



## Banh Mi in Vietnamese Cultural Life

Vu Nhat Tan<sup>1</sup>, Vu Thi Thu Huong<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ho Chi Minh University of Culture

<sup>2</sup>Vietnam Aviation Academy

### ARTICLE INFO

**Published Online:**  
25 February 2025

Corresponding Author:  
**Vu Nhat Tan**

### ABSTRACT

Having been present in Vietnam for over 100 years, banh mi is evaluated as a popular dish and has become the most beloved street food for tourists when visiting Vietnam. The term 'BANH MI' is recorded in the Oxford dictionary as 'Vietnamese bread'. Every Vietnamese citizen has tasted and enjoyed a banh mi at least once in their lifetime. However, each region has its own variations leading to different cultural comparisons of banh mi across regions. The article employs a quantitative research method, using a survey questionnaire of over 100 Vietnamese citizens aged 18 and above, from different regions, regarding the use of banh mi in daily life as well as spiritual activities. The survey results aim to provide an overview of the popularity and unique characteristics of banh mi in the lives of Vietnamese people. This helps to further promote Vietnamese cuisine to the outside world.

**KEYWORDS:** Banh mi, culture, daily life, materia, spiritual

### I. INTRODUCTION

Bread represents a dish of significant prominence among the Vietnamese populace. Despite its origins in Western culinary traditions, it has, over time, undergone a process of cultural exchange and assimilation, thus evolving into a gastronomic specialty that is highly sought after and appreciated by a majority of tourists visiting Vietnam. Regardless of the setting, encompassing both commonplace eateries and upscale dining establishments, bread consistently occupies a vital role within the framework of Vietnamese meals. Consequently, an investigation into the significance of bread and its contributions to Vietnamese culinary culture is of paramount importance and necessity. The findings from such research will provide a novel perspective on bread and the culinary culture surrounding Vietnamese bread.

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the course of time, the Vietnamese populace has commenced the process of Vietnamizing banh mi, thereby transforming it into a quotidian culinary specialty. Individuals have increasingly engaged in the exploration and examination of a dish that, while originating from abroad, possesses distinct Vietnamese characteristics and essence. A mere inquiry of the term "banh mi" in online search engines yields millions of results pertinent to this keyword. Concurrently, numerous articles provide descriptions of banh mi authored by foreign writers. It is conceivable that these authors adopt the viewpoints of anthropologists, ethnologists, and cultural scientists (outsiders as opposed to

insiders) in their discourse regarding a dish that is universally appreciated and savored. Initially, the introduction of banh mi to Vietnam occurred via the French colonial invasion. Vietnamese and Chinese laborers were employed in the bread manufacturing facilities. This circumstance precipitated the workers' innovation in bread-making techniques, thereby transforming French bread into a variant that was more congruent with the preferences of the local populace, rather than solely catering to the French. From its inception as a colonial culinary artifact, bread has, over time, undergone a process of exchange and adaptation, evolving into a distinctive Vietnamese culinary dish. This evolution is evidenced by the entrenched presence of bread within the Vietnamese consciousness, as it pervades all contexts, encompassing both the material and spiritual dimensions of Vietnamese culture.

The Arve Hansen et al (2023)'s study investigates how the tourism boom in Hoi An has transformed local food practices and systems of provision. Through a blend of practice theory and "systems of provision" approach, the research delves into how local hosts have adapted their culinary offerings to cater to tourists, integrating both local and foreign food items. The empirical material includes interviews with restaurant owners, employees, and suppliers, shedding light on the complex interplay of food practices, supply chains, and tourist preferences. The findings underscore the significant role of food in tourism and reveal how local food systems evolve through interactions with tourists, shaping and being shaped by the practice

geographies of Hoi An. The paper also reflects on how these dynamics have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and suggests directions for future research on the post-pandemic tourism and food landscape.

The Bui Thi My Hang (2023)'s study investigates the intra-diversity in the flavor and menu items of Vietnamese cuisine presented in Vietnamese restaurants in Seoul, South Korea. Recognizing calls for the inclusion of immigrant producers in theoretical considerations of taste, she used a combination of ethnographic research methodologies, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with Vietnamese immigrant restaurateurs. Using the forms-of-capital approach, her research demonstrates how each immigrant uses their human-cultural, societal, and economic resources to decide on food menus and develop food flavors. She discovered that, based on their money, each immigrant creates their own tactics for marketing Vietnamese food to their target clients. Finally, her research emphasizes the intra-group diversity of ethnic entrepreneurship, as well as the relationship between immigrants and members of the host society in ethnic enterprises.

Meanwhile, Jeanne Firth and Catarina Passidomo (2022) investigate ongoing food justice challenges during what is described as a "renaissance" in Southern cuisine, highlights the role of diverse cultural and ecological influences in the development of New Orleans' cuisine, and specific programs aimed at enhancing culinary training, supporting local farmers, and promoting food justice, but also explores the intersections of New Orleans' culinary scene with broader.

**III. METHODOLOGY**

The paper employs quantitative research techniques. We have presented a list of 17 questions about bread in Vietnam, from which we have determined the features of bread and the bread culture of the Vietnamese people. We discovered the elements of Vietnamese culture by the qualities of bread culinary culture, which includes material and spiritual culture. We sent 17 questions using a Google form and received 113 replies. These questions are organized into two sections: bread in material culture and bread in spiritual culture. The questionnaires were distributed at random to students in cultural, tourism, and public relations classes at Vietnamese institutions such as the University of cultural, Van Hien University, Aviation Academy, and Vietnam-USA College.

*Bread in Material Life*

Within one week of distributing the questionnaire, we obtained pretty satisfactory results, with answers ranging from easy to complex, or answers that require experience to provide relative accuracy. If Pho is thought to be intricate and time-consuming, Banh Mi embodies the rapidity, convenience, and affordability of Vietnamese culture. Almost all bakeries and shops are conveniently located nearby. There is little capital required to operate a bread shop, therefore virtually anyone can run their own bread cart. Because of the nature of cheap bread, only adding different

fillings changes its value. Bread can be eaten practically anyplace and is regarded as the most convenient breakfast food by the majority of respondents. Bread makes life easier for students. Bread's material value increases when it contains all of the following flavors, nutrients, and colors: the hot, crispy scent of the crust, the sweetness of wheat flour, the fatness of butter, the protein of eggs, meat, rolls, or pate. Cucumbers, pickles, green onions, and chili peppers are also served with companion vegetables to enhance their attractiveness and flavor.

A complete loaf of bread comprises solely crust and crumb. Individuals may utilize a plain loaf as a vessel for an array of fillings including: pâté, cured meats, grilled meats, roasted pork, pork sausage, and eggs, which can be complemented with noodles. Patrons may also enjoy bread accompanied by butter and fruit preserves or dairy products. The table presented delineates 16 distinct varieties of bread, each characterized by specific filling attributes. The majority of bread types feature a consistent combination of herbs, cucumbers, and pickles, which collectively engender a freshness and distinctive flavor profile for each variety. This not only amplifies taste but also enhances the visual appeal of the bread. Varieties of bread containing pork fillings, such as roast pork and char siu, appear to be the most favored, reflecting the prominence of pork within Vietnamese culinary practices. Numerous bread types incorporate pork, including: roasted pork bread, char siu bread, shumai bread, pork roll bread, cha lua bread, and ham bread. Additionally, the extensive range of fillings provides consumers with numerous options tailored to their individual preferences. This table exemplifies the richness and diversity of banh mi within Vietnamese gastronomy, offering a plethora of selections for consumers. The amalgamation of primary ingredients and vegetables not only cultivates a unique flavor but also renders banh mi a widely favored and cherished dish.

**Table 1: Synthesis expressed through the bread eaten with the filling inside (Source: Author's synthesis)**

No	Name of bread	Main characteristics inside
1	Roast pork bread	Roasted pork belly, herbs, cucumber, pickles
2	Charsiu bread	Cantonese roast pork, herbs, cucumber, pickles
3	Shumai bread	Minced meat, mushroom seasoning balls, herbs, cucumber, pickles
4	Egg bread	Chicken egg, herbs, cucumber, pickles
5	Meatball and egg bread	Minced meatballs with salted egg, herbs, cucumber, pickles
6	Wrap bread	Pork skin mixed with pork roll, herbs, cucumber, pickles
7	Pork roll bread	Pork sausage, ham, herbs, cucumber, pickles

“Banh Mi in Vietnamese Cultural Life”

8	Sausage bread	Sausage, herbs, cucumber, pickles
9	Chinese Sausage bread	Chinese sausage, herbs, cucumber, pickles
10	Shredded chicken bread	Shredded chicken, herbs, cucumber, pickles
11	Sardine bread	Mackerel in tomato sauce, herbs, cucumber, pickles
12	Cheese bread	Cheese, herbs, cucumber, pickles
13	Ham bread	Ham, herbs, cucumber, pickles
14	Fish bread	Mackerel in cake, herbs, cucumber, pickles
15	Pâte bread	Pâte, herbs, cucumber, pickles
16	Pha lau bread	Braised pork offal in coconut juice (braised offal)

	everywhere?	
8	Is bread commonly called bread?	64.6%
9	Does the culinary product come from Vietnam?	54.9%
10	Does roasted pork and chicken usually go with bread?	79.4%

Bread consumption peaked at 93.8%, demonstrating that it is a popular food in the community. Furthermore, 38.1% of survey participants ate bread three times each week, demonstrating a consistent consumption pattern. With 97.3% of respondents reporting that there are several bakeries close to where they live, bread is popular and easily accessible in the area. 95.6% of survey respondents considered bread for breakfast, demonstrating that bread is an essential component of people's breakfasts. 65.5% of individuals believe that the name of bread is determined by the filling ingredients, suggesting that consumers have a basic awareness of bread types and how they are named. 43.4% indicated they prefer bread for convenience, implying that bread is regarded as a quick and easy dinner alternative. 88.5% of study respondents stated that bread can be eaten practically anywhere, demonstrating bread's adaptability. 64.6% of poll respondents called banh mi "banh mi," and 54.9% claimed it originated in Vietnam, indicating a familiarity with local culinary traditions. Banh mi is frequently eaten with dishes such as roasted pork and roast chicken, according to 79.6% of respondents, demonstrating the popularity of the pairing.

**Table 2. Questions on bread in material life (Source: Author compiled from questionnaire)**

No	Question	Rate say Yes
1	Do you often eat bread?	93.8%
2	Are there many bakeries near where you live?	97.3%
3	Do you usually eat bread?	38.1%
4	Do you think the name of the bread depends on the ingredients in the bread?	65.5%
5	Do you think bread is the main meal?	95.6%
6	Was bread chosen because of its convenience?	43.4%
7	Can bread be eaten at almost	88.5%

With most respondents consuming bread one to three times a week, it seems to be a popular weekly food. Three times a week, the largest group (38.1%) eats bread. It is evident from the once a week group (36.3%) that a sizable portion of people only eat bread once a week. Although bread is often eaten, not everyone considers it to be a staple food. Bread consumption may be lower among those who eat it once a week or more (19.5%), perhaps as a result of personal preferences or other dietary factors. The almost equal distribution among the groups suggests that the eating habits of the respondents are varied. Bread producers might think about using efficient marketing strategies to attract more customers from demographics with lower consumption rates.

1.3. How many times a week do you usually eat bread?

113 answers

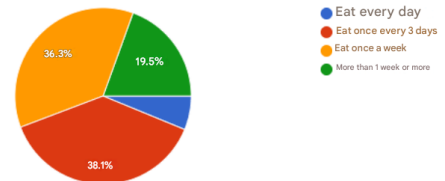


Figure 1: Questions and answers about the popularity and frequency of bread in the culinary structure of each meal - Source: Author compiled from the answer sheet.

This demonstrates the universal allure of bread irrespective of cultural context. Notably, within the Vietnamese rice cultivation tradition, the notion of wheat or flour remains entirely unfamiliar. It is precisely due to the allure of diversity that bread has gained considerable popularity among the Vietnamese populace. Tran Ngoc Them once articulated: "There are good things, bad things, gains, losses, things that appear, things that disappear, things that we will escape from and things that we will be infected with" (2000; p.319). As noted by Nguyen Nha (2009), in a mere 0.4 seconds, the term "banh mi" was queried, yielding over 3 million pages referencing the term. Bread is represented in cinematic works, exemplified by the extensive production "King of Bread." Furthermore, in various still life artworks, bread or a bread basket frequently serves as a favored subject for artists. Bread is ubiquitous, permeating every environment and circumstance. It is consumable at any hour of the day.

A considerable number of students and workers opt for bread owing to its convenience; however, the expenditure associated with this option is comparatively lower than that of other culinary offerings. Consequently, bread is

frequently selected for multiple meals, readily available at any time and place, predominantly for economic reasons. To illustrate, a bowl of pho or hu tieu typically costs around 50,000 VND, whereas a delectable loaf of bread filled with eggs, pâté, meat, or pork sausage generally averages only 15,000 - 25,000 VND. The economic advantage of bread is likely to ensure its continued presence in the dietary habits of the Vietnamese populace for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, the financial outlay for bread is substantially lower than that required for liquid dishes such as vermicelli, pho, or even Western pastries.

#### *Bread in Spiritual Life*

The spiritual realm is extensive, encompassing conventions, habits, holidays, festivals, religions, and beliefs. A loaf of bread is a vibrant and tasty picture. This image's unique color combination is achieved by using the yellow of the crust, the white of the inside, pickled radish, the red of tomato or chili sauce, the black-brown of sauce, pate, cold meat, the green of cucumber, and green onion. In that bright picture, there are numerous flavors. Sweetness of bread, saltiness of soy sauce, sauce, sourness of pickles, spiciness of chile, and green onion. The color/smell/taste picture is wonderfully synchronized, but the economic value is quite popular, making it accessible to both Vietnamese and visitors. Bread is not only utilized by practically everyone; it is also employed in worship rites, where people sacrifice bread to gods alongside roast pork or roast chicken. Bread is more than just a material object; it is also a symbol with both positive and negative connotations. For example, telling a girl to have a bread waist, which means a huge waist that bulges in the middle, contradicts the beauty standard of most girls, who prefer a wasp waist.

74.3% of participants stated that bread was used in rituals, indicating that bread is present in cultural rituals. The large proportion indicates that bread is not only a popular dish but also revered in traditional rites, indicating the intersection of gastronomy and spiritual culture. When someone says, "Bread waist," more than half of respondents see it as a criticism. This could indicate discontent with some aspect of the bread, such as its quality or look. The very high rate (94.7%) of good bread that is appealing to tourists indicates that bread is positively appraised by tourists, demonstrating that bread is not only a popular meal in the country, but also an important aspect of tourists' gastronomic experience. The majority of respondents (87.6%) agree that bread should be more widely available, indicating that bread has the potential to grow both locally and internationally. The large majority of respondents (91.2%) who agree that Banh mi is a symbol of Vietnamese culinary culture demonstrates considerable acceptance of Banh mi's role in Vietnamese culinary culture, emphasizing the dish's cultural and historical significance. 73.5% of respondents identified Flexibility and Popularity as cultural traits of banh mi, demonstrating that it can be modified and adapted to a wide range of situations and demands in daily life.

Bread is not simply a tangible substance, but also a symbol, and the British Oxford dictionary (ba: n' mi/) uses it to define Vietnamese bread without using the word bread (although, bread in English is interpreted in a much broader sense than Vietnamese bread). Vietnamese bread has the highest rating among the world's 100 finest breads. As a result, bread is more than just a dish; it is a culinary emblem and a source of pride for the Vietnamese. Thus, based on the aforementioned research findings, we can conclude that bread plays a critical role in both material and spiritual life in Vietnamese cuisine. Some qualities of Vietnamese bread gathered through the survey results indicate Vietnamese culture and part of the Vietnamese personality, as stated as follows: Universality in culinary culture, bread integrity, economics, flexibility, symbolism, and humanity in a single loaf.

In the conducted survey, participants provided numerous responses attributed to the affordability and accessibility of the food item, thus indicating that flexibility is a significant preference among consumers. This encompasses not only the manner of consumption but also the terminology employed by Vietnamese individuals to refer to bread. Regarding the consumption method, patrons possess the freedom to sit, recline, stand, or even consume while in motion. A notable instance of this phenomenon is exemplified by the portrayal of singer Hoang Thuy Linh consuming bread amidst a classroom setting in the music video "Let Mi Tell You," which incited considerable interest within digital platforms and media outlets. Bread is a culinary item that can be encountered in both upscale dining establishments and in remote or commonplace locales. In terms of nomenclature, patrons frequently identify bread by referencing its filling. Nevertheless, certain varieties of bread lack a definitive designation or do not correspond to the ingredients contained within. The element of flexibility is further illustrated by the diverse appellations attributed to bread based on the vendor or originator, such as Tuan Map, Be Bi, Aunt Ba, and Aunt Bay. Additionally, this adaptability can also be observed in the various forms that bread can assume: elongated, robust, cylindrical, or round, which serve to entice consumers. The multifaceted nature of bread epitomizes the characteristics intrinsic to the Vietnamese populace.

The depiction of Miss H'hen Nie showcasing the "Banh Mi" collection designed by Pham Phuoc Dien at an international competition serves to affirm that bread occupies a prominent position as a symbol of Vietnam's esteemed culinary heritage (Tung Nguyen, 2018). However, due to its relatively low material cost, ease of procurement, and widespread availability, bread has also come to symbolize simplicity and economic hardship. Individuals readily exchange loaves of bread, engage in volunteer efforts, or distribute charitable meals within hospitals and temples; moreover, bread is frequently utilized as an accompaniment to other food items, particularly in communal distributions.

The emergence of Pitaya bread represents a potential solution for agricultural producers grappling with declining market prices or challenges in exporting Pitaya. This innovative product has garnered positive reception due to its novelty and humanitarian implications, aligning with consumer preferences. Within the social fabric of life, the image of a charitable bread cabinet in various locales is profoundly cherished by workers, simultaneously reflecting the compassion and solidarity exhibited by individuals from diverse backgrounds residing in Ho Chi Minh City.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Following the culinary exploration by the U.S. president with the dish bun cha, this particular item achieved global recognition. Conversely, despite the widespread acclaim and popularity of banh mi, its foreign status continues to evoke ambivalence among the populace due to its indigenous roots. Consequently, within the context of banh mi, individuals discern numerous attributes characteristic of the Vietnamese identity: inquisitiveness, openness to innovation, adaptability, and integration. Given these considerations, it is imperative to advance culinary education, forums, and exhibitions to foster the professional development of Vietnamese banh mi. Tourists arriving in Vietnam have sought to engage with Vietnamese cuisine, including banh mi, while contemporary youth exhibit an increasing interest in Western pastries. Participants in the interview process also underscored the necessity of amplifying the cultural significance of Vietnamese banh mi among the local populace to facilitate its global outreach.

#### REFERENCES

1. Huynh Tho; Tran Minh: Vietnamese bread - A special culinary cultural phenomenon of the Vietnamese. <https://plo.vn/banh-mi-viet-nam-hien-tuong-van-hoa-am-thuc-dac-biet-cua-nguoi-viet-post726674.html> accessed March 8, 2024
2. T.Linh: Vietnamese bread ranks first in the top 100 most delicious sandwiches in the world. <https://nhandan.vn/banh-mi-viet-nam-dung-dau-trong-100-mon-banh-kep-ngon-nhat-the-gioi-accessed-April-10,-2024>
3. Ngoc Phuong: Free bread cabinet on the sidewalk of a female student of the University of Economics in Saigon. <https://tuoitre.vn/tu-banh-mi-mien-phi-tren-via-he-sai-gon-cua-co-sinh-vien-truong-kinh-te-20191222095745423.htm> accessed 01 April, 2024
4. Trang Thu: A series of paintings of Vietnamese bread that make netizens "crave." (2020, March 3). Tien Phong Electronic Newspaper. <https://tienphong.vn/post-1172916.tpo> accessed 10 April 2024.
5. Nguyen Nha. (2009). Vietnamese culinary identity. News Agency.

6. Nguyen Dinh Chieu's poetry and literature. (1976). Liberation Literature.
7. Tran Ngoc Them. (2002). Vietnamese cultural foundations. Education.
8. Thi Hong: Giving hundreds of community bread carts to the poor. (2013, November 24). SGGP Newspaper. <https://www.sggp.org.vn/share346428.html> accessed 05 April 2024
9. Quang Vu: Why is bread an indispensable dish in Vietnamese life? <https://kenh14.vn/vi-sao-banh-mi-la-mon-an-khong-the-thieu-trong-cuoc-song-nguoi-viet-20221126074410875.chn> accessed 10 April, 2024