild West is well enough established. "Limonádový Joe" of 1964 is a production in Czech that utilized the same narrative and visual structures of entertainment as appropriated from Hollywood's Westerns.

This understanding of a West beyond Europe, of a state of distinct political apparatus where hard work is exchanged for material ownership, and certain ideas of freedom is an understandable strangeness to desire from behind the Iron Curtain. This awareness of a foreignness is embraced and the images of other environments and representations of social structures are absorbed into parts of Czech culture. In the outer landscapes where agriculture transitions to forested regions and early geologic formations protrude out of the ground between areas of industry, tramping culture continues to carry the images of western films into enacted social rituals. Visuals of cowboys and Indians can still be seen as collective tramping activities in these outer regions. Camping structures

¹⁴ This describes the mode of settling for colonial agents of a Western hegemonic context, and how indigenous natives are character casted to justify their eradication.



are built out of mimicry of portrayed American-Indian lifestyles, with bits of animal hide fashioned as attire for parents and children on multi-night outdoor adventure. Communal system of these mimicry camps in Czechia are also built up around a programmatic hierarchy of the tents, where some are for gathering, and other smaller structures for groups. The stereotyped images of theoretical ideas that were once popular on screen continue to be acted out in real life scenes.

Scattered in the Czech landscape in both urban and rural, the American Confederate flag can be spotted flying on flagpoles of cottage homes, erected on the front yards of suburban homes, and even refreshed as bumper stickers blasting with hyper-nationalist U.S. paramilitary slogans. Does this flag mean what it means in contemporary U.S., where its application in modern U.S. history is entangled with the stench of white supremacy, and extremist views of preserving environments and economies for the entitlement of European descendants?¹⁵ In light of wanting to appear less partial, even the top brass of U.S. military branches have scrubbed the ranks from associating with any confederate memorabilia regardless of tepid heritage association or nefarious intent.¹⁶ Given the historical and contemporary context that are carried with these images, both phenomena are bizarrely strange to witness in Central Europe. Are the movements of American Whiteness so well

15 It was popularized as battle flag of the American Civil War's Southern Confederacy. Through modern history, it has resurfaced in the context of Jim Crow apartheid era, and counter symbol against Civil Rights movements. It continues to be associated with extremist right wing white supremacy. The flag was also brought to Europe by US military members during World War 2.

16 Harkins, Gina. "Pentagon Bans Confederate Flag on Military Bases Without Mentioning It by Name." Military.com, July 17, 2020.

orchestrated that even in Czechia, demographics who do not speak English or carry any discernible ties with the American Civil War are well versed in expressing a specific Americanism? Or is the credit in part due to the logistical mechanisms of stereotyped images that echo theoretical experience across foreign territories, when consumed in abundance, can transfer and become the realities of our environment where our immediate senses enter a cognitive loop affirming - yes, this is what it is.

1.4 Schematic Images

In laying out public opinion, Lippmann's use of stereotype as a printing metaphor and evolved category of cultural operation can be further studied into the specific tools that make these theoretical images possible. Ernst Hans Gombrich links representative style, as determined by an author's tools, to the coding of messages that are reproduced, with the power of the original to influence reproduction and thoughts as "schema".¹⁷ While the book "Art and Illusion" largely examines the pre-photographic era of representation with paintings, illustrations, and printing stencils, Gombrich's argument can be further applied as a critical lens to photography, to which the author not-so-ironically regarded as a truth medium. Even photographic images are part of this schematics that falls under the larger umbrella of theoretical representation. Opposite to the additive stylistic build up of illustrations and paintings, photographic images are subtractive and selective in operation, nevertheless it carries the capacity to frame ideas of something and some other else in the same way of presenting the unfamiliar as a scheme loaded with the intention of saying this is what it is.

Seeing Bun Bo Nam Bo images through the mechanisms of stereotypes and conceptual format of schematics is situated in a larger European context of how entire foreign cultures have historically been transcribed into non-neutral vision as backed by institutional levels of defining what is other. Photography, considered in parallel with Edward Said's definition and revealing of Europe's foundational building of Orientalism exemplifies the schematic potential of the medium in casting a familiarity of areas East of Europe, including the Orient (Middle-east) and Far Orient (Asia).¹⁸ The improved technology of mobile cameras in reproducing some conception of realism was put in action with Napoleon's conquests of Egypt. In the 1970s when "Orientalism" was introduced by Said, the political climate of acting powers across geographies looked quite different than today. For Europe, the abstract ideas composing orientalist thinking of an 'imagined geography' is long associated with the Middle East, while for states on other continents founded by European settlers within the Pacific region might associate the orient with East Asia.¹⁹ Nonetheless, both relationships in the critical framework of orientalist vision are founded upon a narrativized representation of environments abstract to the dominant demographics. The operation of orientalist imagery is embedded in the collective society, and literacy

17 Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 63-90.

18 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Great Britain: Redwood Burn Limited Trowbridge & Esher, 1980).

19 The term "oriental" is used in the context of appropriation and continuation of a conversation that has never been resolved within Western hegemony and foreign policies. Historically, outside of this intent, it is commonly applied as an objectifying slur or form of condescension with the West holding the upper hand of the power dynamics.



skills absorb the conditioning of how these sorts of pictorial artifacts should be read and defined.

1.5 Photographic Mediation: Europe and Imagined Places

Seeing photographs in this attitude of awareness is a post-colonial practice where the paradigm built on multiple centuries of circulated representation is shifted through a critical lens, and often unwelcome by orientalist practitioners. The suggested ethics embedded in orientalist photographs are born out of the authoritative dynamics with most of the power placed with European surveyors and scribes and the imperial states that sponsored a form of knowledge gathering that is biased towards European self-projection and desires. For Ali Behdad, the orientalist photographs reflect this historic dynamic and while this configuration between subjects and objects, space and time fuse aesthetics and politics as inseparable, the proposed perspective attempts to go beyond binary notions of colonial ethics, to widen and deepen the category to include indigenous and resistant works as equal parts of the conversation.²⁰

Of the oriental photography characteristics listed by Behdad, a few stand out in relevance to how Bun Bo Nam Bo images are perpetuated through its own photographic processes. Circulation and mediation explicitly remarks on the distanced environment, places far away that realism photography shows as possible to see and touch, if only the viewer embarks on a journey to tour these locales that are punctuated in orientalist photography through establishing monuments that are recognizable as iconography. This process of monumentalizing also creates stylistic tropes that are included in

20 Ali Behdad, "The Orientalist Photograph," in *Photography's Orientalism*, ed. Ali Behdad, Luke Gartlan (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 11-32.

representations of things from the orient. In commercial European photographic practices, studios would be adored with backdrops and object decor that reflect tropes as programmed by stereotypical thinking while notions of weak and undesirable, as well as sexual tendencies are projected onto the representation of the Orient.²¹ Exotic and erotic merge as the same impulsive tendencies projected on the objectification of others. The link from institutional gaze transfers to mainstream cultural thinking, and mobilizes the tourist gaze as these exotic far away places become the object to be seen in recreational conquest. This leads to the preservation of artificial scarcity. The photographed monuments and iconic experience of the Orient are sold as being a limited temporal experience, where their depletion occurs at a corresponding rate to the trafficking of tourists and changes of development that impede upon a specific idea of what these places should be. In the act of colonial gentrification, the tourist image is the desire of empirical experience that can be owned, but remains the influence that both perpetuates and degrades an already fictional aura through increased consumption. Photographs of Egypt's monuments were also composed with a minimal amount of local people in them. The depopulating characteristics not only rids these spaces of a discernible human scale to the unfamiliar edifices and landscapes, but it also removes identity and ownership from people who have been its inhabitants. With the archival photographs that Behdad includes, the instances where humans are part of the photographed landscape or the object of studio portraiture are composed with stylistic language that portrays in ways that are suitable to European ideas of what orientals look like.²² In case there is any uncertainty in how to see these images, the orientalist photograph is accompanied by detailed anchoring text that is designed to limit imaginations beyond the intentions of the portrayals.

In this framework, Bun Bo Nam Bo is linked, if not a subcategory of orientalist images. The dynamic between Czechoslovakia, as a military provider to a fellow socialist government of Vietnam changed after the American War in Southeast Asia. While versions of Vietnamese training exchange programs have existed since the 1950s with Ho Chi Minh himself visiting Liberec region, these earlier programs of political collegiance between socialist states quickly dissolved into a labor pay back system at the expense of Vietnamese people shipped out as workers. Czechoslovakia's military industry's support of Northern Vietnam's socialist government against accrued debt as weapons were supplied on credit that proved too challenging to pay back immediately after the withdrawal of the U.S. military. In this dynamic, the far-orient's culture and images are imported or incidentally transplanted with the waves of migrant workers with ambitions of financial boom in their imagined Europe. While there are significant differences between the establishment of the Vietnamese Diaspora in Czechia from the larger European imposition of the Middle-East, Behdad's lens of recognising the crafting of otherness in photographs as it corresponds to over-arching notions of Said's Orientalism remains a relevant framework in seeing the visual culture of East Asian cuisine in Czechia.

21 Behdad, *Photography's Orientalism*, 28.

22 Behdad, *Photography's Orientalism*, 24-25.

1.6 Indigenized Foods and Images

Beyond the link between photography and concepts of handling imagined geographies, the case of food and imposed forces that spread to the level of indigenization in foreign locales is an equally important basis for surveying the construction of Bun Bo Nam Bo images. From the pixels on screen during prepress to farming production of non-indigenous ingredients to Central Europe, the economic link and dependency between production and exchange determines the possibilities and limitations for the bistro and their contribution to Czech visual culture. In this sort of causal relationship, Michael Dietler analyzes food archeology between colonial durations and episodes.²³ By considering biological energy sources of physiological needs, food is a material culture that embodies practices of reconfiguring ingredients and power structures that govern their economic availability and assimilation. In the play between this more rigid framework of sourcing, is the dynamic arena of culture. Where Dietler regards it as “not a fixed, static system of shared rules and traits but rather sets of embodied categorical perspectives, analogical understandings, aesthetic dispositions, and values that structure ways of reasoning, solving problems, and acting upon opportunities.”²⁴ Layered on this definition, we can examine any given culture from consumption patterns that acts as a culling conveyor belt that determines material through cultural order where some items are accepted and absorbed, while others are denied. The question of desire for an exotic experience relates to oriental photography, where daguerreotype era images were coveted within archives of institutions or salons of upper classes. Images of a foreign geography are shown in a badge of honor kindling knowledge as power and material wealth. In questioning why alien foods become desirable, Dietler partly credits the broadening of ethnic consciousness with the example of class dynamics, and how exclusivity is defined by internal boundaries and distinctions leading to the ‘turnstile effect’ where one classes’s adoption of exotic food is cyclically duplicated when other classes reflect this back.²⁵ The demand here is not straight economics as proportionally tied to some independent idea of market supply, but rather a cultural intervention that is constructed by “the relational dynamics among social groups or fields”.²⁶

Benefiting from this framework, we might reconsider celebrity dishes that are produced out of a cultural mash up seeded through external interventions. Tomatoes to Europe, especially through the well established Italianicity²⁶ of Italy’s cuisine might suggest some traditional notions that bond Italian customs to this plant, but its biological traces remain linked to the foods imported and cultivated from Europe’s actions in other worlds. Currywursts, an icon of German casual food, is flavored mash up from post World War II conditions where the familiarity of the wursts is flavored with blended

23 .Michael Dietler, “Culinary Encounters: Food, Identity, and Colonialism,” in *The Archeology of Food and Identity*, ed. Kathryn C. Twiss (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 2006) 218-242.

24 Dietler, *The Archeology of Food and Identity*, 224.

25 Dietler, *The Archeology of Food and Identity*, 267.

26 This is in reference to the European familiarity of national identities related to Italian culture. See Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Images,” *Communications*, 1964, 40-51.

condiments from British and U.S. food rationing.²⁷ Today, Berlin boasts the authentic currywurst as laminated to the identity and events around Berlin's past partition by conquering forces with their own distinct cultures. Post Korean War, Budae Jigae (army base stew) grew in popularity towards becoming a common staple of domestic and foreign establishments of Korean eateries. This dish is reminiscent of dire times where hunger was a daily experience of Korean civilians in the turmoil between destructive ideologies on the peninsula. Out of necessity and availability, Budae Jigae as a popularized dish originated from Ggulgguri Juk (piggy porridge) where edible parts of leftover canteen scraps of military diet from American bases were picked out of the garbage and mixed into one pot for sustenance of Korean civilians. In the popularized contemporary form, Budae Jigae continues to include SPAM types of processed luncheon meat, with the addition of instant noodles straight from the packet. This absorption of a post-war Japanese invention to solve mass hunger seems to be a fitting ingredient for Budae Jigae. Since Momofuku Ando's process of preservation for the masses, instant noodles of various culinary cultures (Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, China, Japan) can also be found in their own pop cultural appearance on the shelves of Vietnamese operated pottraviny. These sorts of influence continue to occur in the present day, even in places unofficially in warfare. Since Haiti's violent resistance and successful revolution against the French Empire, it remains teetering on unsettled tectonic plates while foreign imposition continued with both resource and economic extraction with forced reparation for its freedom from European power.²⁸ In present day Haiti, acute famine is the result of a series of natural and political tragedies with a growing dependency of foreign food aid at the benevolence of western hegemony through institutions including: World Food Programme, USAID, World Vision, and Catholic Relief Services. While humanitarian aid is much needed, the long term effects of it have undermined Haiti's abilities to produce food domestically. Without a functioning central government, agricultural infrastructures such as irrigation are non-existent, and where farmers are able to harvest their crop, they are often undercut by the imported white sacks of food from Western countries. These sacks of food aid are also influencing dietary norms of local populations towards assimilating "white people food" as 80% of Haiti's rice is dependent on the US.F²⁹

For Bun Bo Nam Bo, if we approach a general recipe of this dish with similar archaeological attention, we will find that fingerprints of external influences are left on the dish before it was imported to Czechia and assimilated to celebrity status. As a sub-generation of French influenced food, Bun Bo Nam Bo's connection as an alternative dish is through the Bo (beef) protein. Before French colonization, the habits and customs of farming in Vietnam seldomly include cows to the volume of European cattle farming. Cows and water buffaloes related differently to society, as their labor capacity to yield other forms of food in the field were more valuable and productive than to see them in the format of 'beef' on dining

27 Irina Dumitrescu, "Currywurst," *Petits Propos Culinaires* 098, August, 2013, 71-77.

28 Catherine Porter, Constant Meheut, Matt Apuzzo, Selam Gebrekidan, "The Ransom, The Root of Haiti's Misery: Reparation to Enslavers" *New York Times*, last updated, November 16, 2002. www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html.

29 Eyder Peralta, "A Portrait of Haitians Trying to Survive Without a Government," *NPR*, accessed April 21, 2024, audio, 8:00.

tables. As a result of French preferences towards consumption, eating cows became an economic pattern of food in Vietnam, making way for the beef broth of Pho that is standardized between Northern and Southern methods, and much longer-established than Bun Bo Nam Bo. If we go along with the 1980s tales of Bun Bo Nam Bo's creation in Hanoi, beef at that time had already become familiarized to be a recognizable alternate protein, that the main reason to its conception was to offer customers a meat variation to Bun cha (a similar Northern noodle dish of grilled pork with similar domestic success as pho). There is a whole lineage of identity entangled in the preparation methods of Bun Bo Nam Bo, but it happens that its celebrity-status is much greater abroad in Czechia than it is in Vietnam. Unlike tomatoes to Italianicity or currywurst to Germanicity, the identity of Bun Bo Nam Bo remains in the threshold of being an outsider, not quite indigenized but certainly well tolerated as a poster boy.

Kmeny is a Czech publication and short video series on developing and emerging subcultures. In the 2015 episode titled "Hipster" by Jan Láta, the distribution center, SAPA appeared as part of a larger stereotyping of representations of alternative environments to what is considered mainstream and commonly accessible.³⁰ The opening to SAPA's cameo begins with the visual artist, Radek Brousil, yearning for his understood schematics of authentic flavors of Vietnamese food from his prior experience in North America. The camera (mounted with a wide angle lens) is in motion, following Brousil as he walks through Sapa's spaces while capturing as much visual detail of the environment than what is normally welcome in a community that exhibits a level of skepticism towards any form of recording brought by outsiders.³¹ As Brousil settles at the bistro table, the frontal position of the camera alternates with an aerial view of the table where we see incidental details of a typical table setting. Readily available for self-service of the customers, bundles of chopsticks and spoons sit next to bottled condiments of soy-sauce, garlic slices submerged in vinegar, and the iconic Sriracha with the green squeeze cap. After being served Pho Bo, Brousil proceeds to inscribe a number on the surface of the dish that corresponds with the amount of Pho experiences that he has consumed to date. Prior to mixing the red Sriracha into the Pho broth, Brousil does what is now a normative behavior of documenting the dish with his smartphone before instantly sharing his custom stylized Pho on social media. He bashfully remarks to the camera that these numbered Pho posts gather a lot of 'likes', and nonchalantly adding that the validation is not what drives him to do it. For an alien observer, outside of the larger Czech demographic and the Vietnamese Diaspora, it becomes a curious point as to why Brousil socially archives his foreign culinary experiences in a performative act that is akin to pinning a badge of exotic distinction.

Since the 1970s beatnik definition of hipster, global trends of stylized lifestyle have shifted the term's association towards consumption of the non-mainstream with an appearance of

30 Jan Láta, "Kmeny.tv 11/16:HIPSTERI [dokument 26 min.]," filmed November 2016, Czech Republic, video, 26:24. www.youtube.com/watch?v=wORVTrBGp-A.

31 Czech police raids for counterfeit goods and confirmation of legal status in Czechia area a routine occurrence inside of SAPA. The stop and frisk searches open to any vendor posts a stress that causes alarm when outsiders with cameras enter their spaces. See Jiří Štraub, "Celníci a policie vtrhli do tržnice Sapa. Odhalili závadné maso i padělky," Deník, accessed April 20, 2024, video, 1:27. www.denik.cz/krimi/sapa-zatah-policie-maso-padelky-zbozi-praha-libuse.html



placing agency back in the consumer, which in itself has become trend conformity. Within the threshold of soft culture, notions of hipster have transformative effects that are often seen in the opportunistic functions of urban gentrification where what was once moderately uninteresting or outright undesired evolves into commercial prudence. Perhaps the Sriracha performance was an act of associating with the sub-culture of Vietnamese identities in a vanity of being alternative, and an opportunistic front of trend-setting an appearance different from the mainstream.

This episode occurs somewhere in the midst of transforming public opinion of the Vietnamese diaspora in Czechia. Earlier connotations of the Southeast Asian food was binded to a previous era of eateries in Czechia that more popularly saw Chinese bistros selling very specifically

transformed versions of quick stir-fry dishes. Notions of the undesirable were associated with these restaurants with negative stereotyping of their nutritional benefit, and even off-color character casting with discriminative inference of the types of animals used for the dishes' protein.

In Czechia, images of the American Confederate flag, and Wild West depictions of how to appropriate representations of American Indians into tramping culture are similar in degree of unfamiliarity that is bridged by theoretical images as in the case with the geographies and people evoked by Bun Bo Nam Bo images. The ready absorption of one set into self-image might signal a preference of the dominant demographic as more open to identify and incorporate Western made tropes into their immediate environment, while the noodle images remain in a realm of mediating two different familiarities that exists out of pragmatism as an economic bridge that is adorned with bells that ring of exoticism and out-of-the-ordinary experience. Regardless of wanted, tolerated, or unpreferred, Bun Bo Nam Bo images and all its associations offers obvious contrast to Czech palate standards; however, it remains that both of these visual phenomena in Czechia are built from stereotyped imagery, each serving as their own schematics that delineate distant geographies.

02. Vietnamese Diaspora through Taste and Sight

This section aims to better understand the Vietnamese Diaspora in Czechia, and adjacent Central European countries with borders that are contiguous with contemporary Czechia. It is the case with identities of diasporas that there is no linear or simple definition to the complexity of entire identities being uprooted and transplanted to unfamiliar places. This section, as is much of this research, does not intend to reduce the Vietnamese experience into a singular definition (or noodle dish), rather the idea is to grasp the political and economic forces that yield both historical and current impact on the Vietnamese Diaspora in Central Europe. The method to understand this is through a series of first person interviews centered on the topic of Bun Bo Nam Bo images, as well as visiting work of both still and moving images that illuminates the status and underlying nuances of the growing community.

The first documented wave of Vietnamese to visit Czechia was in the late 1950s. In a show of inter-governmental alliances of communist states, exchange programs were established to promote cross-cultural support in knowledge and commodity exchange. At a symbolic level, solidarity was the public relations premise between Eastern Bloc states behind the Iron Curtain, and overseas countries of similar ideological systems within the Cold War divide, such as: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Cuba.

In 1956, a test program was conducted between Northern Vietnam and Czechoslovakia, where 100 school children were sent on exchange to the small town of Chrastava, 10 kilometers Northwest of Liberec city.³² In this first show of transcontinental collaboration, Uncle Ho Chi Minh himself

32 Tereza Reichelová, "Vietostalgie," A2, No. 16, Accessed April 1 2024, www.advojka.cz/archiv/2018/16/vietostalgie

visited the students in a grand welcome by the Czechoslovak officials of the time. Recognition of business exchanges were given in one year contracts for goods and financing of new ventures. Within this dynamic, Czechoslovakia magnanimously provided direct funding and expert support for building up factories for production of bicycle parts, locks, car servicing, hydro-power stations, textiles, beer, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture. In the reverse direction, Vietnam provided Czechoslovakia with rubber, jute, wood, tropical crops, and coffee.³³ At this point of international relations, the mode of exchange resembled a bartering concept of mutually beneficial commodities, which would later change to indentured labor after the American War that resulted in an accumulation of military weaponry debt owed to Czechoslovakia by the newly unified Vietnam state.³⁴

The idea of solidarity between Czechoslovakia and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam can be seen by manifested projects of foreign policy. In 1950, Czechoslovakia was the fourth country in the world to recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Northern). In August 1955, a treaty of economic, scientific, and technical cooperation between the two states was signed. Shortly after in September 1956, the Czechoslovak Ambassador to Hanoi signed the General Specification and Payment Conditions in Business between the two countries which permitted Vietnamese to visit Czechoslovakia and be trained in mechanical engineering and various production industries.³⁵ Even before the first Vietnamese group arrived in Czechoslovakia, demonstrations of state friendship included a gifted hospital to Hai Phong in 1955, where the Czechoslovak government financed its construction and helped staff the medical professionals with Czechoslovak doctors and nurses. They remained working there until the 1970s.

After the first exchange in the late 1950s, diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Vietnam continued in similar fashion until the Velvet Revolution of 1989. In tracing historical moments that might explain the motivation of intercontinental migration, a pattern of political and social milestones emerges for both Vietnamese and Czechoslovaks (and post-1992, a distinction of Czech and Slovak emerges from state dissolution). Glancing at a broad level of modern historical events for Vietnam, it might be alarming to realize that Vietnamese people were subjugated to war and occupation for almost 100 years since the beginning of French colonial era in 1887. Throughout the 100 years, these conflicts involved neighboring countries: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and China - as well as more distant imperialists: France, Japan, and the US.³⁶ In the Czechoslovakia context, ideas of war and occupation were also familiar to the collective experience with Western state's ceding of the Sudetenland region to Nazi Germany before the remaining country was placed under protectorate occupation that was then followed with subsequent regimes of Cold War politics. The events around 1968 is perhaps the most influential milestone on civilian society for both Vietnamese and Czechoslovaks. In Southeast Asia, years of US meddling escalated to full blown warfare between

33 Petra Müllerová, "An Outline of Czech-Vietnamese Relations," ASIEN, no.72 (July 1999): 60-68.

34 CIA Director of Intelligence, Sources of Military Equipment to Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Military Forces, Sanitized Release, November, 1968.

35 Petra Müllerová, "An Outline of Czech-Vietnamese Relations," 62.

36 Not in chronological order.

the partition of Northern and Southern Vietnam, while in Czechoslovakia the military forces of the Warsaw pact rolled into Prague uninvited to end an optimistic period of political liberalization.

In 1980, the official agreement between the two states led to a consistent wave of Vietnamese workers to Czechoslovakia. Different from the predominantly academic focused agreements earlier, this specific policy opened up a broader group of Vietnamese laborers to work in Czechoslovak companies - largely within industrial production where there was a domestic labor shortage.³⁷ It was presented as an opportunity and gift towards the Vietnamese, to be exposed to a superior industrial skill set, based upon the assumption that they will return home to build the nation. In the soon-to-come changes that the Czechoslovak revolution would bring, in 1989, the expectation for the Vietnamese to return home on this premise proved to be otherwise. For Bun Bo Nam Bo images, this policy in 1974 (and the subsequent two decades) is the most relevant as the precursor era to establishing a Vietnamese Diaspora in a post-communist Central Europe.

2.1 - 1980s Vietnamese Diaspora through Czech Social-Documentary Photography

Libuše Jarcovjácová is a Czech photographer and educator who has been photographing personal experiences and encounters since her teenage years. In the context of well established social documentary photography within Czech context, her notable publications and exhibitions have focused on minority groups within a relatively homogenous Slavic demographic. Amongst Libuše's body of photographic work, minority focuses include: the underground queer scene within bar settings during communist era, post-war generations of Roma community that survived ethnic cleansing by Nazis, and temporary Vietnamese workers of early 1980s.³⁸ In similar fashion to gonzo journalism, as coined by Hunter S. Thompson, Libuše's methodology with the camera included full immersion within the communities she photographed. Without the predatory tendencies of camera capture, her photographic position was internally situated and reflects a deeply caring relationship between the subjects and photographer.³⁹ While she was studying photography at FAMU, she met a translator from a similar worker program that focused on incoming Cuban workers. She learned of the opportunity to teach Vietnamese workers Czech language for their first 3 months before they entered the factory lines. Libuše recounts the challenges with teaching the Vietnamese students because there was no formal lesson plan or even prepared teaching materials to bridge the gap between cultures and languages. Without clear communication and expectation from the factory administrators or the government, the teachers themselves struggled with making sense of the broader political situation and juggled their role as mediating representatives of the larger Czechoslovak society. Digging into her visual senses, she figured out how to teach Czech language through images, and focused on the most basic and useful forms of speech that would prepare the students to manage everyday life in Czechoslovakia and work in the factories. With an observant eye, she describes the

37 Petra Müllerová, "An Outline of Czech-Vietnamese Relations," 63.

38 Libuše Jarcovjácová, "Černé Roky," (Prague: Nakladatelství Wo-men, 2016).

39 See Appendix 1, Interview - Libuše.

impressions of the workers when they first arrived. In the earlier waves of students, she remembers seeing a sense of optimism and pride. They were told by their government and group ideological leaders that they would be helping a fellow communist country. A European country that supported Vietnam's nationalist movement of eradicating US occupation; Czechoslovakia, as an imagined geography, was admirable and inspiring for the early wave of workers in the 1980s. They were also charged up with romantic notions that they would be helping both Czechoslovak industry and also with the economy of their new national identity of a reunified Vietnam. On the way to Prague, there was an optimistic feeling for the future for the workers who were mostly between 25 to 30 years old. Much to their dismay, this sense of good will and camaraderie quickly disintegrated. Libuše recalls regular occurrences of racism and hatred directed towards her students, especially when they left their periphery dormitories to visit Prague on class field trips. The distasteful atmosphere of xenophobia and segregation dimmed the spirits of the Vietnamese workers. This change was also noticeable for Libuše with the later waves of students where the incoming workers were well informed of the poor experiences from workers who already returned to home at the end of their work term.⁴⁰ The only consistent Czechoslovaks who the students trusted were their Czech language teachers as they would often be invited to parties or dinners organized by the students in the dormitory. On one rare occasion, Libuše remembers a student who married his Czech teacher and started a family in Prague while he was on the work program. As the interview progresses, it becomes evident that Libuše took on more roles than merely being a language teacher. In our conversation that was paired with her photographs of this era, her emotional proximity to the workers is evident. In one instance, a Vietnamese man was found dead outside of the dormitories without any explanation. Libuše went so far as to inquire about police investigations to no avail; a dead Vietnamese migrant worker did not instigate any alarm within the legal system. Another story included a factory altercation between segregated Vietnamese workers and Czechoslovak workers. After arguing over the use of an electrical outlet for tools, one of her former students was assaulted and fought back resulting in a broken collarbone of a Czechoslovak worker. Due to the physical injury, the Vietnamese worker was sentenced to 2 years in prison. Libuše tried to provide support for the charged Vietnamese worker by finding him a local lawyer to take the case; much to her disappointment, he was imprisoned and immediately deported at the end of his sentence. After consistent negative experiences with Czechoslovaks, the students tried to understand why their new experiences differed so much from their expectations of a warm welcome by their European comrades. Libuše tried to explain the mono-culture and mono-demographics, as well as tensions between the general populace and the communist regime. It seemed that other than government officials and administrators of the factories, there was no awareness or explanation as to why foreigners of a different race and background would begin to populate cities and towns. Xenophobic rhetoric around fears of taking jobs and resources circulated amongst the Czechoslovaks, and further justified their attitudes of fear-driven aggression towards unfamiliar bodies. This is pertinent to point out from the interview because the available literature written from a Czechoslovak perspective of this time downplays the xenophobic attitudes towards the Vietnamese in this period. Even the author of the referenced foreign policy dates described only inert Czechoslovak attitudes and

40 See Appendix 1, Interview - Libuše.

impressions of the Vietnamese, which is in direct opposition to the first-hand experiences of Libuše.⁴¹

In response to the dejectful experiences with Czechoslovaks, the Vietnamese workers retreated into their small groups and focused on collective dependency as a way for social connection and support in an unfamiliar and unfriendly place. Justifications to endure the hardship were centered around economic ambitions that would otherwise be difficult in their country that was being rebuilt. This becomes a pragmatic lens that remains a common goal and aspiration in the Vietnamese Diaspora today, echoing similarities within other demographics of immigrant culture to places with different sets of opportunities than at home. Even in the 1980s, the framework of connection between Vietnamese hubs within Czechoslovakia was already present. In Libuše's archive, we saw photographs of organized competitive sports between teams of Vietnamese people from different factory work circles. The social engagement beyond the immediate groups was much more vast, as Libuše describes the mobility of Vietnamese workers between various towns and cities for social visits. On weekends, the bus station Florence would see upwards of 300 Vietnamese waiting for buses. Another pressing issue for the Vietnamese workers was the canteen food. The gap between flavor and preparation methods of Czech food was far too great for them to accept. Most of them were away from the familiarity of their home flavor for the first time in their lives; the issue of Czech food was resolved by establishing their own communal cooking operations, separate from the dormitory and factory canteens. The initial preparation methods were mostly creative appropriation from available ingredients in Czechoslovakia. Chicken was the primary protein in the dishes, and the absence of fish sauce was initially replaced with concoctions of maggi and worcester sauce. As the needs for other staple ingredients such as rice paper for Nem dishes (Spring rolls/Summer rolls) grew, incoming workers would bring dry consumables and parcel delivery services became a small-scale import method. Based on a need for familiar ingredients, the idea of importing and distributing goods became an important part of the independent structure of Vietnamese workers.

Libuše comments on their self-sufficiency and strength, they found solutions for their needs while being isolated from the larger society. Informal modes of trading described as "gray business" and "black business" were common already during the 1980s. Later, post-1989 revolution, import and distribution networks would become the livelihood of the Vietnamese Diaspora as the 1990s became an era of "Golden Rain" for Vietnamese people looking for a role in society outside of factory work. From the dormitory parties, Libuše was perhaps one of the first Czech people in the 1980s to intimately experience homestyle Vietnamese cuisine in Central Europe. The students taught her how to roll ingredients in the rice paper, and prepared specialty meat dishes with punchy spices that were not yet part of the Czech flavor palate. On the topic of Bun Bo Nam Bo, Libuše cannot recall ever seeing or hearing of this dish in the 1980s, but certainly she is aware of its presence in the bistro menus nowadays.

41 A general summary of Czech sentiments towards Vietnamese workers and students is summarized in each era of major policies in direct effect of permitted incoming Vietnamese. Description of Vietnamese being reserved and retreating into their communities lacks examination of negative experiences with the dominant demographics as described by Libuše Jarcovjáková. See Petra Müllerová, "An Outline of Czech-Vietnamese Relations," 62.

With the history of military supplies and industrial aid provided by Czechoslovakia to Northern Vietnam, industrially produced objects were highly sought after for Vietnamese workers. This was also a necessary mode of transforming factory pay into material wealth that was more easily transferred to Vietnam than currency. Petra Müllerová noted the limited exchangeability of both Czechoslovak Koruna and Vietnamese Dong in the 1980s; cash on hand was much less useful than objects such as mopeds, bicycles, sewing machines which carry the ability to generate more wealth in their potential production and also as objects of trade.⁴² In Libuše's archives, Jawa mopeds are visible as part of the parcels being sent back to Vietnam. She observed that the workers were frugal and once they saved enough money, they would purchase Czechoslovak products as remittance. Within the situation of central economy inventory, limitations were placed on the quantity of each object the Vietnamese were allowed to purchase. The culture of material wealth extended to social impressions of success as Libuše was asked by her students for portraits in front of automobiles that would be sent home in postcard sized format portraying a scheme of earned wealth that was part of the image of leaving home for Europe.⁴³ The photograph's role in this process of mediating two different geographies is to describe a fiction of social status through material wealth to impress upon family and friends at home. Libuše's connection with the Vietnamese community of workers began to wane as she moved to Berlin for the next phase of her life and photographic work. However, she remains hopeful to continue with the second part of her automobile portraits where she would like to find her former students and create new portraits of their lives now, 40 years later.

2.2 - 1989 Velvet Revolution through 1990s "Golden Rain"

The results of Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution of 1989 transformed the social, political, and economic landscape of the country. As the centrally planned economy faded away, and the Soviet Union soldiers were kindly asked to leave, liberalization reforms began to sweep through the country in an era of transition and transformation. The troubling aspects of the 1980s economy had led Czechoslovakia to a productivity collapse, where unsaleable inventory piled up, and a vast shortage of necessary consumer and capital goods could be felt by the general populace.⁴⁴ In the post-communist shift, Czechoslovakia's economic reform was considered successful in global market economy standards, and would inspire similar attempts in countries such as Poland, Russia (after 1991), Lithuania, Mongolia, and Romania.

In an endeavor towards privatization, the same types of state owned enterprises (that hosted Vietnamese workers in production roles) implemented a system of Investment Privatized Funds which shifted economic ownership towards individuals recognized by the State. This was manifested through a voucher, or coupon system, where people bid for shares of state owned enterprises,

42 Petra Müllerová, "An Outline of Czech-Vietnamese Relations," 64.

43 Libuše Jarcovjácová, Lucie Černá, "EVOKATIVE," (Prague: Untitled, 2019).

44 Chia-Ying Ma, "Bidders' Behavior and Strategy in the Czechoslovak Voucher Privatization Scheme," (PhD diss., Lehigh University, 1994), 4-5.



80Kč
Smažený sýr s hranolkami



80Kč
Smažený kuřecí kousky
a hranolky



Kung pao s rýží
- S kuřecím masem **85Kč**
- S hovězím masem **95Kč**



Smažené nudle
- S kuřecím masem **75Kč**
- S hovězím masem **95Kč**
- Se zeleninou **69Kč**



Křupavá Kachna
- S omáčkou a rízolem **135Kč**
- S kung pao **129Kč**
- S zeleninou a rýží **129Kč**



Křupavá kuřecí prsa
- S omáčkou a rýží **85Kč**

and claim ownership as one part of the basis of market economy.⁴⁵ The new economic model of the Czechoslovak environment was only inclusive for registered citizens. For temporary foreign nationals, the busy change in government system left immigration laws with room for interpretation and maneuvering. This was a pivotal time frame for the Vietnamese Diaspora in a soon-to-be dissolved Czechoslovakia, where workers and academic students were left to decide to return home, or to continue their experiences as non-citizens in a new phase of growing pains for both Czechia and Slovakia.

The uncharted time of the early 1990s extended the Vietnamese network of relationships and movement of products beyond previous confines of political geographies. In “Vietnamese in Central Europe: and Unintended Diaspora”, Christina Schwenkel points to the geographies South of Berlin and Northern Czechia as a fluid territory where the Vietnamese Diaspora extended contact and supported growth on both sides of the political border.⁴⁶ New waves of Vietnamese migrants, and existing waves (documented and undocumented), began to fill the non-government induced private markets. Their formation was organic, and focused on distribution and trading in the casual sense of entrepreneurial practices. The tight knit Vietnamese communities of the worker period continued, and became more reclusive as a way of guaranteed safety from negative experiences. Tereza Reichelová’s 2018 column on “Vietostalgia” describes Vietnamese experiences of violent racism towards foreigners during the much glorified Vaclav Havel period of democratic freedom (for Europeans only). Continuing to 1991, a wave of hate based attacks resulted in a case of eighty Vietnamese seeking political asylum in the Netherlands.⁴⁷ However, word of financial opportunities (mostly within the informal market) got back to Northern Vietnam, and the diaspora continued to grow into the 2000s with new waves post-1989 intent on seeking social mobility by accumulating wealth at the cost of discomfort from unfamiliar geographies.

2.3 - 2000s Banánové Dítě and Vietnamské Bistro: Chu and Tùng

“Banana Kid” is a colloquial reference to third culture individuals whose formative years are in an environment different from their parent’s. Surely, there are negative connotations with reductive analogy to yellow on the outside and white on the inside. After all, nobody’s complexion is yellow except for unfortunate patients who suffer from jaundice. These types of terminology to describe third culture individuals exist also in diasporas of other geographies. In more comedic comparison, the Han Chinese Diasporas have their own play on broadcasting channels: ABC - American born Chinese, CBC - Canadian born Chinese, or BBC - British born Chinese. The simpleness of these terms can be diminishing, and often do not adequately define the flurry of dynamics in identity recognition of third culture individuals themselves, but it remains necessary as it helps to distinguish the hybridization of cultures, languages, identities, and acknowledgment of unique personal experiences of children developing formative years outside of their family origins. Between

45 Ma, “Bidders’ Behavior and Strategy in the Czechoslovak Voucher Privatization Scheme,” 3.

46 Christina Schwenkel, “Vietnamese in Central Europe: An Unintended Diaspora,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 12, Iss. 1, (2017): 2-3.

47 Tereza Reichelová, “Vietostalgie,”

banana kids themselves, there are varying degrees of proximity and separation across individuals.

In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, this became increasingly prevalent in Czechia where a mixture of second generation Vietnamese who were either born in Europe, or brought over at an age. Social differentiators put these in different categories, but for the most part, their similarities are of a more adept mobility around language barriers and cultural differences. Like photographs that mediate two different geographies, banana kids are a socio-biological concept, a dual-existence between the situation of home here, and home there. The family responsibility of this hybrid identity is often to assist the parents' generation in navigating the Czech system of everyday life and business affairs.

As part of the research, two separate interviews were conducted with: Phạm Mạnh Hùng - nicknamed as Chu, and Trần Thanh Tùng - who simply goes by Tùng. Since moving to Czechia as young teenagers, they have maintained a connection with their relatives in Northern Vietnam as their families in Europe developed businesses and new roots. Both Chu and Tùng have managed Vietnamese bistros as part of collective family efforts in Prague, and developed an aptitude for juggling the differences in palate and cultural behaviors of Czech, Vietnamese, and somewhere in between.

The interviews took place in FAMU's photostudio with a simple table set up. Bun Bo Nam Bo was served both times, although differently and in ways that play with the conventional methods of eating Bun noodle dishes in Czechia. For Tùng's interview, the Bun Bo Nam Bo ingredients were served separately on communal plates with individual serving bowls for fish sauce dipping in a comparable fashion to how Bun Cha is typically served. Chopsticks were provided as the eating utensil. For Chu's interview, the Bun Bo Nam Bo was pre-arranged on pasta plates that are just a bit deeper than a normal plate - which is atypical considering deep bowls are more commonly used to minimize messiness from mixing the ingredients and fish sauce. Fork and spoon were provided as utensils for Chu. These dish setting details were intended as a conversation prop that could surface during the interview, but almost immediately after both interviews started, the glaringly atypical methods of serving Bun Bo Nam Bo was pointed out by Chu and Tùng. They gently lambasted the incorrect way of serving and eating Bun Bo Nam Bo. From their reactions, we can understand that while Bun Bo Nam Bo is a dish that is relatively young and evolving, but standardized etiquettes are well associated with how it should be experienced. Chu and Tùng also spoke about their impressions of Bun Bo Nam Bo's origins with striking similarities that point to Hanoi, but they also open-mindedly avoid rigid identity association by entertaining the possibilities of a Southern Vietnamese origin.

To assist the research on Bun Bo Nam Bo images, both Chu and Tùng have accompanied me to SAPA on a number of occasions (before the interviews) to explain their connections to the central distribution center and their relationship to the community. They also showed me access points to a variety of delicious bistros for an important research methodology of this study - slurping noodles. Through their generous and welcoming attitudes, I was able to see and taste SAPA in ways that are not always promoted for outsiders of the Vietnamese community. Walking next to Chu with a camera is akin to having a Freedom-of-Press pass. In the market stalls where his family used to work, nobody



seems bothered that I am looking through the lens - in fact, they seemed to welcome it. This would be a polar opposite situation if I were alone with my camera, and without Chu. With Tùng, I saw the life cycle of SAPA from delivery of goods for distribution, as well as the more invisible output of waste management within the market zones. Tùng also helped me navigate the most crucial access point for Bun Bo Nam Bo images: the advertising studio that produces Bistro images where Tùng used to work as a graphic designer - he continues to maintain a collegial relationship with the owner.

Chu remembers the first time he ate Bun Bo Nam Bo. He couldn't believe it was a cultural dish, rather he was under the impression it was a refreshing invention that his mother had spontaneously prepared for a hot summer day. Even on his trips back to Vietnam for family and his camera trading business, Bun Bo Nam Bo is not something he is seeking to eat. I told him that we would eat Bun Bo Nam Bo during our interview, and he initially requested for Summer rolls instead. A significant overlap between Chu's family history and Libuše's 1980s experience is that Chu's father is part of the pre-1989 Vietnamese workers who went through the same training programs that also had Czech language teachers similar to Libuše and her colleagues. His father received vocational mechanical training before being assigned to a Škoda factory. After the end of his work term, he returned to Vietnam where he started his family. Chu's father's return to Czechia was at his friend's beckoning to join in the "Golden Rain" era in the post 1992 economic landscape of Czechia. After his parents gained financial traction, they summoned Chu to Prague, who at that point had been living with relatives in Hanoi. Chu's arrival to Prague coincides with the beginnings of SAPA's establishment as the largest Vietnamese distribution center, and its eventual growth into the dominant cultural center - even overshadowing functions offered by Vietnam's Embassy.

After a series of entrepreneurial ventures, Chu's family decided to open a bistro in the early 2010s - part of the first wave of Vietnamese eateries to begin popping up in Prague. Recognizing the

precedent of Czech-Chinese Bistros and their strategy with menu images, they understood Bun Bo Nam Bo images would be necessary to communicate with tourists and local Czech people alike, but they were wary of creating 'white-washed' dishes that tone down a sense of flavor authenticity to placate Czech familiarity. Pho is Chu's speciality interest, his family would laboriously prepare it overnight as if they were cooking at home for family. Bun Bo Nam Bo eventually became a part of their menu as a response to customer demand and its attractive profitability.

Chu is proud of his heritage, and recognizes his distance from hybridized identities of banana kids while maintaining an adeptness at navigating crowds of foreignness. Unlike the invisible and tokenized parts of the Vietnamese Diaspora, Chu is outspoken and forward. He recently came across a Czech operated restaurant advertising themselves as selling Vietnamese cuisine, and much to Chu's horror he found the Czech chefs mismatching different culinary objects of completely separate customs and presented it as Pho. The biggest crime that he could not accept was gyoza (Japanese dumplings that are typically pan fried) placed into beef broth - without flat rice noodles - and advertised as Pho-čko. The flagrant bastardization of an asian fusion attempt by a Czech operated bistro mobilized Chu to write to the restaurant to inform them of their indiscretion. Admittedly, Chu is not a traditionalist when it comes to culinary affairs. Along with Chinese-American and Vietnamese friends, he is part of a creative pop-up kitchen that studies various cuisines and finds ways to create mash-up fusion that acknowledges the origin and heritages that they are borrowing from. Pho-čko, however, ignorantly crosses too many lines for Chu's appetite.

Tùng, on the other hand, is a soft spoken man. His sense of filial responsibility is what brings him a deeper knowledge of Vietnamese cuisine in Czech geographies. At the edict of his father, Tùng left a white collar job in graphic design to be a full time manager of his father's bistro, Pho Family, in Prague's Vinohrady neighborhood. But even before that, Tùng had first hand experience with casual eateries in Northern Vietnam when he was living in Nam Định with his grandparents, and before his parents summoned him to Czechia. He recalls the creative practices of his grandmother in crafting special dishes of regional flavors that would become a popular anchor for their street level bistro. A similar sense of pride that Chu exhibited of Vietnamese culinary identity is visible with Tùng. There are certain etiquette and modes of eating that are associated with each dish, he shares his observations of customers' tendencies of eating modes towards different dishes based on how they might relate to it.

With his background in graphic design, Tùng was in charge of branding Pho Family's menu, signage, and elements of the interior decor. He consciously decided to break away from the tiled portraits of each food dish and simplified the menu by category of preparation: noodle soup, dry-served noodles, rice dishes, curry, and soups. Within each category, the graphic is represented by only a few images that show the typology of each section, resembling a contemporary cooking book where text and stylized image are almost equal in hierarchy.

For Tùng, influences of Vietnamese food towards Czech familiarity or even fingerprints of the previous era's popular Chinese bistros is obvious, and an inevitable force that he does not resist. During the communist states' brotherhood era, Chinese bistros were well established before the Vietnamese

entrepreneurs ventured into the restaurant business. For many Vietnamese coming to Czechia in the 1990s and 2000s, the kitchens of Chinese bistros were a common job position to start out their new life in Europe. As cooks, they learned the fast and efficient operations of wok stir-fry and dealing with governmental system requirements of business licenses. These skills and know-how would later inform the Vietnamese entrepreneurs who embark on their own bistro ventures. Tùng points out that the the early Vietnamese operated bistros sold a fair share of Chinese food modified for Czech palate because this was the familiarity of the market, and when business was stable, the Vietnamese chefs would begin to introduce Vietnamese dishes such as Pho, Nem rolls, and Bun Bo Nam Bo to the menu. The piggybacked introduction of these dishes was born out of pragmatic risk management of maintaining and growing operational cash flow while appealing to a desire of oriental flavors, and not out of fusion intent. This flipping and incorporating of other Asian foods continues with Vietnamese operated bistro today, where Thai dishes and Japanese Sushi are also tiled next to Bun Bo Nam Bo images and dishes that are of Chinese stir-fry methods. In some Bistros, Czech staples such as draft beer, smažený sýr (fried cheese), řízek (flattened and fried boneless meat), and krokety (fried mashed potato balls) are also offered by the kitchen.

2.4 - SAPA Advertising Studio

After our interview in the photo studio, Tùng arranged a visit to the SAPA advertising studio where the owner shared their production process and image archive of dishes that was compiled over 3 decades. The owner first opened the studio in 1995, which is vivid to his memory because of the commercially accessible digital technology that was required for the business. Windows 95 and the first 2 megapixel digital cameras were the crux of the business operation. The advertising studio is separated into 4 areas: the office with 3 computer workstations for the graphic designers, a printing room, digital fabrication space with automated machines to form shapes, and a manual fabrication space for assembling marquees and other forms of built up signage. .

The owner cannot recount the amount of bistro clients since he opened shop in 1995, but he does recognize his food photographs from the late 1990s that remain in circulation to this day - mostly on the small scale paper menus due to the low resolution image sizes and data degradation. His customer base has grown to areas beyond Prague and sometimes as far away as Czech border towns adjacent to Germany, Poland, Austria, and Slovakia.

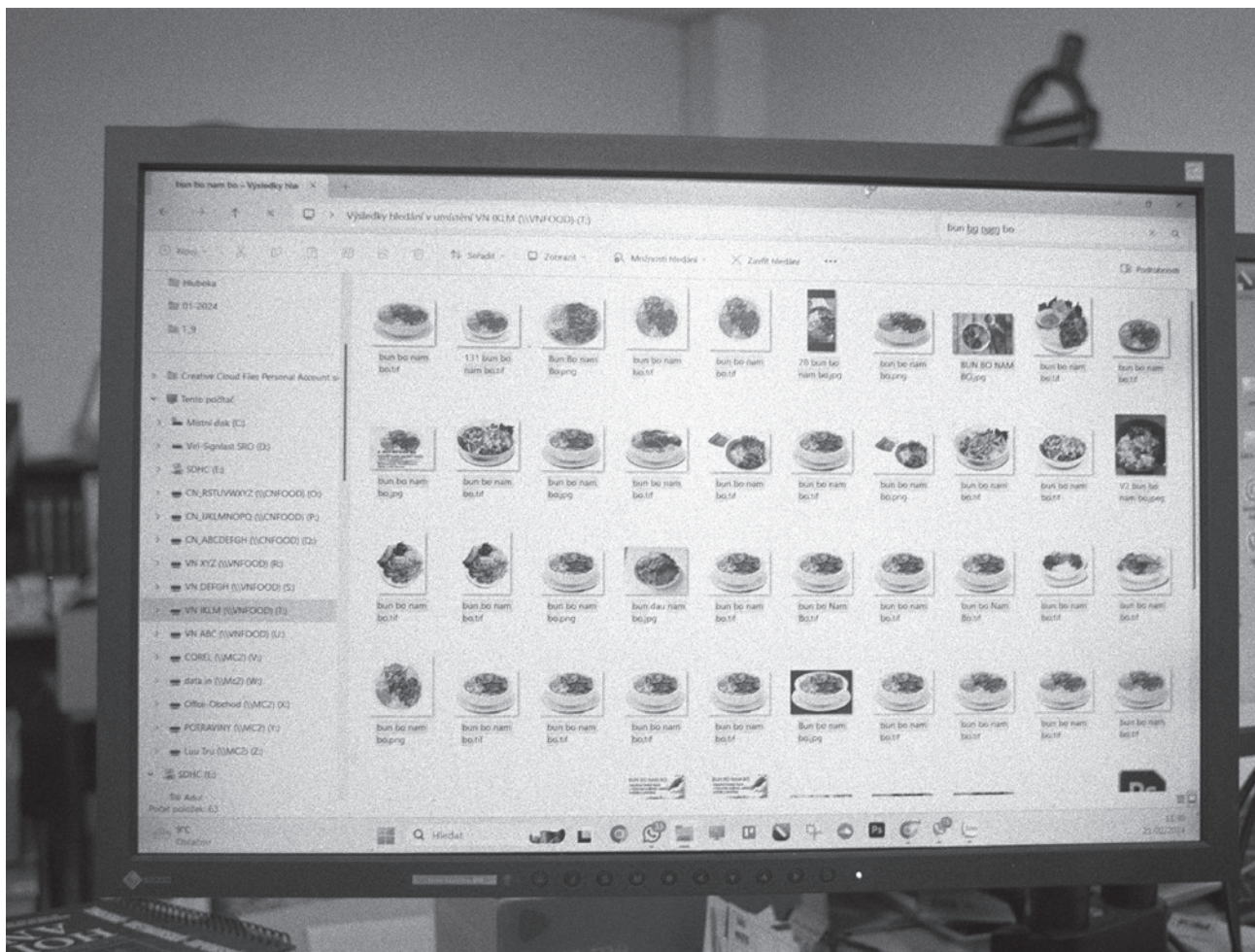
The typical process of collaborating with clients includes a sit down with the graphic designers and the bistro-client's chef. Together, they sift through the studio's image archive and decide if the pixel representation of the plated food is compatible with what the client-chefs intend to offer. In the case of dishes such as Bun Bo Nam Bo, which is often unfamiliar to clients coming directly from Vietnam, the graphic designer gives a culinary explanation as to what it is and how it should be prepared between the unit of pixels to real life food molecules. This is especially the case for bistro clients who intend to offer culinary food outside of Northern Vietnamese familiarity such as Thai food and Japanese food. Through sample menus and archive images, the graphic designer

also explains the ingredients and how each part is prepared and plated.. Photographs of maki rolls become both technical drawings and specifications that communicate the design intent. For ingredients of Bun Bo Nam Bo, modifications are often made to the pixels based on the preferences of the chef. For example, bean sprouts are somehow a contentious ingredient. Some markets of Czech customers enjoy this vegetable, while others do not. To reflect the intent of the bistro chefs, the graphic designers would modify the presence of the bean sprouts for increased density, or completely eliminate it. This can be done for the adjacent vegetables such as carrots, if it will be pre-processed and purchased from SAPA in frozen form with ornamental cut out shapes, or if it would be shredded from fresh carrots. These details matter, because they establish a relationship between kitchen and prospective customers, and expectations must be managed for a mutually agreeable dining experience.

The archive contains 3 decades of food images that initially were custom photographed for clients, but as the advertising studio grew, clients were able to choose from existing images used for previous bistros. The modification of each dish to create a more bistro specific image is a collaborative process between the advertising studio and bistro owners. The pixel areas that represent only food are cropped out and overlaid on top of bistro-client's specified plates and dishes with an added drop shadow line around 30 to 60 percent opacity. The background is mostly cropped out so only dishware and food are retained to be set on top of the menu and signage backgrounds.









During our visit, we sampled one of eight external harddrives (each are at least 1 terabyte) with a quick search for “Bun Bo Nam Bo” file names. The vast images in the harddrive do not appear to have any archival structure as far as indexing and nomenclature, searching through it is a bit like going to a flea market where the exact desired object might come up, but only after sifting through a plethora of adjacently relevant dishes. The file formats are .jpeg, photoshop, and tif files - some are 70 kilobytes and the other end of the size spectrum can be as large as 66 megabytes. Targeting tif files and photoshop files, we examined to see if traces of the graphic designer and clients’ collaboration would be visible within retained image layers. In some instances, we can find various reiterations of Bun Bo Nam Bo as separate layers overlaid on the same Bistro-specific dishware. The differences in each assembly of Bun Bo Nam Bo composition is evident, and with the top image layer representing the final agreed-to selection. The histories of the culinary decisions remain embedded as striated information within these larger files.

There are three camera angles that make up the majority of the images: top down plan view, oblique at mostly 45 degrees, and detail shots where a partial frame of the dish is shown so that the garnish of peanuts and fried onions can almost be quantified by a quick glance. In all the camera angles, artificial lighting touches every ingredient, rendering their shapes and colors fully distinguishable. In some cases, the spiced fish sauce is presented within a separate smaller bowl.

Similar to developments from first generation Vietnamese to the preceding generations of second and third, the graphic aesthetics of Bun Bo Nam Bo images can be perceived similarly. The first version of Vietnamese bistros roughly follow the image structure established by the Czech Chinese Bistros. Since then, software updates and changing design methods of the advertising studio have progressed to menus more like Túng’s for Pho family. With new customers of more specialty bistros



at higher price points, the advertising studio offers stylized menu designs that break away from the individual portraits of each dish in tiled layout. While this may seem desirable for a cleaner and fresh look, the owner reports that some bistro-clients still prefer the first generation's look because of the familiarity that is already established in the visual consciousness of the customer base. The full set of offered menu components from the advertising studio are: menu (2D), window film signage (2D), and built up marquees (3D). After the dish images are complete and approved by the bistro-clients, the advertising studio prepares each of the bespoke components per spatial dimensions specific to the bistro storefronts. These measurements are mostly provided by the bistro-clients, but to verify the environment of display the owner often consults Google maps street view. This is largely to confirm that the window film signage and built-up marquees can be later installed without obstacles. These two components have subcategories of options for the Bistro-client to choose from. The marquees are typically exterior and can be designed to project beyond the bistro storefronts, or face mounted in plane with the glazing or opaque facade elements. Sometimes, the eateries are in sheltered arcades or even in mall food courts. In any case, the interior elevations are treated similarly as the exterior public facing facades.

The printing room of the advertising studio is outfitted with plotters that handle roll paper up to 162 cm wide on CMYK color channels. For window film and marquees that will be backlit, self-adhered plastic material serves as the image base and is adhered to clear or translucent acrylic board. More recent designs of back-lit signage are illuminated with arrays of LED strips, a cost effective improvement to the previous era of fluorescent tube lighting that required heavy sets of ballasts to regulate current.

The fabrication side of the advertising studio is split into two sections. One part contains the digital fabrication tools of laser cutter, and CNC with a mounted router head. These tools are mostly used to cut material sheets into a prepared kit-of-parts for further assembling. In the second space of the fabrication area are stock aluminum and steel profiles that are cut and

joined to create the shape of the projected marquees signages. After the signage structures are complete, and the prints are adhered to the substrates, the advertising team coordinates installation dates where they ship and mount the final products onto the bistro facades.

From conception, production, to installation, the distribution of Bun Bo Nam Bo images traces back to the hard drives that store the archive of dishes. As static as this might be, there are still points of leakiness that move beyond the jurisdiction of the advertising studio's owner. In an unofficial master-apprentice relationship, a few of his past graphic designers have moved on to open their own advertising shops. The benefits of making money in a market economy also means that competition is bound to happen. In the separation of apprentice from master, sometimes the archive is duplicated and flows away from their original data containers.

2.5 - Expanding a Visible Diaspora

In the 2020s, the visibility of third culture individuals of the Vietnamese Diaspora continues to grow. The earlier token minority tropes for Vietnamese is beginning to fade as the presence of outspoken individuals are becoming more obvious in the larger discourse of self-determined representation. There are voices of this from the institutions of Czechia's national Academy of Performing Arts. An alum of DAMU⁴⁸, actress Ha Thanh Špetlíková moved to Czechia in 1992 with her family and has broken from the typical and seemingly pragmatic expectations of finding careers in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Her active participation within Czech culture can be seen on screen, and also in storefronts where she teams up with her Czech partner to operate cafes. In the feature film, *Miss Hanoi*, Špetlíková's major role is a progress in representation, far away from the invisibility of Vietnamese demographics of the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, her interview with Scarlett Wilková regarding the film and impressions of cultural nuances between Vietnamese and Czech identities reveals standards of traditional Vietnamese values are often at odds with Czech values.⁴⁹

There are also image makers associated through FAMU who have contributed to increase representation and conversation of Vietnamese-based identities. Diana Cam Van Nguyen is from Cheb (in Western Czechia) of Vietnamese roots. One of her recent works is a short animation "Dear Dad" that uses photographic collages and illustration to portray her relationship with her Vietnamese father who was imprisoned in Czechia, which offers a different type of visibility to a unique father-daughter dynamic. In Dužan Duong documentary fiction "Bo Hai", the potraviny's family dynamics between the two generations is spotlighted. It shows contrast between expectations and connections to the homeland that structures the father-son storyline. The cast are Duong's

48 DAMU (Divadelní fakulta Akademie múzických umění v Praze) is the Department of Dramatic Theater at the Academy of Performing Arts.

49 Scarlett Wilková, "Nemám pud sebezáchovy, přiznala herečka Ha Thanh Špetlíková," iDNES, last modified August 13, 2018. www.idnes.cz/zpravy/revue/spolecnost/ha-thanh-spetlikova-herecka-miss-hanoi-film-ordinace-v-ruzove-zahrade-magazin-dnes.A180807_120745_lidicky_zar

own relatives, pulling closer the gap between story, production, and final screening in layers of close personal matter. The film deepens an awareness of Vietnamese-owned pottraviny beyond generic convenience storefronts, with details of spirituality and culturally linked generational gaps.

In Slovakia's art scene, the voice of the Vietnamese Diaspora made a breakthrough in the fall of 2023 where personal experiences surfaced in an exhibition at Bratislava's Kunsthalle. Curated by Kvet Nguyen and Denisa Tomková, eight artists of third culture backgrounds present stories through different forms of media as both a method of individual and collective contemplation of their generational transitions between their parents' home and their new geographies in Western states. The eight artists represent situations of the Vietnamese Diaspora (post-American War) across Europe, Canada, and the US. A common theme within the exhibition is centered around the inheritance of intergenerational trauma passed through colonial events in their homeland, the uprooting of their parents, and the yearned connections between family here and there. The exhibition concept is global in the sense of empathy and solidarity. Within the exhibition description, the curators also highlight the colonial subjugation of Palestinians where eruptive events coincided with the fall 2023 exhibition opening.⁵⁰

Kvet Nguyen's research into the Vietnamese histories in Czechoslovakia has led her to examine historic photographs in the national archives of Czechia and Slovakia. Images of Vietnamese migrants during the socialist period, captured by European photographers, are fixed with institutional sterility and coded with hierarchical dynamics that places the Vietnamese subjects in a docile and muted position next to their European counterparts.⁵¹ While these images of Vietnamese in Czechoslovakia are not colonial representations in the sense of French imperial interventions, they nonetheless portray attitudes as defined by orientalist photography.

Within the post-German Democratic Republic landscape, filmmaker Leisl Nguyen presented "Sunday Menu" about three generations of family dynamics in a satellite neighborhood of Berlin. The film opens with the main character, Mi, biking through the streets with socialist housing blocks in the background. The sense of isolation and uncertainty of belonging is emphasized through the camera's wide shot where Mi appears small in a built environment of East Germany. The structure of the film is framed around Mi's desire to connect with her mother and grandmother, each with their own distinct transformation of identity in Europe. Food serves as the medium of this representation, where Mi's mother runs a casual German-Viet bistro that is struggling with business, while Mi's connection with her widowed grandmother is connected through food recipe research that blends with family photo albums that explains how she arrived in East Germany during the socialist worker era. In the archival images of the family album, social conditions that the grandmother endured as the first generation are presented with conflicts of exclusion and a strong desire for Vietnam. In the film, the grandmother speaks Vietnamese, the mother speaks German and Vietnamese, and Mi speaks only German. In Mi's poetic narration, her sense of mixed race identity conjures analogies to

50 Kvet Nguyen, Denisa Tomková, "Nhớ:" Kunsthalle, Bratislava, September 6, 2023.

51 Kvet Nguyen, Seminar of Accidental Wisdom, lecture, FAMU, Prague, March 27, 2024.

photographs and picture frames, where some people have a defined sense of place within the confines of a single frame. For Mi, her identity is restless and ungrounded as it slips from frame to frame.

The contrast of the bistro food and the traditional recipe that Mi seeks to learn through her grandmother is an important secondary storyline to the film. In one scene food represents the tensions and disconnect between the three generations. Mi brings home dinner for her grandmother from the bistro which is then rejected by the grandmother and tossed on the floor as the new identity symbolized by the bistro dish is undesirable in the palate (identity) of the first generation. As Mi seeks to connect with her grandmother, and the extended culture of a far away home that she does not know, we see Mi wandering through a Vietnamese market in a distribution center as she searches for ingredients necessary for the Sunday menu dish. This Berlin version of the distribution center is most likely Đồng Xuân market where the interior kiosk streets and visual culture of signage is indistinguishable from Prague's SAPA.

03.. Food Photography

Unlike photography's potential to preserve a moment as images of single planar dimensions, food as a culinary medium is limited by temporal restraints where the ingredients inevitably decay over time. This section focuses on perceiving food photography as images in print, as objects, and on screen.

3.1 Bun Bo Nam Bo Images in Mass Communication

Recalling cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer's earlier writing, we begin by visiting the period where illustrated magazines entered the mass stream of reformatted photographs emboldening a new form of popular visual culture. Kracauer's 1927 essay "Photography" is well complemented by a later text "The Photographic Approach" from 1951. In the earlier writing, photography's historic coupling with death is further encapsulated as "ghosts" by Kracauer.⁵² The apparition of photographs is reproduced in materials ways that imperceptibly create distance from the original subjects of the camera lens. Even images of iconic figures such as celebrities are represented as a matrix of grayscale dots on paper, where viewer cognitive bridging equates printing systems of rasterization to an authentic sighting of stardom. In this correlation, the question of realism in photographic imagery becomes a centerfold topic to question and scrutinize within widened reproduction. The differences between images stored in our minds from empirical visual experience is defined as memory images, in contrast to theoretical ones in the form of photographs due to two fundamental reasons: 1- memory images, like culinary forms, is subject to temporal changes, grasping only what is symbolically important, 2 - photographs, as scientific instruments, have the potential to capture beyond leading content matter as incidental details inherent to camera capture.⁵³ In contrast between these two types, an uncritical reception of photographs might deduce that the reproduction that we do see somehow

52 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Past's Threshold*, ed. Philippe Despoix, Maria Zinfert (Germany: Diphanes, 2014), 27-44.

53 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," 30-32.

signaled a real-ness or objective truth. For Kracauer, in respect to illustrated magazines, this is position to be wary of, where “photography which depicts appearances familiar to contemporary consciousness, provides limited access to the life of the original subject, it records each time a superficial state that, in this period of its supremacy, is as understood a means of expression as language.”⁵⁴ The ghost image is peculiar because it plays a game of opposites through recording time; the past and its objects are fixed in planar form but what is leftover represents what no longer is present. Within the process, the object of photography is metamorphosed into a representation where both space and time are intervened upon, creating gaps that come from separation of context.

For Bun Bo Nam Bo images, graphic layouts by designers simulating the cooked product with pixels follow an itemized pattern of display, where the dishes are cropped out of rectangular frames that correspond to the geometric sensor surfaces of camera images. By focusing on the dish and the plateset, a cleaner visual order is established where matrices of entire menus can be laid out in tiled grid pattern, and conveniently scaled down from 1:1 life size. Bun Bo Nam Bo is presented as a ghost of the original moment when the digital photograph was made, and duplicated in a chain movement from one bistro’s graphic to another. More specific than the broader idea of space and time, the variables intervened upon is geography and the ingredients accustomed to the soils, and distant socio-political upbringings. If Bun Bo Nam Bo is the celebrity, then these succeeding images are ghosts floating around in multiplicity.

Bistro images and the majority of commercial food photography comes from a larger body of visual culture that is of a promotional nature, looking to trigger a desire through our eyes so that we would consume through our mouths. They also navigate across environments and various channels with relative ease, increasing fluid motion through the poor category of images in its duplication, distribution, and display.⁵⁵ Beyond planar images, this type of photography is tied to a deeper lineage of food representation that includes live display of the celebrity dishes themselves - and to alleviate temporal constraints of fresh food, are sculptural versions at varying scales. In Sapa, advertising studios that produce Bun Bo Nam Bo images have a workflow that merges disciplines in unique character as a defined industry of its own. The offered services include: initial photography of the food, archival selection, custom processing, menu curating, printing, fabrication of marquees and flat signage, and installing displays on site. Each of these services are worthy of its own study in the production and support of images, as such the shift from art history to visual studies is a more suitable lens of examining food photography of Bun Bo Nam Bo Images.

3.2 Visual Culture: Context of Bun Bo Nam Bo

In essay “Visual Studies and Global Imagination”, Susan Buck Morss suggests reorienting the study of art history towards visual studies to broaden our views of images in step with larger globalized

54 Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” 36.

55 Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” e-flux, Iss. 10, November, 2009. www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

developments.⁵⁶ This proposed shift is deemed as a necessity in order to move past the outdated basis of the discourse that is established from five centuries of Western hegemony. In the current global flow of images, “communication” rather than “coinage” is what drives the shift to broaden our view of images towards visual culture.⁵⁷ Intertwined with this, is the expansion of the art industry from exclusive circles of parlor objects as deemed worthy by class ownership ideals to a larger global scale - the market of a big capital art world. With Pop Art rocking the boat by inviting images and objects of ordinary commodity culture to elite institutions of art judgment through recontextualized everyday objects, even Budae Jigae’s SPAM is elevated to celebrity visibility in prestigious spaces.⁵⁸

Photography’s role in this is uniquely between text and art, Buck Morss suggesting some other pure form of experience that resonates with Walter Lippman’s Public Opinion and identifies a contrast similar to Siegfried Kracauer’s identification of memory images. The image of the proposed reorientation towards visual studies are recognizable schematics that are built upon collective literacy, inline with Gomrich’s much earlier text on Art and Illusions. For Buck Morss, the photographic phenomenon of surface images is the medium specific quality that reorients art history to a broader and more globally comprehensive visual studies. The same surfaces produced by photography echoes notions from Walter Benjamin’s “The Art of Mechanical Reproduction “. The mediation of the object through photography is by way of flat images that are produced - more than just ghost summaries of what was once the object, these images generate a new reality that is not the object itself, rather containing only traces of it. In the flatness of the image is where Buck Morss suggests that the global arena of culture is where modifications are made. Our schematic ideas and imaginations can be manipulated, whereas the original object cannot be. This is especially the case in the contemporary situation of images where they stream and duplicate with ease, fluidly transferred from one channel to another with refreshed context and meaning each time. The relationship between the original object and its subsequently reproduced surfaces suggests separate development as images taken from these objects multiply at a rate and manner divorced from the limitations of motion of the original, as in place, person, and plated food. On this point, we will examine in the next section how Bun Bo Nam Bo images present a unique exception to this where the images taken from the original dish continue to inform how Bistros replicate the dish through food photography. Bun Bo Nam Bo has the same capacity to circulate and seek out new viewers, but it does not stray far away from our sense for noodle flavors as the dish is transformed into image pixels, and back to configurations of food molecules.

Here, I suggest that identity association to Bun Bo Nam Bo images remains relatively unchanged since its earlier graphic formatting adoption from Czech Chinese Bistros. They can be seen coming from a sub-camp of Behdad’s orientalist photography, in its methods of consuming ideas of imagined geographies, and in representing power dynamics transformed from migrant labor to economy

56 Susan Buck Morss, “Visual Studies and Global Imagination,” lecture transcript, UK, University of Manchester, 2004.
<https://www.susanbuckmorss.info/text/visual-studies-and-global-imagination/>

57 Susan Buck Morss, “Visual Studies and Global Imagination,” 1.

58 Andy Warhol, “Spam”, 1980.

based service. As a type of food photography in Czechia, they have existed even before the rise of Vietnamese Bistros in the 2010s. It is decades old, and still a relevant format of information exchange that is now recognized as a stylistic choice of branding instead of immediate defaulting for whichever graphics are the most accessible. This implies that new owners of bistros desire an individual refresh, but are cautious to shift the language of food photography away from the familiarity of established market groups that are factored as revenue constants for the payback period of upfront investment. As this noodle bowl schematic expands into the succeeding generations of Vietnamese Diaspora within the general Czech population, the familiarity grows closer through its consistent visibility in the spatial environment, and more recently - on screens. The context of their appearance is relatively the same, and instead of shifting towards new meanings associated with the surface images, they cozy up in proximity and to the point that the new wave of upscale Vietnamese restaurants omit menu-images altogether with preferences for typography only.

Emphasizing a wider lens of visual studies is perhaps suitable due to the historical and photographic context of both producing and consuming Bun Bo Nam Bo images. They exist primarily out of function-based decisions, but also fall into the realm of mass communication. They are images of food that are intended to stimulate our other senses through simulation of a culinary object that is frozen in frame but continues to transform as it settles into new geographies where they are culturally conformed as an agreeable standard for mediating our common biological need for food energy. Perhaps for this quotidian reason, food photography is easily overlooked as an important feed to our senses that inform our bodies of our environments. Its presence is obvious but also inconspicuous, as it is always there from low to high brow, operating and cooking up visuals of culinary ghosts with care not to outshine the dish in real life. It is this blend across disciplines and senses of bun bo nam bo images that fits the scope to study them out of their practices and technological lineage, rather than fitting them into pre-existing art structures.

3.3 Song Dynasty - Early Restaurant Display

The display of food to promote its consumption is a ritual that has deep time precedent from the 1980s Bun Bo Nam Bo of Hanoi. In the Far-east Orient, the era of eating outside of home in restaurant-types of establishments is well rooted in the agricultural developments and cross-region dynamics of a dynastic China's Song Dynasty (divided into two eras, Northern Song 970-1127, Southern Song 1127-1279). Adjacent neighbors, namely Vietnam and Japan, were well familiar geographies through economic ties and sometimes reluctant diplomacy on their part. Within this time, Dynastic China saw unification and relative stability that fostered its own enlightenment and Renaissance period with key developments of many fields, including: gunpowder, magnetic compasses, naval force, and wood-block printing.⁵⁹ Song Dynasty's emphasis on food security led to the integration of efficient and resilient rice grain from Southeast Asia's Champa Kingdom which overlapped with geographies of current day Vietnam. The Champa rice grain is resilient to temperature stresses between high and low, to both flooding and drought, as well as varying levels of water salinity. Within one typical season of harvest to indigenous

59 Jacqueline M. Newman, "Food in History," *Flavor and Fortune*, Iss. 2008, 20-21.

rice of China, the Champa grain can be harvested twice due to its early maturity and growth period that is independent from photoperiod sensitivity.⁶⁰ These foreign rice grains proved to be a great success in both Northern Song and Southern Song periods, and even beyond where standardized modern day rice carry cultivation fingerprints of its early ancestors. In the later Ming dynasty (1500-1600), Champa rice began to shed its name as its alien roots were forgotten and became indigenized into the Chinese diet, even its moniker became synonymous with the indigenous Hsien grain.

After food security was guaranteed, other parts of civic society began to flourish as part of a stabilized economy that functioned with print money for transactions. The wealth of trade routes led to increased diversity in types of consumable commodities that influenced ingredients and broadening of preparation methods. The urban conditions flourished with active commercial centers and street life through small business vendors of products and food. The sustained growth and city energy even led to issues of overpopulation during the Song Dynasty. The enlightenment of civic society also saw the growth of art appreciation in fields of poetry, painting, and theater. Leisure time for those above commoners, now means that there is less time spent cooking at home and dining out becomes a regular urban activity interwoven with work and recreation. The flux of movement between people displays the range of distinct cultures and flavors as encounters within society would occur around dishes and libations. Noticeably different in public policy is the loosened regulation of gastro-entertainment with night markets and their lanterns lit from evening to dawn.⁶¹ The city of Kaifeng, which was the Song Dynasty's capital before the invasion of Jin Dynasty and its subsequent relocation to the South established the following era of Southern Song, was a hub of cross regional cultures of China. Restaurants emerged in both high and low brow ethers of class and economies. Often, these eateries would be specialized in certain foods and common categories developed in 南食 (food of the south), 北食 (food of the north), and 川飯 (cuisine of Szechuan). Eateries paired serving food with providing entertainment, there was a theater-like atmosphere where performance and culinary art could even be experienced through the senses at the same time. Catering towards the more posh class, the servers would hand the customers menus before confirming the placed orders by singing through vocals. It was common that the servers were also hired theater performers. In other categories, there were also bars, tea houses, and eateries combined with brothels. The type of spending and appreciation of art was different in these settings, but still a necessary part of consumption for re-energizing.

In searching for traces of the first menu in restaurant settings, it becomes a curious question about even earlier times, and if there were menus mediating the potential of the kitchen with prospective customers. Could it be that in Ancient Egypt, market vendors showed hieroglyphics on some sort of signage or engraving? Or, what about in Pompei - before the mighty eruption? Today, the city's blueprint remains legible in the ruins. Just next to the public paths of the streets, decayed and petrified masonry that used to make up the cooking surfaces are visible with a slight bit of visual imagination. However, even these

60 Randolph Barker, "The origin and Spread of Early-Ripening Champa Rice: It's Impact on Song Dynasty China," Springer Science + Business Media, January 17, 2012.

61 Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1962), 185.

scenarios might be more similar to market and delicatessen types of displaying food and a separate type of comparison to the level of eateries of customer choice that existed in everyday life of a broader range of class and social groups in the Song Dynasty. In “Daily Life of China: On the eve of the Mongolian Invasion”, Jacques Gernet details civic and cultural life in the Southern Song Dynasty. The culinary awareness of this time not only accompanied other types of leisure, art, government, and intellectual activities, it also grew as a need for traveling professionals to eat food familiar to them while on the move.

In regards to service, menu, and signage, Song Dynasty’s restaurants echo similarities to contemporary eateries. The service provided by kitchen and waitstaff emphasize hospitality and entertainment similar to a performer and audience relationship. On the public facing facades of the eateries are systems of signage that indicate the type of establishment and quality level. Extending from the kitchen to the street, a standardized banner system mediated the communication in appropriation from military unit identification. Similar to user feedback ranking systems of five stars on most social media platforms, the banner system was based on a scale of one to five, each signifying ways to categorize eateries.⁶² For simple diners serving only a few speciality dishes would hang one banner. Eateries with more options from the kitchen with seating would hang two banners. Three banners restaurants did not exist as this was avoided due to linguistic superstition where its pronunciation is a homonym ringing “dishonesty”. For establishments where the chef has been recognized as a master of a specific regional style of cooking, four banners would be installed. The ultimate symbol of five banners is reserved for master chefs who can prepare any dish thinkable of any region. This format of visual communication not only establishes expectations for the customer from the outside, but it also suggests the price point of the dining experience.

Aside from service, options for customers is a similarity between Song Dynasty and our contemporary ideas of restaurant. In some establishments, demonstration dishes from the kitchen are prepared as visual sampling to both assist and entice the ordering process.⁶³ This simulation is as real as food representation gets, and was a necessary method to communicate exactly what the dishes are as customers from different regions might be perplexed by unaccustomed ingredients and preparation methods. However, the temporal limitation of dishes in original aura remains a challenge as they would inevitably settle and undress in sight and smell from initial freshness through work shifts. Eventually, paper menus would be an alternative to demonstration dishes. Song Dynasty’s restaurants, in operation and visual communication, are the most similar to contemporary concepts of dining establishments. It would be another 700 years after the end of the Song Dynasty before French culture developed a similar culinary category as part of civic life.

3.4 Food Sculptures

In later context from the Song Dynasty’s display of actual dishes from the kitchen, the Victorian era in Europe saw a growth in trends of modeling plants, flora, and fruits. This coincides with an English

62 Hatty Liu, “Wine Women Song,” accessed March 28 2024. www.theworldofchinese.com/2018/11/wine-women-song/

63 Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China*, 120.

cultural integration with its colonizing identity and import of knowledge from distant geographies that contributed to an institutional archiving of natural sciences. Peaking in the 1850s, wax replicas of plants difficult to describe and show in their full aura were utilized as treasures of art collection, tools of scientific lecturing, and objects of class distinction. In 'Fac-similes of nature: Victorian Wax Flower Modelling', Ann B. Sheri tracks this wax model phenomena and follows it through its application in society, as well as commenting on gendered norms that were entangled in the craft and labor of these sculptures.⁶⁴ The cross media relation of simulating realism in life size form is closely related to the edge of photographic imagery by the likes of William Talbot with "Pencil of Nature" and Anna Atkinson's contact print cyanotypes. The goal is to archive and index biological knowledge extracted from colonial territories for research and teaching within academic institutions. These wax forms are sculptural schematics that communicate the existence of plants, fruits, and vegetables from far away places. To bring the real plants back to England would have been a challenge to keep alive due to turbulent conditions of the journey, as well as the unfamiliar new environment. Wax sculptures became an accompanying tool of representation for botanists who attempted to grow exotic plants from seeds, but even when they were successful, the temporal and transportation limits made it difficult to further spread knowledge within the field and civilian populace.

Shteir focuses on the story of a water lily from the Amazon that was brought to England in seed form from the British Guiana colony. Under the care of botanists, the plant grew to an unprecedented scale (for the English) and its success was shared en masse with the larger society as illustrations in print. Its growth in England was monumental in how people conceived of foreign exoticness grown on home soil. It was even named after the Queen as a token tribute to the monarchy.⁶⁵ To document the growth process of this tropical plant in England, wax model artists created replicas of it through its different phases. While this served a demonstration and research purposes within the fields of science, it was also appreciated as a cultural spectacle with its own value for collectors. Outside of scientific interests, both amateur and professional art collectors also sought after these wax objects or worked to create them. The enamoration with creating ornamentation of flora, foliage, and food led to specialty stores that sold various versions of improved wax for time of year and application type.⁶⁶ For the hobbyist's attention, book stores carried guides on how to make replicas at home. Stores made it convenient for wax seekers as they were prepped as ready-made sheets, and precuts of specific plants and fruit shapes - essentially serving as stencils of celebrity plants. Hobby packages of predesignated flower or food types were also offered by retailers as a kit of parts. The shape-able base material were beeswax and paraffin, that would be paired with additives that influenced color, end malleability, workability, and temperature resistance. The chemical mixture process allowed room for creativity in order to control the final sculpture; however, with displays directly exposed to solar heat gain, the issue of temporal changes of demonstration dishes from the kitchen presents itself in

64 Ann B. Shteir, "Fac-Similes of Nature: Victorian Wax Flower Modelling," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol.35, No.2, 2007. 649-661.

65 Ann B. Shteir, "Fac-Similes of Nature: Victorian Wax Flower Modelling," 649.

66 Ann B. Shteir, "Fac-Similes of Nature: Victorian Wax Flower Modelling," 652.

droopy relevance in the context of wax models placed in restaurant storefronts. Victorian enthusiasm for wax replicas was not the genesis of this schematic production, rather a moment of popular culture frenzy within an art practice lineage that traces back to the Second Dynasty of Ancient Egypt.

The use of wax to replicate edible objects continued into the 1900s, early cases in pre-war Japan utilized wax models of recognizably modern restaurant dishes. The iconic origin associated with plated wax food is a rolled rice omelet with a soup-spoon's worth of tomato sauce poured over the top of the yellow egg surface, and implies a dripping motion down to the plate. Takizo Iwasaki's sculpture would later become the celebrity dish towards establishing a business specialized in producing 食品 silicone molds are created by casting real food so that the form and textures can be lifted and imprinted on the fake plastic version.⁶⁷ The artisan process of creating requires a high level of attention to detail and careful color rendering with oil paints to ensure the finished surface is visually identical to real fresh food. In this laborious process of manufacturing, simulation of authenticity is important where the act of cooking and sculpting becomes indiscernible. In the fine level of detailing, the plastic materials are sculpted in the same process as how they might be cooked if it was real food. Fake ramen is fed through noodle presses and the extruded plastics are formed and surfaced in identical format as if they were flour based ingredients. Plastic ingredients are cut with knives that would be used for edible food as well. In pursuit of some sort of perfection of realism, custom silicone molds would also be cast out of specific bistro client's dishes or their chef's plating preferences.⁶⁸ If the client's budget is large enough, their entire menu can be custom fabricated through this process. Strikingly similar to photographic reproduction and the relation between negative and positives, business archives hold silicon molds that hold the documentation to half a century worth of Japanese casual food culture. サンプル (shokuhin sampuru), scaled version of hyper realistic food samples suitable for visual consumption only. Shokuhin sampuru were placed on display to entice potential customers and also to inform them of what they can expect from the kitchen, including the amount of food, ingredients mixture, and preparation methods (is it grilled, deep fried, boiled, or raw?). Perhaps the only real thing about these food samples is the dishware which functions as it would for the customer at the dining table while everything else is only manufactured realism intended for our visual senses only. Iwasaki's omelet with tomato sauce was displayed in a department store, which was in itself a novelty in early 20th Century Japan. The environment of these commercial centers emphasizes the display and ease of visual access to the wandering customer within its interior streets. Products are placed for view with great care and attention, where the orderliness is a mastery in both communication and contribution to visual culture. Similar to Victorian wax models, the excitement for plants, and its metamorphosis into wax grew to a pop culture level of fascination of replicas where the sample version of the food appears in hyper life-like form. The goal for artisans who make shokuhin sampuru is to make invisible the gaps between ghost image and the referenced real object. When this is achieved, then the food sample has met its functional goal.

67 Tejal Rao, "The Plastic Paradise of Tokyo's Famous Kitchen Town," New York Times, accessed April 2, 2024. www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/20/magazine/tokyo-replica-food.html?searchResultPosition=5

68 Tejal Rao, "The Plastic Paradise of Tokyo's Famous Kitchen Town".

While shokuhin sampuru carry similar cultural popularity as Victorian Wax models, viewing through intent and method of display is where these two relatives diverge. Wax models were meant to be seen as much as they were collected and nestled in the institutional and private archives. They represented schematic ideas of fruit or flora that would otherwise not be common enough for consumption by the masses or even the select few. The glamor of exotic realism is exactly about what cannot be obtained by the viewer at that moment, as they are reminded by an endearing replica behind glass casings of minimal optical obstructions that promotes a mobile gaze that is focused on scanning the shapes and textures with shifting with angle of view and lighting.

With shokuhin sampuru, dynamics of what the food sample signifies is at odds with Victoriana ideas of wax models. Japan's sample food models exist because they are calling out to the viewer, saying that it is only a few steps into the storefront to enjoy a tastier version of what is seen. Within the public facing display, shohukin sampuru sit on the shelves and model themselves as a friendly host on the search for the hunger-gaze. Texture, proportion, volume - especially plumpness, color rendering, and durability are factors that make up the standard 'fresh-look' requirement of food representations in commercial application. The positioning towards the viewer is in planar and frontal, where lateral angle of view is limited by the storefront fenestration display, or position of shelving units for interiors. Relative to the hunger-gaze, the shimmering structure that supports the unique dishes of varied centers of gravities are positioned in tapered angles so that optimal posture can express geometric volume. This remains relevant to bun bo nam bo images where a typical angle of view is a downwards oblique angle to the dish, which matches the angle of the customers' eating-gaze while seated at the table.

Early shohukin sampuru faced the same issue of dimensional instability when the display unit's ambient temperature rose to malleable levels. In the 1970s, when plastics industries became fully established in the commercial civilian sector, food sample modelers switched material and techniques from wax to moldable and injectable resin-based plastics that are resistant to temperature changes and direct sunlight within the display, making the objects more durable and entirely eliminating the temporal issues faced by wax models and demonstration food dishes.⁶⁹ The new plastic materials were also more suitable alongside media technologies. In the displays of food samples, cathode ray tube television monitors were also incorporated to add to the overall information broadcasted towards the customer-viewer. With the switch to plastic models, the heat emanating from cathode ray tube television monitors were in the manageable threshold of the resin sculptures. For documentation, plastic shohukin sampuru also proved to be suitable models in the photo studio or television studios under the heat of halogen bulbs, making it possible to generate flat images of sculptural simulation to be passed forward in print and broadcasting channels.

With the shift towards plasticity, food samples become highly customized and unique where in plastic form, the extraordinary level of detail increased the amount of labor time required to form and also post process the food samples. This inflates the prices significantly beyond the cost

69 Tony McNicol, "Good Enough to Eat," *Wingspan*, (October 2008): 8-12.

of the dishes in real life, and the eatery displays become a costly expense that also binds the kitchen's production in the long term. For example, a coelacanth fish plate retails at 2.1 million yen (12,700 Euros/324,000 Kč).⁷⁰ As an alternative, Iwasaki Be-I offers a rental system so that the objects are more accessible. While similar to conditions of Victorian wax objects in valuation and ownership, shohukin sampuru differ in their intended display as they are designed for a public gaze, outside of the exclusive spaces. Within the politics of ownership, the format of rental distribution allows for these 3D schematics to be circulated and presented to a wider audience.

After claiming celebrity status in 1932, the wax rice omelet led Takizo Iwasaki to establish a manufacturing company of shohukin sampuru that remains in operation to this day with 350 employees globally, and remains the key player in a multi-billion dollar global industry with Iwasaki Co. LTD owning an estimated 60% of fake food market share.⁷¹ The company's website lists six advert mottos for the life size promotional tools: eye-catching to increase shop presence, increase hunger from stimulating appetite, provide peace of mind for managing expectations of customers, immediate understandability of a cultural literacy, enjoyable selection process for customers, and impressionable for customers to repeat visits.⁷²

The popularity of shohukin sampuru of Takizo Iwasaki's manufacturing methods and level of detail is growing across national borders where Japanese food is a desired cuisine. Similar to Victorian wax models that were both a tool and object of studying, shohukin sampuru fits a similar role for market research of bistro owners looking to design their menu and to calibrate their preparation methods. As the customized food samples carried regional culinary traits, being able to travel to different regions of Japan and viewing shohukin sampuru was a process of gathering information for bistro owners to decide on how to borrow preparation methods and distribute culinary practices to larger geography. This was especially important for the Yōshoku category of hybridization of western food with Japanese cuisine that began in the Meiji period, but only grew in mass popularity after post-war recovery. Spaghetti topped with fish roe, and even Iwasaki's rice omelet with tomato sauce is a form of indigenized western cuisine within a Japanese familiarity. In Iwasaki Be-I's current website, there are product categories that target Chinese Food, Western Food, and general Asian food. As these casual foods settle into the Japanese palette, the creative differences between regions become recognizable. The creative blend of yōshoku as represented by shohukin sampuru as mediator of plastic casting and oil paint renderings to creative food crafting that eventually grows into a cultural standardization.

Iwasaki Be-I provides general instructions to customers who have acquired or leased shohukin sampuru that emphasize the fundamentals of display. The scenographic method of

70 Tejal Rao, "The Plastic Paradise of Tokyo's Famous Kitchen Town".

71 Tejal Rao, "The Plastic Paradise of Tokyo's Famous Kitchen Town".

72 "Basic Information on Replica Foods," Iwasaki Be-I, accessed April 6, 2024, www.iwasaki-bei.com/product/ knowledge.

HLAVNÍ JÍDLA A BENTO

33. Kuře "Kung-pao" (5)



179,-

22. Kuřecí salát s tatarskou

60,-

52. Smažené krevety v těstíčku (1,2)

100,-

53. Vegetariánské miní zóvítky (1)

65,-

38. Kuře s ořechy kešu (8)



189,-

39. Kuře ve sladkokyselé omáčce (1)



179,-

40. Voňavé a křehké kuře (1,6)



199,-

40b. Kuřecí maso na železné plotýnce



209,-

43. Vepřové "Kung-pao" (5)



189,-

46. Pikantní vepřové nitky



199,-

50a. Vepřové maso na železné plotýnce



219,-

58. Hovězí "Švej - ču - žou"



229,-

60. Hovězí na železné plotýnce



219,-

67. Kachna na železné plotýnce (1)



279,-

68. Pekingská kachna (1,6)



480,-

86. Krevety na pepřem a soli (s krunýřem) (2)



379,-

89. Krevety se sojovou omáčkou (2,6) 15ks



275,-

105. Mořské plody v keramickém kotlíku (2)



269,-



B1

Voňavé kuře, hranolky pikantní polévka, salát

189,-



B2

Kuřecí kousky, hranolky pikantní polévka, salát

179,-



B3

Grilované kuře, hranolky pikantní polévka, salát

199,-



B4

Kuře na červené kari, pikantní polévka, rýže, salát

179,-



B5

Voňavá kachna, rýže pikantní polévka, salát

209,-



B6

Sladkokyselá ryba, rýže pikantní polévka, čínský salát

179,-



B7

Míchaná zelenina, rýže pikantní polévka, salát

169,-



B8

Tou-fu po sečuánsku, rýže pikantní polévka, čínský salát

179,-



B9

Osm pokladů v pikantní omáčce, pikantní polévka, rýže, salát

189,-



B10

Vepřové na červené kari, pikantní polévka, rýže, salát

179,-



B11

Hovězí na červené kari, pikantní polévka, rýže, salát

199,-



B12

Smažené krevety, hranolky pikantní polévka, salát

219,-

showing the presentation is equally important. Six key points are noted in the display guide.⁷³

Brightness - the sample case of food replica is significant for first impressions of the eatery as they make up the public image. Since the food samples are well detailed on every surface, full illumination allows the eyes to scan and build up appetite.

Cleanliness - this emphasizes presentableness to promote the brush-glazen freshness in the shohukin sampuru. Dust and signs of maintenance neglect should be avoided.

Volume - of food sample pieces should be bountiful so the entire display glistens of resin highlights. This emphasizes the option of the customers in their pre-selection, before even passing the entry threshold of the eatery.

Angle - since the food samples are plated, angling the sample so that the top surface details are easily seen by the prospective customer enhances the overall visual effect and fills it with an array of options for wherever the hunger gaze might be directed.

Price cards - these are supplementary information that is added as anchor text that fosters a clear business relationship between the eatery and the prospective customer. Almost through politeness, knowing the price creates a peace of mind for the customer juggling between appetite, desire and budget.

Signage - as a customized branding that complements the shohukin sampuru and creates a layer of specificity of the eatery itself.

Iwasaki replica influence extends the metamorphosis from food to plastic, before jumping towards larger pop culture, and even social activities. In lineages similar to SAPA's advertising studio of master-apprentice relationship, there are other manufacturers of shohukin sampuru who once used to work for Iwasaki Company and now continue to distribute the medium in their own practices. There are also spin-off businesses launched from the cultural enthusiasm towards plastic food samples. In object form, keychains and magnets of further scaled down shohukin sampuru are on display for sale, embracing kitsch as something cool. There are education workshops in Gujo Hachiman that offer hands-on experience of making simple pieces of shohukin sampuru. They display the workshop curriculum in the same format as menus with pre-paired options based on food dishes.

3.5 Food Photography Technical Parameters

In discrete ways, shohukin sampuru also makes the jump to the scientific gaze for analysis to quantify

73 "The 6 Roles of Replica Foods," Iwasaki Be-I, accessed April 6, 2024, <https://www.iwasaki-bei.com/product/responsibility>.

food photography's levels of attractiveness in photo-image format. Nagoya University published a technical research paper titled "A Study on Estimating the Attractiveness of Food Photography".⁷⁴ The stated cultural relevance of the technical investigation is credited to the growth of social photography and prevalence of food sharing through screen images. The research proposes an estimator that is input with a digital image of a food photograph, it then detects the dish and the food by cropping out the everything else in the frame, and gauges the pixel configurations within this confine. The main factors are the color and shape (or form) of the dish and food, as well as the angle of camera that is set at increments of 30 degrees, between 0 degrees (frontal elevation) and 90 degrees (top down).

In similar necessity as Victorian wax flowers for scientific research, the authors from Nagoya University used shohukin sampuru as a model of the photographs due to the level of realism and temporal stability of the food molecules to withstand photo studio conditions. The research uses a control dataset that is amalgamated from subjective human answers and the data from the mathematical analysis is compared relative to human perception of the photograph's attractiveness.

In a separate technical research by University of Tsukuba and Rakutan Institute of Technology, the deliciousness of food photographs is studied beyond the confines of the dishware with a larger set of adjusted factors that impact the overall appearance of food photographs.⁷⁵ Key to the authors of this research are: camera angle (0 degrees, 45 degrees, 90 degrees), background color (black, white, grey textured), lighting (1, 2, or 3 sources), light color (warm, daylight, shade). The last portion of high influence factor identified are the adjacent secondary objects such as side dishes and ingredients that are in frame of the photograph, which the authors call 'elements'. On this factor variation, they considered the number of elements from 0 to 2, types of elements (fries, rice, tofu), and position. The method is split into two parts that is also based on a dataset pooled from subjective human answers that is compared with the mathematical model that identifies which factors and their relationships that impact perceived deliciousness.

The results indicated light color as the overarching influence in photographs, where warm tone is consistently more preferable; the authors identify this as a bridge towards motivating consumption. A separate conclusion also found the increase of adjacent objects increased the desirability of the food representation. A second test of more specific parameters was performed, and a notable conclusion relates to the elements, and adjacent objects that could be used to add complementary levels of details about the dish itself. This author's note the cultural relevance of this part based on what the viewers' associations are between decorative elements and the food type.

74 Yasutomo Kawanishi, H. Murase, Ichiro Ide, "A Study on Estimating the Attractiveness of Food Photography," conference, April, 2016.

75 Oscar Sakay, Toshimasa Yamanaka, Soh Masuko, "The Impression of Deliciousness through Food Photography," International Journal of Affective Engineering, (November 2021): 67-76.

3.6 Food Photography System and Distribution

Bun Bo Nam Bo images, of food photography, is a result of a larger set of production practices that is intermingled with cultural references. As in the case of Victorian wax models, entire institutions acting as back-end recorders of colonial expeditions fit into a larger system of individual wax proprietors, retailers, modellors, and art sales. Similarly, Shohukin Sampuru embodies a larger industry of food samples and it is interlaced with regionally nuanced methods of culinary preparation. There are sets of rules in their design, production, display, and distribution that establish gazing patterns of these ghost celebrities. Beyond object replicas, the photographic method's stillness further transforms the apparitions of food representation to formats suitable for information distribution. Within this system, the message portrayed and implied by food photography becomes paramount to judging its performance in adequately communicating charged with details of science, advertisement, and culture. Roland Barthes offers an essay of food culture, and a basis to understanding the establishment of food photography through advertisements. First, in print form before migrating to networked screen devices where the speed of image transfer is heightened and new cultural expressions around displaying food are binded to social behavior.

At a broader level of communication, Roland Barthes's "Towards a Psychosociology of Food Consumption" examines structures of food and its cultural influences through institutions and class structures.⁷⁶ As an opening to the essay, Barthes draws comparisons of staple ingredients and food icons between the U.S. and France. The American propensity to add sugar to every dish, snack, and beverage becomes a part of everyday experiences where wine is a French counterpart of common abundance to the same effect. An example is the structure around coffee as a beverage where ideas associated with drinking it are linked with taking a break from work and charging up for more energy. Barthes suggests this attitude towards food extends beyond fueling up on energy, and possesses their own set of images, dreams, tastes, choices, and values.

In posing a baseline question to define food within a cultural context, Barthes lays out "It is 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".^F While the first and foremost role of food is to energize human bodies, it cannot be separated from what it communicates in social terms. In applying linguistic analysis to food, Barthes suggests if we were to transfer the idea of a singular communication unit to food, we could observe transformational switches between the contextual intent of particular items. The example of bread is presented as a food category with alternative versions for various situations determined by necessity of cultural functions. Within the European context, there are regular bread for typical consumption at home, and then the transformation to pain de mie which is baked in a cast form to create consistent rectangular geometry that is suitable for other means of prepared bread dishes. There is obvious categorization of bread between white and brown as it relates to the type of flour and larger industries of farming and refinery associated with it, as well as nutritional health as expressed through the flour type's own

76 Roland Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," 21.

cultural reputation. Barthes also simply suggests the pain de mie version would be suitable for party situations. Of the preparation methods, the consistent orthogonal shape of pain de mie (in slices) might also be suitable in transformation to french toast or even sandwiches. Further into the category of bread, the basic unit of ingredient between white and brown broadens the significance of type within the unit structure. Outside of European geography, we can also recall the colonial events that made up situations that created Banh Mi sandwiches, as a transformation of recognizably french baguette in mini form with layered pickled vegetables, aromatic herbs, and various forms of protein. Each of these banh mi ingredients signify a cultural relevance from the exertion of institutions of their own political agendas - if not in the category of religion, education, profession, then certainly of social purpose.

Within the larger system of foods, Barthes examines images of food advertisement and identifies three themes. While the lens of observation is French specific in consciousness, the concepts can also be gleaned at a broader level for bun bo nam bo images as they relate to a Czech environment.

Function of identity conjured by food. This part of food acknowledges a past lineage that gives a specific dish the characteristics that we expect of it. Time and events from the past are emboldened within the eating experience, linking the entire process of ingredients and preparation to the geographical soil that made it possible to begin with. Social coding of consumers. The audience of these images and their social inclination plays a large part in how the message is received. Desire from the viewer is relative to a social coding as to how to make sense and categorize the image relative to themselves. Health, as a modern concept that links lifestyle patterns to various forms of biological exertion. Food is posed as a supplement of power in energy, but also the scenarios that deem what is necessary. Health is a cultural term that is understable when it comes to eating patterns and food types, while the technical justification behind it is modern nutritional science that has its own set of rules and interests.

As the proposal for a necessary and novel method of examining food concludes, Barthes highlights that the functions that surface in importance for situation- based modes of eating, and food as a biological necessity will fall into the background. Functions such as the business lunch is a new type of ritual where dishes and the mode of eating now become environments where talking business deals occurs with multitasking gastronomic actions that is both the focal point, and ornamental medium that facilitates formal business. At a more casual end, the 'snack bar' becomes a separate type of function with modes of eating, where efficiency and speed of assembling the ingredients is translated to the consumption demands of modern life.^F Here, we might revisit the bistro environments of bun bo nam bo images. The casual atmosphere and the chef's efficiency in the kitchen produce an informal dining experience where the consistent lunch crowd on weekdays include Czech office workers looking for a refreshing bowl of sustenance to continue into their afternoon shift. Within the system of food consumption, we might regard the bistro and its display of food photography as end points within the larger distribution network of schematic images. Between the real food dishes, and their ghost-image representations, displays of bun bo nam bo are scaled spatially within media. The bistro itself is a retail-like presence where the cooked ingredients and products that go into the dish

are sourced from a larger institution of distribution centers with individuals and organizations that possess curatorial authority over what is imported and eventually distributed. Zoomed in, at a smaller scale, are the marquees and photographic advertisements of the menu dishes on offer. Within this structure, and remaining at a broad level, the distribution of photographs in Vilém Flusser's proposal "Towards a Philosophy of Photography" serves as a useful basis to understanding the propagation of images. If we take the larger systems and institutions embodied through food, as proposed by Barthes, we might check in on the public relations department and consider how images are pumped into the culture sphere where they are received, and categorized by their deciphered meanings.

In defining the basis of channels, Flusser notes the growing changes to photographic media where the traditional notions of specialty prints now exist alongside complex apparatuses of distribution that are not tied to physical photographic materials.⁷⁷ With technological advancement, the speed of image transfer from creation to viewership is streamlined in high volume through society's programmed channels. For Flusser, the significance in this growth of new industries to the photographic world is an attribute of the post-industrial environment, "where the information, and not the thing, is valuable. Issues of ownership and distribution of objects (capitalism and socialism) are no longer valid, evading as they do the question of the programming and distribution of information (the information society)."⁷⁸ Within the abundance of channels, information (images) are classified by type of data; Flusser points out that while channels appear to reflect theoretical distinction between political, aesthetic, scientific, and optative, the operation of images do not maintain course within single channels, they have the tendency to jump between formats of appearance and refreshing their identity and meanings in each channel environment. The analogy of channel does not suggest a straight corridor or aqueduct where the spatial qualities promote uninterrupted and uni-directional flow. Within each channel, there are operators who can program and influence the output information, while potentially being coded themselves within the feedback loop of the larger apparatus.⁷⁹ The themes of food advertisement identified by Barthes fits within the framework of Flusser's definition of communication, where it is a process of manipulating information.⁸⁰ In phased sections, information is first created before it is distributed to impress upon the viewer. Within the two phases, Barthes' themes of identity, social coding, and notions of health fit between dialogue and discourse of circulation.

3.7 Food Photography Instructions

Within this section of food photography, we will examine communication and information of instructive capabilities. Since restaurants of Song Dynasty's demonstration dishes and text-based menus, other formats of describing kitchen production have appeared within visual culture and established their own code-of-operation in conveying information. In the 19th century, French culinary progress

77 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006).

78 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 51.

79 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 55.

80 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 49.

within culture provided Europe with the first type of eateries where the customer is presented with possible options from the kitchen.⁸¹ Similar to shohukin sampuru displays where the visual arrangement has both image and text, we see these two ingredients remaining at odds with each other in the development of print media - specifically food advertisements and recipe books.

In more recent development, two case studies have demonstrated the progress of visual communication where text is installed as an appendage with background role. "Point it - Traveller's Language Kit" is a picture dictionary designed by Dieter Graf. The small book is pocket sized at 8.9 cm x 12.7 cm, and is horizontally oriented with spreads of various objects and situations that are laid out by categories so that a traveler in a foreign place can simply point to each image to communicate non-verbally.⁸² Originally published in 1992 under the Dictionary genre, the book is routinely updated with subsequent editions. The most recent update in 2023 is 72 pages with 1300 images of objects and scenarios. Keeping pace with electromagnetic channels, Graf editions also offer screen options with apps for both Android and Apple operating systems. The spreads are dedicated to categories and instances of situations where communication might be necessary, such as dining out where entire pages are dedicated to views of table settings. Common condiments of both Western and Eastern cuisine are laid out, with various forms of utensils. Similar pages are dedicated to table setting of breakfast items, seafood types, and even beverages (from frontal-elevation view). The image manipulation process appears goofy with multiple misaligned perspectival vanishing points between each object. They also appear to be cropped and placed with visibly altered shadow lines on the table cloth. Regardless of this amateur style of altering and presenting information, the images still perform their communicative function through the traveler's index finger.

In the evolution of recipe books, a recent cookbook by Larousse Publishers centers the food photographic image as the primary mode of communication. In "La Cuisine sans Bla Bla", food photography is further simplified and revisualized into diagrammatic schematics of the cooking process.⁸³ Ingredients in organic form are juxtaposed next to the required cutting preparation, describing size of pieces. Mathematical plus signs connect which ingredients should go together, and arrows lead the eyes to diagrams of container types and clocks that indicate cooking times. The ingredients and actions of cooking are indexed in linear fashion with an image of the end product in stylized format on the opposite facing page, showing what would be possible if the viewer generally follows the formula. The role of text is in secondary effect where they are positioned as anchors with annotations that manage expectation of viewers on quantity based information for ingredients, preparation time, and serving size. Larousse's cookbook is a significant advancement within a longer lineage of recipe books that extends back to the 19th century where the initial versions were more similar with scientific channels of laboratory preparation manuals for culinary practices of largely male professional chefs.

81 Dave Roos, "When Did People Start Eating in Restaurants?," History, accessed April 1 2024.

82 Dieter Graf, Point it: Traveller's Language Kit, (Graf Edition, Muenchen: 2016).

83 Anna Austruy, Recettes Express: La cuisine Sans Bla Bla, (Paris Larousse: 2018).

Jens Ruchatz recounts the history of cook books and the progress of incorporating photographic images of food dishes. For the channel of recipe books, the breakthrough moment was when printing technologies were capable of introducing color to food images in large volumes of book production.⁸⁴ Prior to this, block prints or even plate prints of retouched photographic images never quite achieved the level where images stand alone to express the proposed food dish in full glory. The lack of material description of food dishes meant the black and white image reproductions were always subservient to text and fell in line with the linear structures as ornament and illustrations at best. Their pictorial qualities were also limited based on the type of dishes being represented in black and white. Stews or soups appeared as surfaces of messy gray and difficult for the reader to discern clearly. With uvachrome and other reversal advancements in photographic technology, food photography of cookbooks began to transform and take on a more dominant presence through color prints. Ruchatz credits the first of these books to Alice Kuhn's cookbook "Kase-, Milch- & Rahmspeisen" that was published in 1927, where the layout of images appears in similar format to more recent cookbooks of 21st Century, such as Larousse's "La Cuisine sans Bla Bla". Images of the dish share half the page spreads where the text of recipe instructions is reduced in visual order. As recipe books with color images continue to grow in popularity, structures of gender norms begin to be programmed into the channel, as the food photography evolves to deepen its visual deliciousness. By 1942, American cookbooks targeted domestic duties of women by providing photo recipe books that coded instructions of common food dishes as one of society's programmers of gender expectations. The relationship of text and image continues to develop from Alice Kuhn's book; however, the form of food photography continues to shift in advancements in composition and framing.

The 'detail shot' is a heavyweight of food photography for both instruction books and food advertisement. With this, the camera angle is between 30 degrees to 90 degrees and the composition within the framing captures adjacent details such as utensils, ingredients, side dishes, and table setting props that contribute to the photographic atmosphere. The detail shot's deliberate frame crop of the given eating situation takes the scene of food out of context, and for Ruchatz, this becomes a deliberate method by photographers to imply abundance as the table surface extends beyond while playing with a depth of field that is not achieved in angles of frontal elevation or images cropped to the constraints of the dish itself.⁸⁵ The mathematical studies attempting to quantify food delicious in photographs from University of Tsukuba are applicable metrics for the detail shot. The quantity and types of elements that were incorporated into the study is a paramount factor. As the technical study notes, details related to the food dish can be registered in the background as secondary messages while the camera angle, through the optical geometry of conveying volume and shape of the crafted food, describes the fundamental characteristics of the dish.

84 "La Cuisines Sans Bla Blah"'s methods are also mentioned, and detailed in deeper length as the contemporary reference of recipe books. See Jens Ruchatz, "The Recipe and Photography," in Food Media Senses (Bielefeld, transcript Verlag:2023) 159-194.

85 Jens Ruchatz, "The Recipe and Photography," 174.

As Ruchatz's quest of following food photography continues, "The Recipe and Photography" essay eventually turns its attention to illustrated magazines. In similarity to Kracauer's focus of ghost images within channels of celebrity focused illustrated magazines, food photography (in color) bloomed in common sightings as its own genre in the 1970s and 1980s. Within lifestyle magazines, creative still life of food would go beyond the imaginary limitations of the text recipes and portray illusions well beyond standard expectations of home cooking.⁸⁶ In the production process of these images, the collaborative workflow between disciplines includes: 1-chefs and studio cook create the recipe, 2-food and prop stylists design the visual arrangement through plating, set environment, and visual composition, 3-photographers gaff and frame the curated arrangement. Between book and magazine, food photography jumped to the forefront of attention where the rubric of image follows text ruptured, and the image alone holds the gravitas to tell its own story in the foreground. Ruchatz credits this to the switch of channels and format of print media that allowed the image to reverse the hierarchy of text, and in turn the food photography of the magazines influenced future books. With this understanding, the image centric communication of LaRousse's "La Cuisine sans Bla Bla" in 2018 no longer seems so groundbreaking.

3.8 Tampopo Film, a Ramen Cookbook

Food photography can also transplant itself in the channels of cinema. It has the flexibility to act as a symbol or even play out the entire structure of the narrative plot. Barthes's projection of food's role transcending beyond biological necessity to a higher ranking of functions is especially convincing when we consider the media overlap between food and film. Appearing in a wide genre of film, food images is a visual language that communicates narrative relationships of intention and goals that are both social and political. In Peter Greenaway's film "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover", situations of food in a fine dining restaurant are centered both within the storyline and in the scenography. In a much different type of production, "Harold and Kumar go to White Castle" depicts the power of food advertisement on screen that launches the two protagonists on a lollygagging adventure through the night to satisfy their cravings for American burgers. The sterile looking burgers wrapped in cardboard packaging pale in comparison to the colorful adventures that they encounter on their way to their final destination - the fast food joint. Perhaps a film that more comprehensively merges food as prop and storyline concept is Juzo Itami's "Tampopo" that was released in 1985. It is a work of comedic commentary of Japan's urbanized social life, with hints of cultural tensions with Western customs, all presented through the lens of making the perfect noodles. It is considered a ramen western, that plays on the genre of spaghetti westerns. In similarity to Czech production of Limonádový Joe, the trope of a protagonist cowboy is appropriated into the story of Tampopo as five men attempt to help the damsel in distress, who is characterized as a widow left with a struggling ramen house.

The film begins with the reading of a book that describes the ideal method of enjoying a bowl of ramen that appreciates all of the culinary details in the bowl. The senses are sequenced from seeing, to smelling, to touching and finally to slurping. Along the main narrative, inserts of smaller stories are

86 Jens Ruchatz, "The Recipe and Photography," 183.

included as sidebar commentary on food culture. A Japanese version of Barthes's business lunch is also critiqued on screen in full humor at the expense of corporate macho-ism, conformity, and hopeless power distances as monumentalized by stringent hierarchy. Five senior business men are seated with one young employee who spans one to two generations more junior. The high-end restaurant presents a menu that is only text based, describing dishes of European cuisine. Without demonstration dishes or food photography, the senior business men have no idea how to process and communicate the kitchen's offerings, so they end up with exactly the same order in groupthink behavior. The young employee turns out to be a passionate foodie, and much to the chagrin of his boss, orders a full curation of exquisite European dishes - expertly paired with Corlon Charlemagne (probably a white wine).

The script is structured in the same sequencing as a recipe book. The protagonists embark on a journey to research a variety of ramen houses and glean their best characteristics. Their research methods extend observations to eating at the various eateries - a methodology much like this thesis paper itself. Through the vantage point of eating, flavors and manner of operation of the bistros can be quietly observed in between slurps. Upon completion of research, the scenes are sequenced in the same process as it would be to cook up a bowl of ramen at home with narration of how to prepare each step. Calibrating the perfect broth and noodle recipes proved to be the most difficult, and in their culinary journey they inquire with a gourmet master, who happens to be homeless. In this process omurice (rice omelet) appears on screen as a reverse apparition of shohukin sampuru's original dish. Like options within a recipe book, these side-tracking stories within Tampopo offer the viewer a moving image format of seeing how exactly omurice is prepared in steel pans, so that the scrambled eggs solidify consistently on the exterior while remaining more liquid like in the enclosed center. Even the now classic move of ketchup topping is not forgotten in the on-screen recipe book.

In each scene where the noodles are presented, the camera is always mindful of the optimal thresholds of angle and framing as discussed for food photographs. When bowls enter the frame, the camera angle is similar to bun bo nam bo images where the volume of the bowl and ingredients are legible. The orientation of the chef's hand presenting the dishes enters from the top of the frame, whereas the eater's enter from the bottom of the frame. While this is an obvious choice of camera work with blocking, it creates an intentional relationship where the audience projects their point of view to the person dining on screen.

Tampopo, as a cook book, also comments on the culture around eating noodles. Ramen, and the culture surrounding Ramen houses is within the same category of casual dining as Vietnamese bistros in Czechia. The noodles are informal within the hierarchy of dining classes, and offer a replenishing meal for amateur eaters. Juzo Itami juxtaposes this casual and sensually expressive experience of dining around the behavior of slurping. In the same posh setting as the business lunch, an etiquette class is taking place for Japanese women learning the manners of Western dining. The instructor directs the women to use a fork and a spoon to twirl the spaghetti before raising the fork to the mouth and quietly eating it, which proves to be too unnatural for the students.⁸⁷ Before they know it, the students succumb

87 The noisy sounds of slurping noodles is a socially accepted behavior for expressing excitement for noodles.

to their cultural familiarity that noodles need to be slurped in order to properly enjoy it as they begin to scoop the strands of spaghetti directly to their mouths as if they are eating ramen with chopsticks.

4.0 Bottom of the Bowl

The consumption and production of images creates an ever growing archive of photographs, film, and sculptures of food. For celebrity dishes similar in stardom to Bun Bo Nam Bo, online platforms exist as alternate versions of the harddrives at the SAPA advertising studio. They present other forms of ordinary images that are prevalent in transmitting visual information.

Regarding currywursts, Joachim Schmid draws his attention from the sparse print images of the fast food to its rigorous documentation on Flickr, where Schmid discovered about 30,000 images online. This volume of photographs that document food before they are chewed up and digested is a fascinating surprise to Schmid. Increasing speed of image production and distribution has been a consistent driver of photographic innovation, where technological transformation has a democratizing effect on access to the medium. Schmid's further exploration into the online archives discovers entire categories of banal images by recreational photographer-users in ways that he finds would have been unthinkable (in terms of human behavior) within a previous era with analog photography. Extending beyond the technological realm and physical context of Bun Bo Nam Bo images, two possible categories of further study as related to ordinary images comes to mind:

The first is the vast and forever sprouting online archives of ordinary images that contribute to visual cultures. Paul Frosh has identified stock images as one of the channels that these exist within. The degree of global ordinary-ness to these images are heightened as they put on generic identities to be optimally recognizable across audiences of various visual backgrounds - increasing their potential to be relatable wherever they might appear. This is especially appealing for beneficiaries of consumer culture. The mode of operation of these image systems would require scrutiny, if we transfer the idea of entire institutions behind food items, we might also question these ordinary images in the same way - which structures claims ownership to these photo archives, and what are the cultural drivers that create the schematics for their production, and the ones produced within a causal loop?

Second, is the shifted behavior pattern of etiquettes as photography relates to our lives. What used to be unthinkable in the era of food illustrated magazines, is of people recording themselves in the act of eating. Through social media and video streaming, this is a frequent occurrence where the photographer (content creator) is simultaneously the distributor (platform user). Even the recipe book format, metamorphosed into film recipe books, is compressed to mini-clips on social media that succinctly instruct methods of preparing entire dishes. The photographic process is not just shortened for increased speed, but completely collapsed into the movement of a few actions, and bonded to user behavior in a feedback circle of influencing and being influenced.

The significance of linking digital images with platforms that host user distribution is a significant

shift from the channels of Bun Bo Nam Bo images that exist in material physicality. From their miniature version on menus, to the signage on windows and marquees, the image technology and industry that makes their display possible have been around for decades. If we can think of images in class hierarchies, then we can also acknowledge the seniority of Bun Bo Nam Bo images; they have been around the block for a while now, but this is by no means a call for a retirement party. Even with more posh Vietnamese restaurants abandoning Bun Bo Nam Bo images, these bistro images will continue to be produced and remain in the visual field of the built environment - that is, unless something sways our interests away from slurping noodles.

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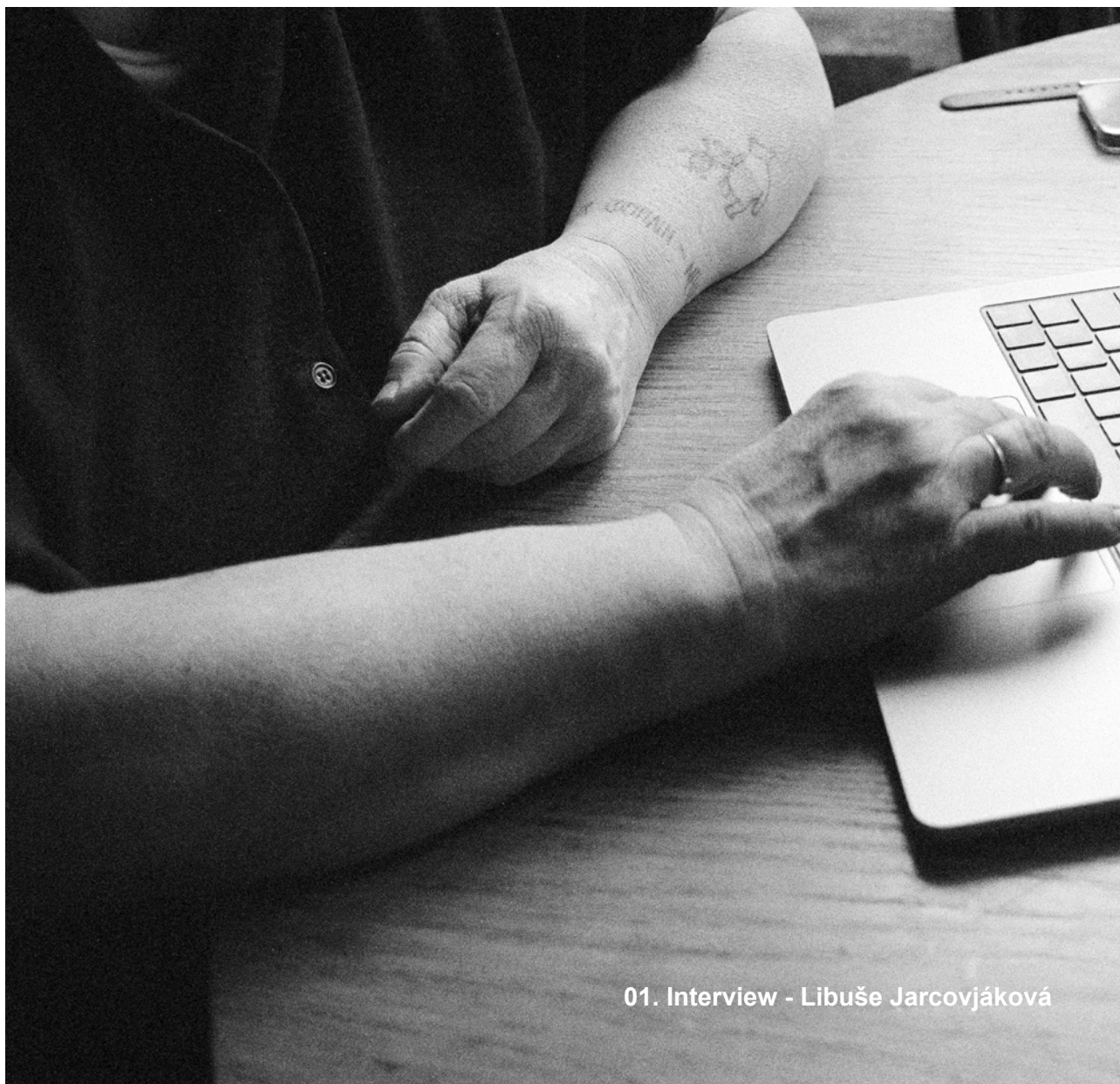


Appendix

01. Interview - Libuše

02. Interview - Chu

03. Interview - Tùng



01. Interview - Libuše Jarcovjácová

Mike Ma: Recently, it seems especially with Vietnamese classmates that this is a popular topic in the Czech Republic.

Libuše: Especially from the beginning.. I don't know... nowadays it is a cycle. Probably, firstly, at the beginning and for a long while after...the Vietnamese Community was pretty closed off. Now it is better, because there is the other generation in Czech society. The young generation speaks Czech and they are more or less innovative and also feel they are at home.

Mike Ma: Do you mind if we can open the laptop and see some of these images together?

Libuše: No problem.

Mike Ma: I was thinking that you have family in Houston.

Libuše: No, no. I was invited for an exhibition of the T-club from my 1980s photograph. So they invited me as part of the festival.

Mike Ma: That's cool. Because in Texas, I'm not sure if you have seen this, but the Chicago and Texas area has the largest community of Czech immigrants. I learned after moving here that Texas has the earliest Czech immigrants.

Libuše: Yes, Chicago too. Also in parts of New York as well, but I believe Chicago is one of the most, and then Texas which is more rural connected... I have to check your equipment here.

Mike Ma: Ah hah, yes this one is a recorder connected to the camera. You can take mostly still photos with it alone and use it as a lens for a separate recorder, but by themselves they would not work as continuous video camera. And this way with the monitor, we could see ourselves a little bit. And this project you were telling me about, revisiting the Vietnamese people you photographed in the 1980s. Is this something you are planning to work on soon?

Libuše: You know... I had a special offer in 1981 if I would like to try to be a Czech language teacher of a Vietnamese group who were coming here to Czechoslovakia. I was studying at FAMU at that time. I was immediately interested in it because... again, the feeling brings me to the middle of something that is visual and very interesting. So I started it, and did it for 3 to 4 years. I spent a lot of time with Vietnamese, and living with them in the dormitories. I had pretty good access to these groups. They came here one after another. I don't know how much you know about the system, and how it was in the '80s.

Mike Ma: Yes, we should definitely talk about it. I was also curious about the other photography in the 80s that you were making. I guess from when you were younger to the Berlin era, and the time at FAMU. I remember from your lecture, there was a difference between the photography that was focused on, perhaps something more classical in style and your approach to it.

Libuše: I studied at FAMU at the age of 25, after some communication...because of my social statute... my parents were not the right persons in the socialist society. My access to FAMU was complicated, I couldn't...

Mike Ma: And this is for political reasons?

Libuše: Yes. My parents were both painters and I was not politically engaged, but somehow also probably something personal so I didn't manage to make the entrance examinations for 3 years. Always it was some political test, not really test, but the in-person exam was not only your artistic abilities in your work, but also your political profile. There was some commission and they had some questions, and some points, and if you are the person who is good for studying or not. And

I was not admitted for at least 3 years. I started there at 25, after I worked in the factory. When I was there, I was already quite independent, mostly in the sense of my visual technique and photographic technique and my life was already very wild, and not too much... I was not a good student.

Of course I was schooled in this classical czech documentary. A big part of this project was done in this documentary style. I use it also as my final work at FAMU, for my master I did this book about the Vietnamese.

I started '81 in January. I was one of the teachers. Until the 80s, every month there would be 1 or 3 airplanes with hundreds of Vietnamese and they were divided into groups all over Czechoslovakia, and they always had 3 months of Czech language and then they started to work in some factories.

I started to teach the first group of students from Vietnam, and it was weird for me because we absolutely did not have any materials. We didn't have textbooks or dictionaries, or any methodology. So, to try to teach them and bring them the Czech language was very difficult, and it was possible only through some games. We didn't have any bridge because the European language was pretty new, and they knew only Vietnamese. I knew English, but not many people knew English at the time.

So we started one day...at zero and after 3 months, they spoke more or less Czech. More or less. Less, let's say.

I spent this 3 months from Monday to Thursday from 8:00 to 13:00 in very intensive contact. Small classrooms, here are some photos of the classroom. They lived in the same house mostly I worked in Prague 4 where this... also from the school.

Mike Ma: In the dormitory, and they were having quite a lot of social life.

Libuše: Yes, but the problem was that the minority, not the minority... the majority totally refused them. They came here with an open heart like we are your friends, and we are coming and we will help you. They came here with this message, and nobody explained it to the Czech population and said why they are here.

They lived in dormitory, always about one room for two persons. In the beginning, when they come everybody is given 3000 kc and were brought to the department store to buy some clothes. So everybody has very similar clothing in the beginning. You can also see here they have short hair so this is the incoming, new people coming first with short hair.

Mike Ma: And when they came, were they able to choose which part of Czechoslovakia they can go to?

Libuše: No. It was already done.

Mike Ma: It was assigned by the Czechoslovak government?

Libuše: I'm not sure, but probably yes.

Mike Ma: And how did you come to be contacted as a teacher?

Libuše: I met somebody who was a translator, but not for Vietnamese, but for a similar program with the Cuba people. This man was responsible for Cubanese, but in the moment they started it was a big lot of people to be able to take such a risky occupation. It was scary. I was in the class with 15 young Vietnamese, and we had no idea how to communicate, so I played some games and I used some pictures. Step by step we learned the basics. It was still very good because these first groups were very optimistic and full of hope, something positive happening. But day after day, they met such big hate in the streets, and big reclusion that suddenly they lost all optimism. They lived in this dormitory and only studied Czech language. In the beginning they got food from... restaurant for them, but they were not able to eat it because it was not good for them. Step by step they stopped using this prepared food, and started cooking themselves and found ways to live and learned a little bit of Czech. At the beginning, most of them only had one contact person and it was the Czech language teacher. We were mostly very friendly to them because we saw the situation and we had no information either. My aim was to bring them as much Czech as possible and show them how to live and how to make shopping, but it was almost impossible.. Okay...they tried to communicate with Czech people.

So here you can see people around 30 for example.

Mike Ma: Were they very aware of your camera?

Libuše: Yes, firstly it was in the time that they liked it to be photographed. It was a time when they were not aware of their personality and so on. I was asked, and you can find it in the photos, I was asked to do the photos for them, for their families. This is with the cars.
Here is a photo of a group of girls.

Mike Ma: Is this the examination room?

Libuše: No, this was just a kind of classroom. It was always somewhere in a part of the factory. This is very significant for me, because it was the first day when they visited the working place, this is the main person who brought them around. It is some bistro, you can see how the czech people are really wondering what they are doing here. You can see he is speaking Czech to them, but they are wondering 'what is he saying to us'?

Mike Ma: Were they looking for beer or food?

Libuše: Parties. They started to have a lot of parties later, but in the beginning they had big trouble with alcohol, because they do not have this enzyme so they were very red or pink even. But it changed with time.

Mike Ma: And who is this gentleman?

Libuše: One of the students who asked me to make photos for him. One of the important reason, and it was good for them, they came here also for economic reasons. They were allowed to buy, during their 4 years, they could buy 2 mopeds, a sewing machine, and bicycle. When they make money, they bought it as quickly as possible and send it to Vietnam. It was very important for them. This guy here is already preparing his moped to send to Vietnam.

Mike Ma: Jawa?

Libuše: Jawa, yes.

Mike Ma: They are sending it to their families.

Libuše: Yes, during this 4 years...

This one here is from a party also - before the party.

Mike Ma: And you were also living here in the dormitory with them.

Libuše: For this, it was in Prague, so in this case no. But when we were outside in Prague, yes. Also in the streets, they were very isolated. They tried to have some contact with people. I will show you another photo.

This is the first day when they came, you can see everybody has the same coat. Also you can see they have already longer hair so it is after 3 months.

Mike Ma: So when they come they have a fresh haircut.

Libuše: Jo jo. So when I was in Prague, I was living at home, but I visited them everyday for coffee.

Mike Ma: What do you think they were looking for when they came here?

Libuše: Partly, some of them were very deeply trusting of the communist regime, and they really trust they are here for the brotherhood - for a mutual help. They were told they are here to help us with our industry, in fact the reason was absolutely other. Vietnam had a big debt toward Czechoslovakia so it was part of the deal on how to pay back the money.

Mike Ma: Labor.

Libuše: Yes.

Mike Ma: Was this from the era of the American war?

Libuše: After, but also the last period of the American war beginning from 70s but mostly 80s. Vietnam as a socialist republic was existing around this time. These debts are after the war.

Mike Ma: I see, so they provide labor to pay back. Was Czechoslovakia in need of this labor force at the time?

Libuše: Yes, I think there was a lack of people in the industry especially outside of Prague such as textile fabric. I was often somewhere in North Bohemia where almost every small city had a group of Vietnamese - they worked in the factory.

You can see how inhumanist it was.

This one here is a bit difficult for me. The most open minded person and he died. Nobody knows exactly why...he was found outside of the dormitory. I was searching for what happened and nobody was able to tell me. For me, it was hard, this experience.

Mike Ma: And this group here is much younger.

Libuše: Most of them were around 25 to 33 years old.

Mike Ma: Were they able to tell you what they were doing in Vietnam before they came here?

Libuše: I am afraid they were not able to, but as far as i know... they were mostly in the army because there were other conflicts like China, Laos, and also with Cambodia. There were local conflicts, and I had a feeling these boys went out from military and took the opportunity to come here. Okay, there were some advantages as I told you already. This possibility to spare some money, and save some money, and to buy these goods. :
This is some more party. Also, some of them started...

Mike Ma: Ah, volleyball.

Libuše: Yes, this was very rare because they didn't have any social life. They only have some match together with another Vietnamese group from another factor.

Mike Ma: So there is some community organizing that they are doing.

Libuše: Yes, mostly by themselves and it was not directed from anybody. It shows me the strong part of their character because they were able to find their own way on how to live here. At the

beginning it was forbidden for them to have contact between boys and girls. But in the end, they got married sometimes. Always during the weekend, Vietnamese groups would travel from one part to another to visit, and make good food, and have party and socialize with people. This is very special. This here is hand reading.

Mike Ma: Ah hah, so he is reading this gentleman's hand.

Libuše: Yes, it was somebody from the streets. This was very rare.

Mike Ma: So he is describing to him what he is reading.

Libuše: This man is actually a translator, so he knew a little bit better Czech than others.

Mike Ma: This was very spontaneous.

Libuše: This one here is one of the teachers and her son. A lot of contact in the beginning was through the teachers.

They did these panel parts for the panel houses.

Mike Ma: The modules.

Libuše: Yes, somewhere in Prague-4.

And for example, this lady is also a teacher. She was very open and invited the Vietnamese to their home, and finally she married one of them and had a daughter. It was also very rare.

Mike Ma: This was the 80s.

Libuše: Yes.

Mike Ma: So was her partner able to stay in the Czech Republic for longer than 4 years. And I see here, they are wearing American brands.

Libuše: Yes, they started getting really good in business with sewing jeans. They were also very good with black market, and gray economics.

Mike Ma: Trading.

Libuše: Trading, yes.

This man here has to go back because of some illness so he is preparing some things to go home.

Mike Ma: So he is returning with a lot more luggage, carrying these Czechoslovak commodities. And this guy here is preparing a Jawa to send. And where is this setting here?

Libuše: It is Prague-4. Do you know Zelený Pruh? It is on the hill in Prague 4. The metro station is probably Budějovická, and then bus to Zelený Pruh - maybe you can find it.

Mike Ma: That is interesting because Prague 4 - Libuš is hosting Sapa, the largest Vietnamese community.

Libuše: Yes, I will see if I have something more. I have a lot of work, but this topic.. I was not too much into it nowadays so I owe myself some book of this.

You can see this uniformity. It was at the beginning, everybody had the same clothing.

And these photos here, I did for them and they were sending it to their families to show how good they are living here.

This is the boy I told you about who is dead. He was from South Vietnam, and very clever. Spoke very quickly Czech, much better than others. I don't know what happened to him.

Mike Ma: That is also interesting because he is coming from Southern Vietnam.

Libuše: Yes, in the part of Danang. Not Ho Chi Minh city, they were not so ideological and had their own meaning about socialism.

Mike Ma: And most of the other students were coming from the North?

Libuše: Yes, from the North, near Hanoi.

There are people, for example, him. They were very uneducated, and it was almost impossible to teach them something. He is coming from military, and you can see how he looks. It is like something from another century. The other ones were much more vivid and communicating much better. There were differences between them.

I thought I had some more photos here, maybe on my website.

Mike Ma: These ones here are very interesting, their portraits in front of very industrially advanced things. To show that they are coming to a place...

Libuše: Not Only. I also did a lot of photos with the cars. Probably it is somewhere here... They send it home to show they are able to buy these cars. They are very pretending it is their own car.

I will try to check for more photos, maybe on my website. Probably.

It is strange, I don't have the photos here. Would you like some more photos, I could send it to you here.

Mike Ma: That would be great, especially these photos of the portraits that they are sending home. In many ways, this photographic relationship compared to a Jawa moped is just as important.

(shutter click)

Libuše: (searching laptop for more photos) I could have been more prepared, sorry.

Mike Ma: And they are all wearing slippers inside. Are they slippers they bought in Czechoslovakia?

Libuše: Yes, this was part of this first packet, they got some pajamas, some shirts, some t-shirts, 2 pairs of trousers, winter coat, and socks. When they first came, they were always taken somewhere to make purchases.

I can't seem to find more, maybe I am nervous because of the cameras because I can't seem to find it.

It's funny, but I can't find it.

Mike Ma: I think I remember a lot of these photos that you showed at the FAMU lecture.

Libuše: Nevermind, I will send it to you. In this slideshow, I really have a lot of slides. Here is one pdf with the photos of Vietnamese so I will try to show you this. It means 'Brotherhood Collaboration'.

Mike Ma: So this is the government's relationship with each other.

Libuše: Yes, and this is one of the group of students that I taught. This is something they were working on during the hours from dormitory. I will send the pdf to you right now. It was in the beginning of the time that there was something like 'menza' for food, but they were not able to eat it.

Mike Ma: Too big of a cultural difference?

Libuše: Absolutely. And here is more of the dormitory. You can see a little bit of a kind of military style they still have here.

Mike Ma: Ah, the cohesion. Did the military style feeling change overtime that they were here?

Libuše: Yes, there was also big disillusion from this feeling of socialist system is the best, and communism is the best, because they saw how much of the Czech people were skeptical towards communism.

Also, this is really sad. This was in Kampa island. It was very sad, I took them to the city a lot.

Mike Ma: And what is the sadness that you see in this photo?

Libuše: Lack of women. Alone-ness. And this is the one with the cars.

Mike Ma: And how big were the photographs?

Libuše: I made them mostly in postcard size to give to them to send home in an envelope.

Mike Ma: So they came to you as photographer and teacher, if you can help them communicate this back. And for them, they don't own the car, but they are just walking by?

Libuše: Of course, and probably they pretended. And they have suits mostly, and try to look very comfy, very wealthy let's say. I don't know what they wrote, but it might be possible they wrote 'I just bought a car'. It's difficult to say.

Also, this was very important, these plastic bags. It was something to have plastic at the time.

Mike Ma: Ah hah, because it was quite new, this convenience of a new material.

Libuše: Yes yes.

Mike Ma: So, how did they learn from Czechoslovak people, this disillusionment with communism?

Libuše: It's difficult to say. Partly, they came to just a big wall of racism. They were not admitted, they were refused so the communication went very difficult. Only just a few people were able to try to communicate with them and explain to them something. I also didn't tell them the communist party was the best. Okay... I couldn't be absolutely open, but I just show them that I don't agree with everything and not to think everything is so ideal. We have big troubles with Soviet Union. It was a little bit dangerous, but on the other hand I was pretty much open.

Also, here you can see somebody already bought this moped.

Mike Ma: And they are sleeping next to it.

Libuše: Also, this ... of being like this composition of the map of Czechoslovakia, and this polystyrene of something like art, and something that brought them home.

Here is maybe a week before he died. It is so sad for me.

It was also a very sad story for me, he was my close friend. Tung. He was also from the Southern part of Vietnam. He was so interesting, very important person for me. He learned quickly Czech and when he started to work, he had conflicts during his work. There were 2 groups of workers: Czech and Vietnamese. There was a fight because of one connection to electricity, so they fought because both of them had something to do and only one connector. And it became something like a fight. He got a punch, and then he pushed the man and he fell into some hole and broke his collarbone.

Mike Ma: He (vietnamese worker) fell into the hole?

Libuše: No, the Czech guy. And he was sentenced for 2 years in prison because of heavy injury, and then he was immediately sent back. I lost all contact with him. What I was able.. I found for him a lawyer, but I was already living in Berlin so it was difficult for me. I am so sad. I was hoping I would find him again one day, just name - but nothing more. He ended up in the prison for 2-½ year just because he wanted to work as a good worker.

So they started to mostly live together, being in some small groups doing some eating and party. Some of them drink a lot later.

Mike Ma: Did any of them express to you an interest that they would want to stay in Czechoslovakia forever?

Libuše: I think it was not possible. They could prolong the 4 years with another 4 years. So some of them agreed to stay there until the end of the break, or to come a second time. I know several, but it was only a few people who stayed here in the Czech republic. This deal continued till the late 80s, always new groups came here. The groups came were able to stay here, and it was the beginning of the Vietnamese migration to the Czech Republic, but most of them are back in Vietnam.

I have one dream, and I hope maybe it would be possible one day to do it. To go to Vietnam with a translator, and they should have... and I would like to find some students from that time, and to do with them again photographs with autos or some location of their situation. I hope it would be one day possible to do it. In the short future.

Should I send it (pdf) to you?

Mike Ma: Absolutely. I think this would be so fascinating to find them again. It is 40 years of difference at this point.

And in their small communities, you mention they are also cooking together. Are they also doing something else together?

Libuše: They have a common economy somehow. They put the money together and probably have some deal that they buy together the stuff and cook probably in some shifts and also I think they did a lot of things. In the same time, I taught a shorter period, the Cubanese. They were much more able to be socialized. First they start jogging, everyday. I was outside of Prague with them. They played baseball and they were pretty good at it. They make big jogging everyday, several kilometers and they were able to have contact with Czech girls, and communicate with the legs and hands with no problem. They were very soon socialized. They start to become, and never ever have been in such a situation as the Vietnamese. It was always something which was to us, abroad from the communist party, from the government, and people... you know our culture was monoculture. Okay.. we have gypsies, but it was part of society for some decades so foreigners

maybe you could meet once a week with dark skin, but one of few students who studied at Charles University. Otherwise, it was very monochrome and mono-nation of society, and suddenly you see something from pretty much exotica without knowing why. Always the people had a feeling that they came here to take from us..

Mike Ma: Jobs?

Libuše: Jobs, and food. So I was often part of situations that were very unfriendly and racist. I know for them, the Vietnamese, it was very hard and sad.

Mike Ma: How did they react to this?

Libuše: They ask me... how it is possible to have apartheid here. Why we are so racist? And I tried to explain to them that there is no communication between the government and normal population. Without knowing it is really a deal from this communist party. The people here... the normal students and workers didn't know so they were not able to explain why they are here.

Mike Ma: And between when you first started teaching, the first group of students and closer to the end when there was a new wave coming... did you notice a difference?

Libuše: Yes, absolutely, because by then they already have information. The new coming later, they were very skeptical. They didn't want to learn much because they have the feeling it is useless and nobody wants to speak with them anyways if they speak better Czech or worse.

Towards me, and towards us teachers, they were still very friendly. But no motivation, and no enthusiasm. Earlier, it was very enthusiastic, and they were really hoping it is real brotherhood, and that everybody wants to be with them and find something in common - but it was not at all.

Mike Ma: That is a very big shift.

Libuše: Yes. So this independency, I think it helped the later groups a lot of what stuff to bring from Vietnam. What would be good to be sold, and what is possible within which community is possible to make some business. They were more and more interested in business, gray business, and black business. They just started to be concentrated on the economical part of the deal, no more ideology anymore. It was enough, and it was probably the ground of these people that they started these small businesses. And SAPA later.

Mike Ma: Did these students have any dreams or ideas, that now they are in Europe that perhaps they would go to other parts of Europe?

Libuše: No, it was impossible. You could not travel anywhere. I think they didn't have passports, everything was administered somewhere by the chief of the group. The group was actually

organized, they always had somebody who is the ideological leader of the group, and some meetings. Political meetings as well. So it was pretty much strict - no freedom.

Mike Ma: Back to the social side with the food, when they realized they could not adjust to the foreign food here. Did you see what kind of food they were cooking?

Libuše: I learned a lot from this because mostly they used chicken. Always it was chicken, they did this Nem. They brought from Vietnam, the rice paper. But at the beginning, they made fish sauce from the ordinary chicken spices like maggi and worcester, and they tried to find the taste from the ingredients as they found there, but later they brought everything from Vietnam. They did mostly... Bun Bo Nam Bo.. it was not there at that time. It was all kinds of chicken and fried rice. At the beginning they could not eat this European type of rice. They could only eat jasmine rice, so later they brought everything from Vietnam.

Mike Ma: So how did they bring it? Every group coming would just know to do it from the others?

Libuše: Yes, and also I think they sent it by post as well. They were able to send very big parcels, so probably they also got it this way. I remember it was a special kind of.. Probably narcotic tea. I remember one day, somebody got this tea in the parcel and they drank it in the evening. I think they could not sleep for 2 days. The whole group could not sleep, and they were really like zombies. It was too strong, such things happened from time to time. But this group at this time had no drugs in this society. They smoke a lot, they learned to drink a lot, but no weed or such things. It was not usual at that time.

Mike Ma: So did they teach you how to cook some of the stuff too?

Libuše: Yes, I learned Nem, these rolls. They also did some special dumplings with the meat inside, especially in winter. It was big meat, and inside was the meat.. I think it was beef with some spices. I was very happy always when I was invited for some party. I loved it.

Mike Ma: And what did you think the first time you were eating this Vietnamese flavor because it was not common then.

Libuše: Yes, that is true but I was already at one time in Japan before this. So I was a big fan of asian food. It was home, I loved this flavor and I was really happy. I did a lot of things and pretty much learned cooking from them. Even though in the beginning it was difficult, later it was more and more possible to find something really authentic from Vietnam.

Mike Ma: And for you, since being a teacher of the Vietnamese migrant workers, to let's say... 1990s, 2000s, and now, how do you see signs of the community here because it is quite different now than the workers who came.

Libuše: I think this generation and period, there is this one really big problem with the isolation and no ability for communication. I see it is more and more open through the young/new generation of Vietnamese born here. It is possible it is already common to speak with the people in the shop with better czech and have some communication. This isolation.. They got through with their enthusiasm and diligency. They work 3 times more than Czech so naturally they became rich. They have bigger and better statue, step by step. Also the ambition of the parents to their children is enormous. They want the children to be well educated and doing good jobs and so on. So, I am teaching now... I have probably 3-4 vietnamese in the group and what is for me very important and interesting is I can't find these cultural differences immediately. There are some but not noticed immediately. If we are working on some topic, a few years ago it was simple to recognize some other cultural basis and there is something aesthetic of the content that you can recognize other histories, but now it is almost gone.

Mike Ma: And these Vietnamese students you are teaching now, were they born in Czech Republic?

Libuše: Yes, they were already born here.

Mike Ma: And they are integrated with Czech society?

Libuše: And also in the groups, no language obstacles, no culture obstacles. Sometimes they have bigger trouble with the parents or grandparents when they are traveling to Vietnam, and they are not able to speak as well Vietnamese as the grandparents are expecting. It is funny.

Mike Ma: Wow, you have seen the whole spectrum. I am curious about the students who came in the 80s, there was a separation between the genders...

Libuše: At the beginning, yes, it was strictly separated.

Mike Ma: And it was concerns about... that there would be uncontrolled family groups?

Libuše: Yes, exactly. It seems that pretty soon it was evident that it is not possible to keep them separated. At the beginning it was when they decided to marry, it was a huge problem. But later less and less... they started to build. They were not mostly living together in the same city or village so they had to travel a lot.

Mike Ma: How did they travel?

Libuše: By bus mostly. You could see on Saturday morning at the Florence station you could see 300 Vietnamese at the platforms. One group travel to Liberec, another to Moravia. Everywhere.

Also small cities and small... I don't know villages... but cities definitely. It was for them better, because when it was small society, they mostly had better contacts sooner. But not always, just only it was less anonymous.

Mike Ma: I'm also curious at the individual level for some of these people. They are coming with the idea of freedom, but was there any sorts of looking for freedom at a personal level... let's say even sexuality?

Libuše: I'm afraid... I left Czechoslovakia in '85, and at that time it was pretty much very strict because of the ideological leadership in the groups so it was not so open. I suppose it was logical that it would come with this freedom, and feeling of freedom. It was normal development, the ideology must be broken sooner or later because the air was already full of this freedom somehow even if it was still very strict.

Mike Ma: This is great. How are you feeling?

Libuše: It is weird. I will send you this pdf immediately. And do you think this is useful for you?

Mike Ma: Absolutely. I was also interviewing some of the Vietnamese community, and more specifically the ones caught in the middle. They were not born here, they came maybe around 12 years old and sent to these smaller places in Czechia.

Libuše: Yes, where their parents were having their shops.

Mike Ma: Yes, and they started learning, and then after a while the goal is for everyone to come to Prague and work here. One of them, his name is Chu, his father came in the early 80s to work at the škoda factory. He went back to Vietnam in the late 80s, and then he decided to bring his family to Czech Republic.

Libuše: Yes, so I suppose it is one very good model... it is not so unusual, we don't know, but there are many families like this example. It was the same practice in DDR, in East Germany and I think it was very similar process with some slight difference. I know also some Vietnamese, they were living here and then they moved to Germany because of bigger profit and economy. They are living there... pretty much satisfied and not missing the Czech Republic.

So I would like to see your final work.

Mike Ma: Thank you, I will finish writing about this in April, and then prepare an exhibition in May. I think the fun part of all this is working with the advertising studio in Sapa that makes the bistro images of visual culture. They make all the signs and menus, and it is very fascinating talking to them because they started in 1995, and they remember because of Windows 95 and established digital photography. They were making all the photos and now they have this process of so many

1000 gigabyte hard drives of these images since 1995. This is so fascinating to me, because of the focus of Bun Bo Nam Bo and the reason why in the 80s they were not bringing this dish because it was probably only invented in Hanoi in the late 80s. It was an alternative to Bun Cha, which is pork. I talked to the Vietnamese friends and I asked when they ate Bun Bo Nam Bo. They never ate it in Vietnam and it was only after coming to Czech Republic they know of this.

Libuše: So it is quite a phenomenon. Because in the beginning, nobody was cooking bun bo nam bo at that time, and nobody knows.

Mike Ma: Yes, and when I speak with my Czech friends who are around 22, they can remember their first time having Pho or Bun Bo Nam Bo because it is such a different experience. So if they were eating it around 10 or 12 years old, it is actually very similar to the Vietnamese children. This dish somehow became the best seller in these Bistros and the economies of the Vietnamese people who are not often cooking this dish at home. So in this advertising studio, the chef would come and look at photoshop and decide how much beef and beansprout they want and they are changing it immediately in photoshop with pixels.

Libuše: Yes, this is something very obvious and also hidden at the same time. So there is something of a discovery behind it. So, keep me in touch, and I would really like to see the result of this.

Mike Ma: Thank you, I will invite you to our exhibition.

Libuše: And, maybe... it could be connected to the food as well?

The interview with Libuše Jarcovjáčová took place in Prague on March 3, 2024. Set in her attic apartment kitchen - on a round table, laptop, and exhibition print of her photographs from the teaching period in 1980s.



02. Interview - Phạm Mạnh Hùng (Chu)

Chu: Man, you have no chopsticks.

Mike Ma: (laugh)

Chu: I need to take a photo of this dinner set up for my girlfriend.

Mike Ma: Alright, welcome Chu. We were just talking a little bit about Bun Bo Nam Bo about how it is like a salad sometimes. This is usually how this is served, right?

Chu: It is supposed to be in a bowl, not a plate – yes.

Mike Ma: Yes, we have a sort-of-bowl plate situation going on here. Usually, we have a bowl of exactly what you see here, the sauce comes on the side, or in the bowl already? Then it just gets mixed up.

Chu: No, normally it doesn't come on a plate. Something deeper, everything is inside the bowl and the sauce is inside already. And then you mix it all up and enjoy it. But I understand why totally, you would have it (sauce) separately, and pour it on top. Because fish sauce is a little bit more pungent than other sauces. The smell can be, you know, intimidating for some people. They can have it with fish sauce, or soy sauce – which I do not recommend.

Mike Ma: And does it look the same as where it is from in Vietnam?

Chu: Really speaking... I have never had this dish in Vietnam.

Mike Ma: The first time you had this was in Czech Republic?

Chu: Yes. My mom made it for me. And she said "Yeah, this is something for the summer-fresh".

Mike Ma: And did she learn about this dish here?

Chu: I do not know, but I would assume she knew about it in Vietnam. She is also from Hanoi. My family, in fact, is from Hanoi.

Mike Ma: And so, for people who know about this dish, do they know where it is from?

Chu: The name of the dish is named Bun Bo Nam Bo, which translates to 'beef noodle from the south'. But it is actually not from the south, but from the north.

Mike Ma: What gives you hints about that? Are there similarities to other Northern dishes?

Chu: Man, this is quite good though (slurp).

Mike Ma: Thanks, I made it myself.

Chu: Oh, you did?!

Mike Ma: No.

Chu: (laugh) (slurp) Okay, side story. The fish sauce is really well done, it doesn't have that kind of too much fishy smell. Enough umami, saltiness, enough sweetness. The herbs just come together really well – this is really nice. Sorry, back to your question.

So, do people think it is from the North or the South? If you ask people from Prague, Czech Republic, 2nd or 3rd generation, they probably will think it is from the South. If you ask the first generation, either they would not know where it comes from or they know it is from the North. It is very misleading because of the name. Bun Bo Nam Bo is literally from the South. It's not from what I know. It is in the '80s on, people would go to have Bun Cha which is the most similar dish to this one. Bun Cha is with pork belly, grilled pork belly. This is with grilled or stir-fried beef, depends on

the restaurant handles. Basically, it is two identical dishes but with two different ingredients. One is with beef, and one is with pork. So, as far as I know, the restaurant where they first served the beef is because people ask if they can do beef as an alternative to pork. They did, and it became this. One of the most famous dishes in Czech Republic. And I assume only Czech Republic, or Eastern European – maybe. If you go out to France, it is totally different because of immigration. Vietnamese French is different, they immigrated a long time before during the colonial era and because the French were there. It is very different. In the US, Canada, you probably would not find this dish.

Mike Ma: I've never seen it there.

Chu: Yes. Well Bun Cha is a signature dish in Hanoi. Vietnamese people in North America are usually Southern (Vietnam) people because that is where the US Army was based, in the South before. This is why they fled to America.

Northern people, majority of us were communists and this is why we don't go to the US. Southern people do because America was there before, a lot of them fled there because of that reason.

Mike Ma: And I think the flavor profile of the South is quite different.

Chu: Yes, it's different.

Mike Ma: For me, coming to Czech Republic is the first time I am really seeing Bun Cha and Bun Bo Nam Bo. Pho and Banh Mi are almost more global in the diaspora.

Chu: Coming from Hanoi, I have to say, the Banh Mi from the south is much better than the North.

Mike Ma: I'm going to get some peanuts here.

Chu: So, the Banh Mi in Saigon, they have many more things inside. They got the pickled veggies, meat balls, and they've got interesting sauces. In the North, we stick to Pâté which is French. Well Banh Mi as a baguette is also French – French fusion. We have egg omelets, or char siu.

Mike Ma: A bit more Chinese then?

Chu: Yes, a bit more Chinese. There is a good mix of a bit more Chinese and French. In the south, how do you call it... they are more liberal. They need some acidity. More pickles. The meatballs are nice. The gravy is nice, in the baguettes. It is really interesting how they elevate dishes. And for me, I think this should be the standard.

Mike Ma: And because of this difference, it shows different Vietnamese people migrating to different parts of the world.

Chu: Totally. I think Banh mi is more universal. You can do a bunch of things with that and still call it Banh mi and still own it as a Vietnamese version regardless of it being from North or South.

Mike Ma: Yes, the whole basis of that is a creative fusion. And when did you come to Czech Republic?

Chu: Yes, a long time before I ate Bun Bo Nam Bo. I could tell you when I first ate Bun Bo Nam Bo. Okay, so I came here in 2003, and I was around 13 years old. Everything was new and fresh.

Mike Ma: Even the language.

Chu: Everything. The road. The people. I came from a big city, much bigger than in Czech Republic. The amount of Vietnamese people available to talk to... actually, because when I came here that was when Sapa was first opened. They were opened a year before. It wasn't crowded, it was just a market where people could sell stuff. My family was there as well. So, I met a lot of people in Sapa.

Mike Ma: This is Sapa that used to be a chicken processing plant? Then Food distribution? Were there other places doing this?

Chu: Sapa started... let's put it in a nice way, the other market Bokave ran out of contract and had to move.

Mike Ma: That was another Vietnamese distribution center?

Chu: Yes, it was one of the distribution center in Czech Republic, and not even 1 kilometer away from Sapa now. Pretty much from the back of Sapa now. Sapa started, I think around 2001 with a plan. I came in 2003, that is when it first actually got merchants to move into the shops at SAPA.

Mike Ma: And who started it?

Chu: There is a group of Vietnamese men who have shares in the other market before, or they are doing well in business and they have money to invest. At that time, I think there were around 4 or 5 guys pooling money together.

Mike Ma: Becoming the landlords?

Chu: Yes, from what I know, SAPA is rented from the government for 99 years. It is not completely sold. As of today, I do not know what the status is. I think there are about 22 shareholders, officially or unofficially. I don't know... more unofficially.

Mike Ma: And are these shareholders the elite of the Vietnamese community here?

Chu: Probably they feel like they have power, and they think they are elites. But there are people wealthier than the SAPA owners. And they do not have any shares in SAPA.

Mike Ma: Did they get wealthy here, or did they come to Czech Republic with some investment money.

Chu: Most of the time they come here poor. They work their way up.

Mike Ma: How do they do that?

Chu: So, we have to look back... there is a story from my father. 1992/1993, they call it the... this is going to be funny... 'Golden Shower' – whatever (laughs). Referring to the Czech Republic in general.

Mike Ma: You are talking about fortune opportunities?

Chu: Yes. It is a direct translation. For all the North American, it is not what you think it is. Let's say golden rain or silver rain. This is the time when Czech Republic got away from communist and started to have an open market. Everything else produced in Europe was more expensive, so Vietnamese or Chinese people would come to the country and they would import from China or Vietnam for much lower prices. It is quote, unquote, whatever you have on the table, they will buy it. It was just different, everything was cheaper. It was more affordable to people.

Mike Ma: Did they recognize that things were from China?

Chu: I think they didn't care.

Mike Ma: It was just accessible.

Chu: Yes, they didn't care where it came from. A t-shirt is a t-shirt. A coat is a coat. Just cheaper. And they would buy it. So Vietnamese people would accumulate wealth from that era up until now. If it goes well, it gets passed to 2nd and 3rd generations.

Mike Ma: So, the 90s was the first generation to become entrepreneurs. Business owners, and no longer in the factories.

Chu: Yes, that used to be the case. My father came to Czech Republic in 1983. He was a mechanical student and was working in the Skoda factory outside of Prague. I can't remember which city he was in. There was a student exchange program – not Erasmus! It was... kind of let's say... communist era move. So communist countries would exchange students, as a matter of fact my auntie went to Russia for student exchange. My father came to Czech Republic for exchange

program. I don't know what exactly they called the program. He came to study, and after he had a period to stay and work and then he went back to Vietnam. He went back to Vietnam to work, and returned to Czech Republic after he was married to my mom.

Mike Ma: After studying in Czech Republic, did he feel he had something different to offer when he returned to Hanoi?

Chu: Uh... I think as my father did not have a business sort of mind. He was more like "Okay.. I studied something and came back home"... and he became a motorbike sales man. He knows mechanics and knows how motorbikes and scooter bikes work, but I don't think he went too much with using that knowledge to try something different.

Mike Ma: What was the inspiration to come back to Czech Republic after marriage?

Chu: Good question, because I know the answer. Because of his friends who were also studying in Czech Republic and then went back. They had an idea, what if they return to Czech Republic and try to make a living there.

Mike Ma: Did they have people they knew who were already doing this?

Chu: They stayed longer than my father and they saw that Vietnamese people were making kiosks in the market to sell stuff and it worked. His friends said "How about we import stuff from Vietnam to Czech Republic?"

Mike Ma: This was '90s?

Chu: This was 1995/1996. I was 5 years old.... So, he left to Czech Republic to import goods from Vietnam and try to sell. They were in Ostrava or Teplice... one of these cities. My aunt is still in Ostrava.

Mike Ma: You have quite a whole base in Czech Republic.

Chu: Yes, we were everywhere. In terms of business... when you have a market where there are less accessible groups, like you have something to provide... you can sell faster and make more profit than for example Prague people who are wealthier and have the ability to access goods and they wouldn't think to go to the market where foreigners are selling. Like the flea market, it's not so common that people will go there but if people are in the villages and small cities... They think it is a good deal and will take it. This is just my guess. Vietnamese people mainly started in smaller cities and then we moved towards Prague because it is bigger with more opportunities.

Mike Ma: So, when you first came in the early 2000s, did you go to a small city first?

Chu: Actually, I came to Ostrava when I was 8 years old, 1998. My parents had to send me back because they did not have enough money to raise me at that time here. I don't want to say too much of a burden but it adds to the economic hardship so I was sent back to Vietnam, and then I came back later to Prague. The funny story is my mom says in Ostrava "we can survive but we cannot be comfortable" so we need to look for better opportunities. So, she asked my father if we can move to a bigger city, and my father says "Yes, let's go to Prague where there are some sort of markets where there is Vietnamese community." We can also still enjoy the culture and food without sacrificing anything. We can still make business.

Mike Ma: So straight to Sapa?

Chu: No, no, that was 1998 SAPA didn't exist then. Sapa is a 2000s thing. It was another market before.

Mike Ma: What was SAPA like earlier? I see tour groups of middle-aged Czech people there these days. I don't want to say it is melting with different identities, although there are Korean restaurants and products from all of the Asian markets.

Chu: So, I have a fair share of experience in SAPA, and how they run SAPA in general. So before, it was concentrated in wholesale, and wholesale only. If you have a company, you have a shop, you do wholesale... they would refuse if you ask for one piece of clothes. They work in volumes of cartons and pallets. After a while, it started when the recession hit in... 2008? 2009? If I remember correctly. It hit bad - the economy of the world, US, Asia, and Europe – a bit later, maybe 2009. The business was going down, people didn't have much money to generate enough business. People were abandoning their shop and not renting anymore, or asking for lower prices. The owners of SAPA were thinking about transforming SAPA from a business center to a cultural center where they would promote more food, cultural... more festivals going on, and everyone is welcome. Of course there is still a business side of it, but you can see SAPA is pushing more and more into cultural events. You can see every mid-autumn festival they would have parties for the children, roller coasters, and games. Every year, for the past almost 20 years. Recently, we had our lunar new year event in SAPA which is rare to see because of Covid in the past 2 years. It was one of the rare occasions when they would invest into something more cultural, and invite everybody to enjoy regardless of where you come from.

Mike Ma: And these are the owners, and shareholders who are open to this?

Chu: Yes, every festival that happens has to go through a process of agreements because it is still a business center. If you want to have a private event, or a private party, you still have to go through them. The interesting thing is they agreed and promoted having it so it is kind of interesting to see how it evolved from strictly whole sale business center to a more cultural...

Mike Ma: And the temple? Was it always there?

Chu: The temple came around 10 years ago; it wasn't a temple, just a container stacked up there.

Mike Ma: And does it have a big significance for Vietnamese people in SAPA?

Chu: So, in the Buddhist side of Vietnamese people, we have always been very close to that. We related to Buddhism, so having a temple or pagoda is what people wanted. I noticed there was a group of wealthier people who invited monks from Vietnam to carry out some rituals. They were looking for a place to build a big pagoda or temple in Czech Republic but because of legislation and internal affairs, they couldn't do it, so they opened a small little temple in SAPA. There is a monk there most of the time. They would invite different people from Vietnam to celebrate and carry out different rituals which is interesting.

Mike Ma: So, in many ways SAPA is an embassy and cultural affair hub of Vietnamese.

Chu: Now that you say that... our embassy, have they ever done anything that is culturally significant for Vietnamese people in the Czech Republic? It is very close to where I live in Plzeňská. To think about it... SAPA has done more than the embassy themselves. I have friends from Thailand and every year they celebrate the Thai relationship with Czech Republic. I have never seen one from Vietnam (embassy), or if it happened it was probably exclusive, not for normal people.

Mike Ma: Sapa's cultural element is really growing from business. It's almost like there is work life balance molded into the same place.

Chu: Yes, our parents don't take holidays or a day off. They work there the whole month, and have their friends there. For them, it is to go there to have business but also to enjoy some time with friends. I don't work in Sapa so I don't have that kind of relationship, but I grew up in Sapa. My home was opposite the street near the kiosk stalls. I was running around on my skateboard in Sapa. The warehouses have perfect surfaces for skating.

Mike Ma: I always found it a difficult place to photograph, or the people were very aware of the camera. I remember a few times that I went with you, it was really easy to make photos in Sapa.

Chu: I just know more people. They see me, and they know who my father and mother are.

Mike Ma: It is a generational familiarity.

Chu: It's funny, I know a lot of Vietnamese people around my age. Not because I know them personally, it's because I know their father and mom. It is because I used to be taken to their homes for visits, but the kid would be hiding in their room. And so, I just end up talking to the

parents and suddenly know them more. It is funny. You imagine that kids would hang out with each other and talk.

Mike Ma: Why wouldn't they hang out? Was there a reason for that?

Chu: I don't know. Maybe they were born here, and they don't speak much Vietnamese.

Mike Ma: Ah, I see, this is the type of difference you talked about before.

Chu: Maybe it is also because my father, and their father are close friends. But they don't have anything with me, they don't go to the same school or talk outside of the family setting.

Mike Ma: So, there is no sense of connection.

Chu: Yes, exactly.

Mike Ma: And so, what is this thing about the graphic design with these Bun Bo Nam Bo images that you have some experience with?

Chu: So now there are more design houses and shops that do the banners and marketing materials. Back before, there were maybe 2 places that did it. You either go to one or the other. They would have a pool of images of different dishes. A lot of them were Chinese bistro type of food style, and some were Vietnamese inspired. They would pull it from google, or somewhere else. They wouldn't make a photograph themselves, because how do I put it... it is very homogenous where you have one type, or set of menus, that everyone would lean to because somebody has successfully developed the menu and run the business as is. The other people sort of just follow, so the menu doesn't really change.

Mike Ma: And about the positioning of dishes, specific types of mixtures on the plate...

Chu: Even today when you go to 10 different Chinese bistro and open up their menu, it is going to have a lot of similarities because everyone uses the same images. Maybe a little bit of this and that in photoshop. Look, if you have the cash to spend on a photographer and a designer for your high-end restaurant, then sure do it. But a lot of bistros have limited resources in terms of money so they would go for the easiest options.

Mike Ma: And the least risky is also going with the menu that already works.

Chu: Yes. If you go to any Vietnamese restaurant, you can have Pho Bo, Bun Bo Nam Bo, Summer rolls, Spring rolls. Every single one.

Mike Ma: And they are just working from an archive. But what happens if some restaurant wants to make their Bun Bo Nam Bo a little differently with ingredients. Do the images show that?

Chu: As of now, they would go out of the way to plate the dish in the restaurant and take some photos. Now, yes. A lot of places offer some services to go out and make some better photos. People now invest more into visuals and marketing materials because how it is more important now than 10 years back.

Mike Ma: So, this is the next category up from the more casual bistros that we have seen.

Chu: Yes.

Mike Ma: I've noticed a few of these and their prices are quite high for comparable things. It is definitely displayed in this way that resembles more French restaurants in terms of presenting food options. In those situations, you don't see images.

Chu: I think it is better, much better. We are stating our dishes as famous, and you don't need to see what it looks like. You have to see how spaghetti Bolognese looks like? No, you don't need to. Do you need to know how Pizza margherita looks like? No, because it is just as famous.

Mike Ma: Are you saying we are at this next phase, where Bun Bo Nam Bo has been here and has a common understanding of the dish.

Chu: Yes. There is an idea of it, just like how I don't know how Kung Pao chicken really looks like. (laugh) So, yes Bun Bo Nam Bo is how you have presented it in the beginning. It always looked like that, with the same type of ingredients. Cannot miss out on the fish sauce.

Mike Ma: So, this is not a super popular dish in Hanoi where most of the street credit is pointing to as its origin. Even different from other fusion foods of Vietnam of foreign influence, maybe Pho and Banh Mi for sure. I feel like there is a sort of standard as to what is good Pho. How does that compare to Bun Bo Nam Bo? How do you see authenticity?

Chu: You are asking a guy from the North. I am from Hanoi, the capital city. My family originally is from Nam Định, which is where pho comes from. Now Pho is a statement of Hanoi, and I grew up in Hanoi eating so much Pho in my life. I have a very high expectation as to what Pho is and how it should be. You can't imagine... last year when I returned to Vietnam. The first thing I ate was Pho. Right off the airplane, my cousin took me to a street in the old quarters to have Pho there. I had to have it.

Pho from the North and from the South is so much different. If it is me to judge which one to prefer, of course I pick Northern. Still...the Southern one, of course, has more interesting elements to it than let's say Pho from Hanoi. I cook as well. I cooked it 2 days ago.

Mike Ma: Yes, I saw your Instagram story.

Chu: We cook it with beef bone, beef, and depending what type of cut you want. More fatty or lean. The broth is quite simple. You got the beef bone, add onions, star anise, coriander seeds... what's it called... cinnamon, and another one that I forget the name. Rounded herbs, anyways you toast it or grill it to get the aromatics. You boil the bone for, let's say 8 hours. You want everything to be cooked for about 10 hours. You add the aromatics in the last 2 hours, so it isn't overwhelming with aromatics, so you still have the sweetness of the broth from beef bone – very beefy – and the aromatics from the different spices inside. It should be very clean and light, not too sweet, not too savory, very refreshing. The noodles, what I prefer is freshly made noodles. Like how you would make pasta, make fresh rice noodles. It has to be flat, please! For everyone out there, if you have Pho, it has to be flat noodles. Recently, one of my friends sent me a video of a fusion pho where they use this noodle – the rounded rice noodles – called bun noodles. If you have this, it automatically changes the dish to Bun. It isn't Pho anymore. Also, I don't want to call out any names but there is this pop-up kitchen recently in a very famous district of Prague. I'm not going to call it out. They have the broth, and they added meat in there, and Chinese dumplings. No, not Chinese dumplings. Gyoza. I don't know if it is pan-fried or steamed. And they call it Pho-čko. I wrote to them "Sorry, but this is not right".

Mike Ma: (laugh) what line did they cross?

Chu: They crossed every single line. If you're taking Gyoza which is Japanese dumplings and you put it in a beef broth without Pho noodles... what is wrong with you? Everything is wrong here. I'm sorry... but. I don't know if they added spices for the aromatics, or if they simmered the bone for 12 hours. Sorry, I don't care. Without the flat noodles, it is not the dish and entirely something different.

Mike Ma: Is this the next generation of Vietnamese food?

Chu: I think they just got lost in translation. Completely.

Mike Ma: So, it isn't a category of Vietnamese-Czech food. It is just very experimental.

Chu: No. It was just Czech people trying to make something fusion.

Mike Ma: Ah okay, it was Pho being presented by Czech people.

Chu: Yes. It's pretty much making me sad. I wrote to them, and they never replied to me. So okay, I will drop it.

Mike Ma: It would be interesting if they hired you as a chef. Or consultant.

Chu: I think I would refuse.

Mike Ma: Okay, but that is a good point because you have a really clear idea of what makes Pho in this Northern point of view. But for somebody who probably saw numerous images of Bun Bo Nam Bo in the bistro signages before you actually ate it from the first time your mom cooked it for you. How did you conceive of it, and the level of Vietnam-ness from it other than the similarity of the fish sauce.

Chu: First, when my mom made it, I thought it was something she made up herself because the dish is so simple. If you think about it.... How to prepare Bun Bo Nam Bo. You boil the rice noodle. You stir-fry the beef, add the herbs, add the fresh vegetables – salads. You just mix the fish sauce how we always made the fish sauce. This is the same as dipping Summer rolls, Spring rolls, Bun Cha – you just add it in. For me, it is too simple to be a dish. For example, with Bun Cha... everyone has different secrets for marinating the meat. But it all comes down to charcoal grill, it has to be on live fire. Now, I know we don't have the chance to do live fire, open fire, in a restaurant, but it is now missing the point. The very essential point of Bun Cha. If you go to Vietnam, to the street vendor, you see the big smoke coming out of a small charcoal grill and they are just flipping the meat. That is Bun Cha. I know it is Bun Cha, I can see it and smell it from across the street. This makes the dish so different than... like if you go to SAPA, definitely you can have real Bun Cha with open fire and they grill it in front of you. That's how it should be. It is very sad that restaurants here cannot do that. So, what my mom did when she opened the restaurant, she would grill the meats in Sapa. Cool it down, and then vacuum seal it, and put it in the fridge. Whenever the customers wanted it, she would stir fry it again which is not the same thing. When you have a wok, you have the wok haze where the smoke gets into the meats and there is this charcoal smokey smell that makes its way into the dish is how it is. We try to preserve it to the point that we can, because having a charcoal grill in a small bistro is impossible. So, with Bun Bo Nam Bo, I could not believe how simple it is.

Mike Ma: Does this remind you more of a Chinese wok stir-fry method?

Chu: Actually, it is. Because in Vietnam we do not use wok too much. Here, yes because it is faster and more efficient.

Mike Ma: Is that something absorbed from the Chinese?

Chu: Yeah. Also, I believe a lot of Vietnamese learned how to cook in foreign countries through Chinese restaurants. This would not be rare. Chinese restaurants are everywhere. So, if we learn something from them, it would be totally normal. With a wok, I could pump out... let's say from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM, I could pump out roughly 200 Bun Bo Nam Bo. Non-stop. Easy. This is how I worked at my mom's bistro before.

Mike Ma: Her bistro was in SAPA?

Chu: No, it was in the city center.

Mike Ma: What was the process for that? Did she acquire the business from someone else or start from scratch?

Chu: From scratch.

Mike Ma: Tables, menu design, kitchen layout?

Chu: Yes. I was there for the whole process as well. That time when Sapa was not making business for her anymore, and she was tired of being there so we started thinking about Vietnamese restaurant serving Czech people. It was 2013 when we thought of this idea. 11 years ago, there weren't many Vietnamese restaurants back then but now it is popping up everywhere – for the better.

Mike Ma: Popular now. And what were some of the main parts of that? How did you set up a bistro that serves Czech audience?

Chu: We were focusing on bringing original taste, and as close to home as possible. We didn't want to go the Chinese bistro route – sorry Chinese bistros, if it is offensive – it is just westernized. We didn't want to go this route. We didn't even have Bun Bo Nam Bo at first, but it is a cash cow so you keep milking it and people will have it. For example, the Pho... we really took care of it. The other dishes as well, we took care of it like we were eating from home. Caramelized pork belly with eggs or for the Pho, we had a 100 liter pot that we boiled for 12 to 14 hours. It was huge.

Mike Ma: Was it with the type of pot and burner where you need to have it on the ground?

Chu: Yes, we started with that one. Then we saw in Germany that they have this type of gigantic soup boiler that is 120 liters. It worked so well so we bought it and it was fun to use. You can boil it, and close the lid and turn off the electricity entirely and it keeps the heat inside so well that the next morning after 12 hours of break, you come in and the broth is still 90 degrees Celsius. It kept the heat so well, double isolated, like a thermos cup. Gigantic. A jacuzzi kind of size. It was so easy to clean as well.

Mike Ma: And how did you guys present the menu?

Chu: It's funny, I'm into collecting cameras and photography. So, I had a canon 450D back then with a kit lens and I just took photos. Mom made something, and I took photos to put into the

menu. I went to some guys in Sapa, and I asked them to crop out the background and had just the dish. It wasn't much of a design.

Mike Ma: Was it also displayed tiled of all the dishes?

Chu: Yes, because back then we still considered this very new and need to inform people especially in Prague 1 where you have a lot of tourists and a lot of people who never had a chance to go to SAPA. SAPA is in Prague-4 that is 10 kilometers away from the city center – not a lot people go there. So how would people know about the dishes? Of course, we had to put the tiles and the photo. We want to introduce the food, but as time goes... we add more and more stuff to the menu and we just ended up with a menu with Bun Bo Nam Bo, Pho, and Spring rolls. The rest is just in explanation as to what is inside, and people took it well. Stir-fry rice... with shrimp, and this, and this.

Mike Ma: So, you see they are taking the time to really read the menu. Do you ever serve the food and the customers are confused between the menu photograph and the actual food itself?

Chu: No. The menu was very clear, words and photographs. No miscommunication. But I had a customer that I clearly remember. They ordered Pho, and they asked me "Where is the fresh herbs", "Where is the, you know, side dishes"? I said "I'm sorry, what? We don't do side dishes with pho". They ask "Where is the Hoisin sauce?" I said "Sorry, we don't do Hoisin sauce" and they tell me that back in the US that was complementary and it was always there. "Where is my mung bean?" I'm sorry that is outrageous, because we serve Northern Pho. It is very simple. You have everything in your bowl, there is no extra. If you have chicken Pho, you add a little bit of lemon. If you have beef, you add a little bit of vinegar. Not the other way around, and this is how we have it. There is no extra vegetables and hoisin sauce inside. This comes back to Saigon, and how Southern Pho is. It is interesting because they have a bunch of herbs on the side. If I see that... if you put a bunch of herbs inside the pho, it will suck up all the flavor into the herbs and mung bean and it hides the flavor of the broth. How can you enjoy it like this?

And then I had Pho in Saigon and then I understood how they have it and how it didn't affect the broth, because the broth was simply stronger and more flavorful.

Mike Ma: Punchier.

Chu: Punchier. More aromatics. So, it doesn't kill the flavor and just adds to it. For me, it is a totally different dish, and I would not say it is bad. It is good by itself – just different.

Mike Ma: When I lived in San Francisco, I noticed this. Anytime I ate Pho, it seemed to probably be more Southern style, and so I came across this place where it was quite different called 'Turtle Tower' (restaurant).

Chu: Ahhh Turtle Tower (monument). Yeah! Yeah! Man.. I live literally 2 minutes away from the turtle tower. It is in the middle of Hanoi.

Mike Ma: Ah, okay so this is probably what they named it after. The minute you go in, the smell of the restaurant is different. There was more steam from the kitchen, and the flavor was much lighter. That was the first time I realized that it isn't the same Vietnamese food that I have had since Canada. All of the food I've had there seemed more southern style

Chu: Yes, interesting. We have the saying that the more South you go, the sweeter the food gets. It's true, it's reflected in the cuisine.

Mike Ma: Is it a weather and geography thing? What is available, and appetite?

Chu: That, I have no answer to. I don't know because if you go up north to China, things just get different. There are more salty foods, and more oily food. I'm not really entirely sure where the influence comes from. I never thought of that much.

Mike Ma: Speaking of these customers you had who were more used to American style of Vietnamese food... Sriracha is everything.

Chu: What? Sriracha? Yes, I refuse to put that in my food.

Mike Ma: Even that, I think it is Vietnamese who went to California and came up with this sauce. This is what I understand. There is this one town that is just producing Sriracha sauce.

Chu: Yeah, and now we even have a crisis with Sriracha.

Mike Ma: There is too much Sriracha going on? Or too little.

Chu: Too little, there is not enough supply of it.

Mike Ma: Over manufactured?

Chu: No, under manufactured, there is not enough supply to sell. So, you don't have the original Sriracha anymore. If you look around, you find a bottle of Sriracha then you can probably flip it for money, that's how hard it is.

Mike Ma: The original, red and green bottle cap?

Chu: Red and green bottle cap. A lot of companies are now mimicking that branding but if you

actually look at the bottle from Huy Fung food, you don't find them anymore. You don't find it anymore, man. That's crazy.

Mike Ma: I'll have to ask friends in California if they are still seeing it.

Chu: Maybe in California, yes. Here, we just don't have it anymore.

Mike Ma: So, if I find the connects that will be our import business.

Chu: (slurp) Yup, we can do that. Sriracha is definitely very interesting because it has a very mixed flavor. I liked it... on my pizza – yes. But on my Vietnamese food... no. They don't quite use the bird eye chilli. I think they use jalapenos or other chilis more available in North America. It's just different, and also sweeter. But aside from that, the chili is just different.

Mike Ma: I am curious though, the bistro your mom was running in Prague 1, you had this idea that the flavor would be authentic to what you guys would cook at home and what you are used to from Hanoi and Northern Vietnam. Have you ever come across places where the flavor is in a completely different method where it is catering more towards Czech and Central Europe.

Chu: Okay, so let's go back to Ostrava. It is a little town that people don't know about, but my cousins are there. We were out drinking on the streets, and it was late night. There was one Vietnamese restaurant that was open so we say "let's go there". Hungover or drunk with pho is the best thing ever. We went there, and I expected noodle soup with a lot of broth. We went there to eat, and there was barely any broth – just noodles. It looked like a Bun Bo Nam Bo dish with Pho ingredients, it was strange. As for me, I could not hold back. "I'm sorry, but what is this?" So, one of the chefs came to me and said "I'm sorry, I didn't know it was for Vietnamese because of the guy who ordered it". So czech people don't like it too soupy soaking in water and broth. So, I asked him "what is the point?", the chef said he is just selling to Czech people.

Mike Ma: So, the chef is Vietnamese?

Chu: Yes, and then later he brought me a totally normal Pho. I was glad. But first there was barely any broth. In Pho there should be more broth than anything else in the bowl, but you don't drink all of the soup. You always leave a little.

Mike Ma: Why is that?

Chu: Uh... so I'm not sure if this is true, but I am just hearing it here and there. Reading books, and hearing from my parents... After the war, you don't want to present yourself as a poor person. A poor person would eat the plate clean. We always want to have something left over so it seems we have enough for ourselves. Especially for Vietnamese in Hanoi, we always leave a bit of broth left,

or just a little bit of food.

Mike Ma: So, this is about social appearances.

Chu: Yes, at the outside of home. But at home, you always finish your Pho. This is all an unspoken rule for some reason. You have to have a little broth left, you don't take a spoon and start drinking broth. I was taught at a young age and I am still doing it now. A lot of friends from Hanoi are the same so I assumed it is common practice. Okay, but if you are at home with a bowl a rice, please finish it or else mom is going to be holding a sandal.

Mike Ma: So, this Czech experience with Pho was quite weird but the chef fixed it to meet your expectations.

Chu: Yes, and this is quite strange to me that they would completely alter the dish just to make it approachable to other people.

Mike Ma: And if you were to launch your own bistro again, how would you do it? How to consider the audience, and which dishes would you pick?

Chu: I would definitely pick Pho as a first choice because I am always into that dish. Some things also less well known like minced beef with lemongrass.

Mike Ma: Over rice?

Chu: You can have it as it is or over rice which is fine as well. Or, some homemade dishes. I wouldn't have a set menu; I would do it seasonal or even weekly depending on my mood. But something that is more Vietnamese-to-Vietnamese than Vietnamese-to-the-Western World because if you look at SAPA that is how extreme we go with Vietnamese-for-Vietnamese. One restaurant serving one food. You go to have Pho.. two choices: beef or chicken. I'm sorry, nothing else. Vegetarian, I'm sorry – no. Vegan, definitely no.
Or the place you had the Bun Bo Hue, they used to have one dish which is just Bun Bo Hue, but now they have Bun Bo Nam Bo as well because so many people are asking for it so they say "why not"?

Mike Ma: Ah yes, I saw that there 3 days ago. I saw two Czech people eating Bun Bo Nam Bo, and I was so confused.

Chu: (laugh) Yes, because it doesn't cost them (the bistro) anything else.

Mike Ma: They already have the same kitchen set up.

Chu: All the ingredients are there. You just either put it on the wok, or you put it in the broth. It is

very easy. It is called 'economy of scope' where you have the same ingredients, but just different processing. Or you use the same ingredients to make a different dish. For them, it is just easy to have another wok -that's it. Really, rarely anybody (from SAPA) asks for it (Bun Bo Nam Bo).

Mike Ma: So, you would have Bun Bo Nam Bo on your menu too?

Chu: I would....have to think twice about it. Because I don't want to be any other Vietnamese place.

Mike Ma: But would you, if people are coming and asking you for it a lot?

Chu: Yes, it is a cash cow. At the end of the day, it is business. The main point of having a business is to make a profit. If you don't make a profit then it is not a business. It is as simple as that, basic baby business theory. If too many people are asking for it, then of course... let's please the audience. But would I be proud to serve it? Only if I find a way to make it so much better that nobody can compete with my dish.

Mike Ma: So, with a creative spin on top of it.

Chu: Yes, but that doesn't mean I'm going to lose the noodles and only have the stir fry beef with the salad and call it Bun Bo. No. But maybe something with the beef. If I have to make it again, I would have a good play with it.

Mike Ma: But you wouldn't necessarily do the same play on Pho.

Chu: No, Pho has to be originally. Like, I'm sorry... there is lobster pho, duck pho, wagyu pho...

Mike Ma: (laughs) Haha in California for sure.

Chu: You need to know the rules first before breaking the rules. How many people who make these dishes can actually make a bowl of pho that is original to the root of where they are from? From the North? From the South? I don't discriminate, I mean original to their roots. Can they do that? Or can they only make a spin-off and call it innovation? Pho is not easy, man. We have a Facebook page in Vietnam dedicated to Pho where people comment on where they will go, how good it is, and how bad it is. We take it seriously! People would join the group, and try to make reviews about it. It is such a national dish that people take pride in it. I'm just not sure if everyone could create the dish that is authentic as close to the root as it should be. It doesn't matter if you add rib-eye steak in there or wagyu... maybe the wagyu doesn't work because the fat has too much flavor and it will overpower the broth. You don't know... My grandfather went for Pho with wagyu in it and said it was horrible, and he is the man who goes out for Pho every single morning.

Mike Ma: For breakfast.

Chu: Yes, and to one place and one place only.

Mike Ma: And do you know when Pho became a thing in Nam Định?

Chu: I think pho in Nam Định started with the noodle itself, but Pho as an entire complete dish was more established in Hanoi. Some say it was a fusion of French beef soup. I don't know if I can pronounce it right... "Pot-au-Feu" or something like that. It was a spinoff from it, they added Pho noodles to the beef broth and made it a thing. I cannot confirm it, I read about it from books and internet resources but nobody can really confirm it 100% where it is from. No one can say.

Mike Ma: Maybe that is just how this type of food evolves. It gets embedded. Bun Bo Nam Bo is certainly doing that in Czech culture. Definitely more embedded in Czech culture than Vietnamese culture it seems.

Chu: (laugh) Yes, and I am waiting for the day a Czech person goes to Vietnam and says 'this is not Bun Bo Nam bo, this is something else' (laugh) "Just because I am foreign, you are making me a different dish?" (slurp)

It is interesting, yeah? Man.. but this Bun Bo Nam Bo is very good, I missed the herbs. (slurp)

Mike Ma: When was the last time you had Bun Bo Nam Bo? I don't feel you naturally order it.

Chu: I don't. I don't even make it at home. You know why? You have this dish deconstructed, have everything separately, put it in rice paper and roll it up and it becomes Summer rolls. That is more enjoyable. Dip it in sauce. It is a little bit more enjoyable with the process of rolling it. Bun Bo Nam Bo looks nice when you first plate it, but after you mix it, it looks like a big mess. Look, it tastes nice, that's what matters the most. But imagine if you have this in the rice paper roll, and dip in fish sauce, why would I make Bun Bo Nam Bo?

Mike Ma: And, with sriracha sauce?

Chu: Actually, I wouldn't mind sriracha in my fish sauce to add a little sweetness to it.

Mike Ma: That's how they do it in California. I actually learned it from Korean people, to mix the Sriracha and Hoisin sauce on the side, and when you are eating Pho Bo, you take out the ingredients and dip it. This is how you do it in California.

Chu: Interesting. I've never done that in my life but I would totally try. I have no problems with trying new cuisines and fusion food.

Mike Ma: Just not gyoza in broth.

Chu: Ya... I worked with my friend Adam at a pop-up kitchen and we used to make Korean tacos. Korean people can come at us and say this is not Korean food...

Mike Ma: Yes, but that is common in California. There is definitely very good Korean fusion, and ones that are just confused.

Chu: We try to keep it creative, and not offensive. We don't take someone's culture and twist it all around, and call it our own dish.

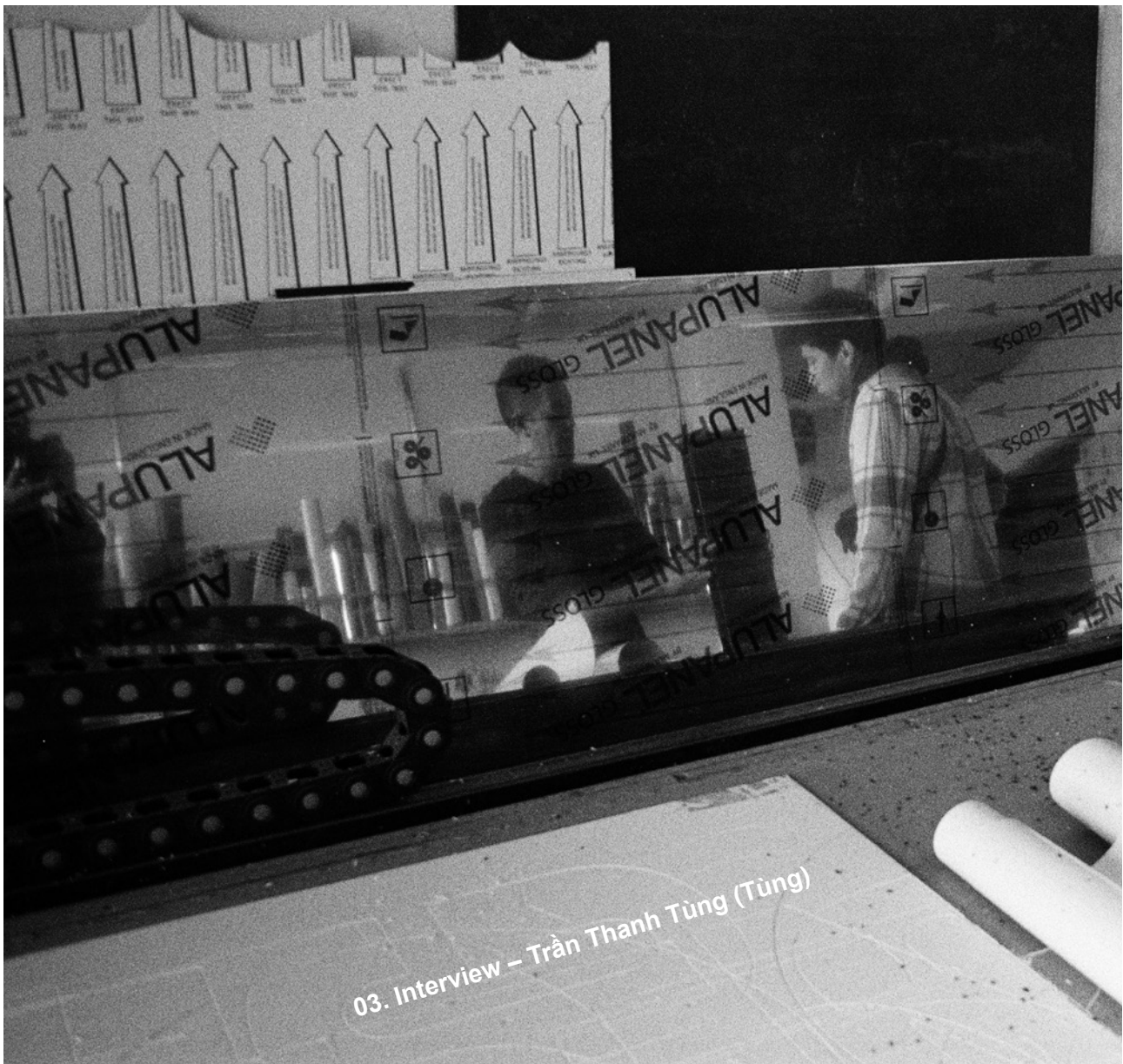
Mike Ma: So, how do you do this?

Chu: So we have 2 Vietnamese people, 1 Chinese American guy and sit around to talk about what we like and what kind of flavors go well with this or that. If we have seen it before, and how we can make it better. It is kind of a learning process; we don't just take it and stuff to it and think it will work. We try to envision how the dish is, and how we can make it better – or how we can add on it while trying to be respectful of the culture that we base it off. I would never roll a Bim Bap and call it Sushi, but people would mistake it if they don't understand it. It is similar, rice roll and nori sheets, but it is different. Or dim sum's Har Gao confused with gyoza, it is totally different.

(slurp)

Man.. where are the chopsticks?

This interview with Chu took place at in Prague at FAMU Photography Department's Foto Atelier A on February 23, 2024.



Mike Ma: Is this normally how you're used to eating it?

Tùng: No, of course not. Yeah, this is not right. The more proper way is to put all the things in first then pour the fish sauce.

Mike Ma: Okay, well... let's do this?

Tùng: Where did you buy this? From Nam Viet?

Mike Ma: Yes, from the Nam restaurant.

Tùng: (laughs) This is totally different. (slurp) Disclaimer, this is not how you eat Bun Bo Nam Bo.

Mike Ma: The ingredients are separate and this is kind of important.

Tùng: Yes, ingredients are good.

Mike Ma: And where does Bun bo Nam Bo come from? (slurp)

Tùng: I'm not an expert on Bun bon Nam Bo but from what I know there are 2 stories. One comes from the south, because it is in the name – you know? Nam Bo means Southern part of Vietnam. Nam is South, and Bộ is the area. So, if you put it together, it is from the south. One more popular story is actually coming from the north, Hanoi. They say that it originated from a street vendor where they sell this kind of food. In Vietnamese, Bun Bo chặt. Chặt means mixed everything; we have a lot of dishes with chặt. You put a lot of different ingredients, mainly with noodles and you mix everything together with some sauce.

This is similar here, you know – you mix it.

And the street where the lady was selling it from, before was called Nam Bo Street. Now it is Le Duan Street. (slurp) So, when people go there to eat the dish, in time they just say “hey let's go for...”, you know if you go to a restaurant, like KFC. We get chicken wings, so they say it in a short way “Chicken wing KFC”. So this is the same, Bun is the dish, everything with this noodle is Bun. Let's go for ‘bun’ in the name street ‘Nam Bo’. Bo is the beef. We go for Bun Bo on Nam Bo Street. It becomes Bun Bo Nam Bo.

Mike Ma: I see. And when it comes to Czech Republic, it just becomes the full name Bun Bo Nam Bo. So how people are familiar with it, now becomes its branding. Is it more popular in Czech Republic or more familiar in Hanoi?

Tùng: I think it is more popular here, compared to people in Vietnam. Percentage wise you know... more Vietnamese people here know about Bun Bo Nam Bo than they do in Vietnam. (slurp)

I was born in Vietnam, and I came to Czechia when I was 13. In all my life, for 13 years, I never even heard of Bun Bo Nam Bo. I'm not from Hanoi, which is where it comes from and is more popular there. I am from Nam Định which is about 200 km away from Hanoi.

Mike Ma: And this is still in Northern Vietnam?

Tùng: Yes. Near my hometown, Pho is born there. Pho also has two stories between Hanoi and Nam Định, where I am from. You can say the food culture is also strong, but I never heard of Bun Bo Nam Bo.

Mike Ma: Until you moved here. (slurp)

Tùng: Not even. So, when I moved here, I was in Cheb – a city in West Czechia, near the border of

Germany. Back then when I first came, Bun Bo Nam Bo was not a dish yet.

Mike Ma: So how do you think it got here?

Tùng: So, when I came here, it was 2001 and Chinese restaurants were more popular. There were almost no Vietnamese restaurants as you know of it in SAPA. When I first came, it was as they say 'Golden Nature' of business for Vietnamese people because of how easy it is to sell to German people and basically all cities around the border of Czech and Germany were doing well in business. (slurp) There was a lot of these open markets like SAPA, so in Cheb was one of the biggest Vietnamese communities in Czechia back then. I think it was as big as Prague's even though the city is so small but it has several major big markets with big communities. You have restaurants, kindergartens just like SAPA – but several in the small cities. There was only Vietnamese restaurant in those areas and not outside like the Chinese people had. I think they came here before us, there was already so many Chinese restaurants in Cheb and in Czechia in general.

I think after the restrictions got stricter and the businesses went down, people began to think of different ways to make money. Vietnamese people are very hard working and always about business.

Mike Ma: (laughs) Yes, the stereotype.

Tùng: Yes. (slurp slurp) So we all came here from after the war, people came here for academics or factories because Vietnam and Czechia had a relationship.

M: Which war was this in Vietnam?

Tùng: The American war. The period after that, 70s, 80s, it was still very poor and communist country so people went to other communist countries for exchanges. To study, or to work. That is how the first Vietnamese people got here I think.

Mike Ma: To gain new skills and to make money?

Tùng: Yes.

Mike Ma: And you came in 2001. (slurp)

Tùng: Yes. It was quite easy then to come here, if you have family here then it was easier then compared to now. It was easier to come here than Germany and Poland. Also because of the business already here, it was doing very well.

Mike Ma: (slurp) There was already a community established by then.

Tùng: Yes, I think Czechia has one of the biggest Vietnamese communities in Europe.

Mike Ma: In terms of noodles though, you have some background with noodles - in Vietnam?

Tùng: Yes. (laugh) (slurp) So, when I was in Vietnam, I was living with my grandparents. And my grandma actually had a noodle shop, you could say a street vendor. In Vietnam, every house is open to the street. It isn't like apartments here. Most people have, what you can say is (slurp) houses next to each other. And they used the front of the house as a business place.

Mike Ma: For noodles. (slurp)

Tùng: It is still true nowadays in Vietnam. Almost every house is like this. They can even rent out the first floor, then live in the other stories. So, my grandma had a noodle shop opened for selling noodles - not Pho.

Mike Ma: Served dry?

Tùng: No, not really. My grandma sold that with chicken meatballs. So that was my first experience with Vietnamese cuisine.

Mike Ma: And was that her own creation that she designed? (slurp)

Tùng: (slurp) So my grandma had several dishes, but her most popular is called Bún bung. Now I forget how you call this... this kind of... plant.

Mike Ma: It is a leaf? Perilla?

Tùng: You roll it and then cook it. So, what I was saying before, the Chinese people are more popular with restaurants, and the Vietnamese people more popular with clothes. Selling clothes type of business. But when the businesses went down, the Vietnamese people came up with other businesses to make a living. They start with potraviny, and then restaurants. That is how we got a restaurant here in Czech Republic much later.

Mike Ma: Pho Family?

Tùng: Yes. Even though we have in the family grandma's restaurant, my dad's business was selling clothes when we first came here. And then in 2019, we opened a restaurant called Pho Family in Prague 2. Just like the name, our most popular dishes were Pho. Pho noodles. At that time, the Bun Bo Nam Bo was already very popular. I think Bun Bo Nam Bo is what made Vietnamese restaurants more popular for Czech people.

Mike Ma: As the attraction dish?

Tùng: Yes, attraction dish.

Mike Ma: Is it always offered at Vietnamese bistro?

Tùng: Almost all Vietnamese restaurants will offer Bun Bo Nam Bo. Actually, I don't know exactly when it was that Bun Bo Nam Bo was made popular. Before that, I think it was Pho. When Vietnamese people first opened the restaurants, they were selling Chinese food with this stir-fry stuff. Chicken mushroom everything together. Stir-fried noodles Stir-fried rice. Typical Chinese dishes. That's what we first started because Vietnamese cooks went to Chinese restaurants to learn, and then opened one themselves.

Opening a restaurant in Czechia is not easy, you need a license, and know how to renovate the place to be able to open it. I think most Vietnamese people learned from Chinese because they already have a lot of experience opening restaurants. (slurp) So, they cooked there and gained enough money to open their own restaurant. But they only know how to make Chinese dishes!

Let's imagine you have a restaurant for 1 year, and you are doing well. And you are Vietnamese so you begin to think that my cash flow is okay, I have a lot of returning customers and now I can offer new dishes. Like Vietnamese dishes. We, as Vietnamese people, are very proud of our food. We think it is one of the best, and much healthier in some aspects compared to Chinese food. We use less oil, and we use more vegetables and greens.

Mike Ma: Freshness. (slurp)

Tùng: Greens. (slurp slurp)

Mike Ma: And for your restaurant, pho family, how did you decide the menu. Curating, the dishes and everything?

Tùng: So, I have a background in graphic design. I studied here, at Prague College which is in the center. After graduation, I worked exactly 1 year in this firm in SAPA. It is an advertising studio, making signage. I was there 1 year as the main designer. (Slurp) that was the interesting part. I didn't notice before but when I was working there, I finally realized that most menus you see in Asian restaurants of Prague or even in other places in Czech are all coming from one studio where I was working. The reason for this is because it is easier and cheaper for the restaurant to come to the studio and say "hey I want a menu" but I don't have photos. "Can you make photos?"

The studio doesn't go to the restaurants and make photos like you would normally imagine. It's

quicker and easier to just browse from the hard drives of restaurants that already took the photos. You can imagine the first ones who went there needed to make photos, maybe second one also wants to, and third one, but the fourth one has some images already available to choose from. As for copyright issues, not a problem for us. If two restaurants are very far apart, it doesn't matter if we use the same images. They don't care, and it is cheaper. If you want to hire a photographer to go to the restaurant, you can. We also offered that service but it's more expensive for the customer and most Asian people don't want to invest so much into the business.

Mike Ma: Stay practical.

Tùng: Yes, very practical. For my restaurant, we don't want to pay upfront investment. They always say, let's see if the business is good. When the business is good, then we can invest more. That is how most Asian businesses start, more traditional. For me, when I made the menu for my restaurant, I didn't make it like most other restaurants that have one photo for each dish. This is a lot of photos. I just used one big image to get the idea, but yes - most restaurants you see in Prague, they have a big box in front of the restaurant with all the dishes. They think that Czech people are wanting to see the menu first before going inside, and also the food is not familiar. You would need pictures; I think this is mostly true. For Czech people...Řízek, or what is more popular czech dishes?

Mike Ma: Krokety?

Tùng: More popular! Like traditional...

Mike Ma: Svíčková?

Tùng: Ah Svíčková, yes. (slurp slurp) Something like that, that Czech people already know about it and what it tastes like. So, they don't need pictures. So, Czech restaurants can afford to just have text, and very nice design. But for Asian restaurants, pictures and photos are needed because the customers don't know what it looks like.

Mike Ma: To know what to expect?

Tùng: Yes, and same for Chinese restaurants. They need photos.

Mike Ma: Yes, and Chinese restaurants that already existed here were already doing this.

Tùng: Yes. Opening a restaurant is not an easy thing, it is very complex. It is easier to copy, and when most people start out, they just copy other people before them. So here, the Chinese people. But now we have more younger people opening restaurants with nicer concepts, and presented in different ways. But for most businesses, I think they just copy from others. That is why it is so

similar with all the pictures. And when they come from one studio, it is the same. Just try to go to several restaurants and take pictures of their menu and compare. You will see it is exact copy.

Mike Ma: Do you recognize the images you worked on when you go to different bistros?

Tùng: Yes. In photoshop, we cut the food. So, when you open the restaurant you get unique plates and you would want to have that in the menu. So, they can actually just take the photo of the plate and we photoshop the food into the plate.

Mike Ma: Is it also that the angle is very much the same for everybody?

Tùng: It is very random. They take the photos themselves and send it to us most of the time. And it is very bad. Random. It is a good technique to have a good plate shot, and then just photoshop the dish in, so all the dishes in the same angle every time, looks less messy.

Mike Ma: So, it is more about them photographing the dish specific to the restaurants, and then you guys cook the graphics as to what goes in the bowls.

Tùng: Yes, so let's go back to Bun Bo Nam Bo. Some restaurants will have this beansprout, and some do not. So sometimes, we reuse the photos of Bun Bo Nam Bo with bean sprouts, but if the customer doesn't do bean sprouts, they will ask 'can you take this out'. So, we photoshop the bean sprout out, but it is still from the same image.

Mike Ma: Why is that different, the difference in Bun Bo Nam Bo recipe?

Tùng: It is about the customers, because some Czech people don't like this. So, in Prague 8 maybe some people don't eat bean sprouts.

Mike Ma: And this advertising studio is in SAPA, where there are markets and suppliers for restaurants?

Tùng: Yes.

Mike Ma: So you go there for your kitchen, and also your store signs.

Tùng: Everything. (slurp slurp slurp) When you open a restaurant in Czech, you have to adapt to the Czech customers.

Mike Ma: What they want to eat and what to expect.

Tùng: Yes, that is how people first start out.

Mike Ma: And how do you know what the Czech customers want?

Tùng: That is what the first restaurants had to figure out, and the later just followed. For example, Pho is a very good example of how we adapt to the Czech people. If you go to the restaurant in the center, and if you order Pho Ga, which is Pho with chicken, you always get chicken breast. Which is not typical for a dish with chicken in Vietnam. Authentic Vietnamese chicken is thighs. Chicken thigh is the best part, but what I am trying to say is with the skin. Not just plain white breasts like it is here. If you go to order chicken Pho in Prague center, you always get the white breast. If you go to SAPA, you will get an authentic one with skin. Restaurants in SAPA first served Vietnamese people, and they don't eat white chicken breast. But Czech people like it more, and this is why the center offers chicken breast.

Mike Ma: Oh, very interesting, I did notice Pho Ga here is mostly breast.

Tùng: Yes, that is not how you do it. But with beef it is normal, there aren't changes with that. So that is the same with Bun Bo Nam Bo, and similarly, people don't like bean sprouts. So, as I said, when the Vietnamese restaurant started out, we sold Chinese food like stir-fry stuff and then we began to introduce Pho and Spring rolls, and fresh rolls or we call it Summer rolls in Czech. Some genius then introduced Bun Bo Nam Bo, I don't know when. But it got so popular and the reason why is because there are a lot of greens and veggies. Pho is quite popular internationally as a Vietnamese dish, but Pho was not typical for Czech people – it is still a soup, right? They are not used to just big soup for lunch. For us, we don't call this soup, for us it is normal to have a lot of liquid but for Czech people they have their own version of what soup is. I think mentally, it is not the go-to lunch food.

Mike Ma: It might also be a bit messier to eat as well.

Tùng: Yes, you also need chopsticks to effectively eat the Pho. So, with Bun Bo Nam Bo, you can mix everything together and you have a lot of noodles, and greens, and the only part that is cooked is actually the beef. Beef is always stir-fried like in Vietnam. It is healthier. And easier to eat with a fork. It is quick. It is tasty, and you have a lot of stuff. Noodles, meats, greens, and you have fish sauce. So, it is very authentic, but also convenient.

Mike Ma: The concept of the taste is quite authentic. The flavor of Bun Bo Nam Bo, even though it is not popular in Vietnam – is it similar?

Tùng: Yes, it is similar. All the ingredients are similar, there are noodles, cucumbers, beansprouts, the beef is always stir-fried, and fish sauce. I think fish sauce is what makes everything taste like Vietnam. Oh, don't forget also these fried onions, and peanuts. (slurp)

Mike Ma: At the advertising studio, are there selections where there are a bunch of Bun Bo Nam Bo to choose from that was collected overtime. As a scheme or footprint of each version from past

customers?

Tùng: Definitely. Even though there are a lot of photos to choose from, you can imagine that not all of them are good. So, the best ones are more often chosen. You can see the better ones more often than the bad ones. So, when we go to get photographs, we have good photos... then we use those more often.

Mike Ma: How did you figure out the best way to make photos of Bun Bo Nam Bo. Lighting? Is the angle selected by the customer?

Tùng: The most popular angle is 45 degrees where you can see part of the bowl, and you can see most of the dish compared to top-down, or front. I think this is for all foods, not just Vietnamese. And from this angle, you can use it more in Photoshop, on different dishes, and different plates. For Bun Bo Nam Bo, you chose to show a little bit of noodles, the beef, but show mostly the greens. This is what is attracting the customers.

Mike Ma: Mm... the vegetables and colors.

Tùng: Yes, and for Czech cuisine there is not a lot of greens. They always have meat, Knedlík, and some sauces. Then they have salad on the side, but in the food... not many greens.

So, for Czech people, it (Bun Bo Nam Bo) has so many vegetables and it is so good because of the greens.

Mike Ma: A health-conscious thing.

Tùng: Yes, that is the most common compliment of the dish. So, if you show in the photos that it has a good amount of green and freshness – then I think it is a good photo.

Mike Ma: At your restaurant, which one was the best-selling dish?

Tùng: In our case it was Pho, because we are Pho Family. The main focus is Pho, but I think for other restaurants Bun Bo Nam Bo is always on the top 3 or top 5. Pho, Bun Bo Nam Bo, Stir-fry noodles are the three most popular among all restaurants. The stir-fry noodles, because the Chinese made it popular... It is ingrained in Czech people for this dish. It is also easy to make, so the consistency across the restaurants are very similar. Bun Bo Nam Bo is also easy to make. Anytime you go to any restaurant and order Bun Bo Nam Bo, you have a feeling it's like McDonald's or KFC franchises where the quality and consistency is the similar. This is also an aspect why it is popular.

Mike Ma: And do you think the chefs have an agreement on how to do it?

Tùng: No. They learn from each other. Like I said, this is not a popular dish in Vietnam so I don't think most Vietnamese people know how to make it so they need to learn from other chefs. So, when they come to Czech Republic and want to open a restaurant, they go to other ones that are already open and apply to be a cook first. It is also a way to make a living. In Czechia for most Vietnamese people, you do nails, cook (open a restaurant) or potraviny (cashier), these are the most popular positions.

Mike Ma: And is all of this business tied to SAPA somehow?

Tùng: Yes, except nails, I think. The nails businesses are more independent. They don't really need SAPA. In SAPA, it is more about cooking and potraviny, but of course you go there to buy the products.

Mike Ma: We talked mostly about Vietnamese bistros that are more casual, and now we are seeing not just the first generation of Vietnamese people who have come, but also others like you who speak Czech, Vietnamese, and English. They are also coming from creative backgrounds. There are certain restaurants where the interior design is not following the same type as the bistro, and the menus are maybe more customized and not from the advertising studio in SAPA. Is that a new version of bistros that you see, or is it still a connection to the early wave.

Tùng: I think there is still some connection. The young people now who open the restaurant, get the money from their parents.

Mike Ma: Investors.

Tùng: Yes, like in my case if I want to open a restaurant now, my father would invest and he has all the experience and knowledge because we already opened one. We can be decision making in the design on how we want the restaurant to look and how the menu to be. What we want to offer. Like Banh-mi-ba, is a younger and newer generation.

Mike Ma: Yes, quite successful chain.

Tùng: Yes, they offer less. If you go to the earlier restaurants, you will see 100 dishes to choose from which is good but also bad because you need a lot of ingredients and lose focus on making one thing good. This is why I think Banh-mi-ba decide they want to do it differently, and first offer the most important one – Banh mi. We didn't talk about that yet, also popular. If you go to Banh-mi-ba, you can actually tell what is the most popular dishes because I think they even have Czech investors as co-founders. This is how they were so popular with the franchising, because the guys know more people and they have very good locations with good connections. You need Czech people for that. It is still different cultures, and when Czech people speak to Czech people, it is easier to do business. This is just the reality. I think now they even offer Pho, Spring rolls, and Bun

Bo Nam Bo. Oh, and Bun Cha.

Mike Ma: Ah, Bun Cha we haven't talked about that yet. It is the sibling to Bun Bo Nam Bo.

Tùng: Yeah, the sibling, you have almost the same ingredients. Noodles, some meat, and fish sauce. But Bun Cha has less greens. But in Vietnam when you order Bun Cha, you get a side of greens like Bun Bo Nam Bo, but you just don't mix it together.

Mike Ma: And that is the original Bun Cha that is the method before Bun Bo Nam Bo?

Tùng: Yes.

Mike Ma: And that is quite regionally common in northern Vietnam.

Tùng: Yes, but Bun Cha and Bun Bo Nam Bo are not considered very similar there because bun cha is grilled and not mixed together. You dip the meat, and you dip the noodles. Bun Bo Nam Bo is stir-fried.

Mike Ma: And how we are eating this in front of us right now is more like Bun Cha.

Tùng: Of course. Like I said in the beginning, this is not how we eat Bun Bo Nam Bo. Bun Cha is grilled and always uses pork, but Bun Bo Nam Bo is with beef stir-fried.

Mike Ma: And which one is more common, eating pork and beef?

Tùng: Pork.

Mike Ma: Did beef become a habit later to eat?

Tùng: Yes, I think the French made beef popular to eat. Because Vietnamese people were very poor. There is chicken and pork, but beef is more expensive.

Mike Ma: And the cows are in the field working, maybe not so much sense to eat the cows?

Tùng: Yes. (laugh) The pig is mainly farmed for meat, and the chicken for eggs and meat. In Vietnamese New Year, you always have chicken as a dish because it is one of the main meats.

(slurp)

This Interview with Tùng took place in Prague at FAMU Depart of Photograph's Atelier B, on February 20, 2024. The formal visit and non-recorded interview with SAPA advertising studio took place on February 21, 2024 with Tùng in the role of translator.

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