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Keeping Alight the Kitchen Fire: Food Charity and Communal Solidarity in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam)

Dr. Le Hoang Anh Thu

Abstract: *This study explores the preparation of food for charitable distribution by Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) (Vietnam). Most of those involved in cooking for charity are women. This article shows that HCMC women perceive cooking for charity as an extension of household cooking. Food charity transforms the household duty of cooking into a charitable practice that benefits the wider society. Vietnamese media focuses on this feminine aspect of food charity, portraying it as an act of kindness that increases communal solidarity during adversities such as the Covid-19 pandemic, similar to women's kitchen work in sustaining their families.*

Keywords*: Food, Charity, Cooking, Feminine roles, Feminization of charity, Vietnam*

Introduction

I met Mrs. An and her cooking team at the Trì An temple[1] in an alleyway of District 4, a central district in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). They are practitioners frequenting this small temple for regular chanting and other rituals. Twice a month, the temple's charity team prepares 700 portions of a vegetarian meal for patients—and their relatives—at an Oncology hospital in HCMC. The meal is comprised of steamed rice, a braised dish (of tofu and vegetables), and soup (usually sour soup with vegetables). The total cost of cooking and delivering meals each time is about four million VND, which is equivalent to approximately 200 USD. It covers gas, seasoning, and transportation, and each portion costs approximately 5,000 VND, which is 22 US cents—not enough to buy a decent meal in HCMC. Twice a month, this group gathers at 4 AM to wash and peel a large quantity of vegetables and cut tofu, and cook them in huge stoves, pots, and frying pans in the temple's kitchen. At 2 PM, they transport big stainless steel containers fitted with foam boxes filled with hot meals on an auto-rickshaw to a charity-distribution center managed by a Buddhist temple in HCMC. There, food is distributed to patients who have received food stamps beforehand.

This cooking team is part of a vibrant charity phenomenon in HCMC and Vietnam (Hoang et al. 2019). Although the exact number of charitable organizations, religious institutions, individuals, and grassroots groups that distribute charity meals in HCMC is not known, numerous news articles have covered these groups, which are known by names such as "charity kitchen" (bếp cơm từ thiện), "kitchen of love" (bếp yêu thương), and "0VND kitchen" (bếp ăn 0 đồng). Recent studies on food systems in Vietnam have explored various food practices, such as vegetarian diet, delicacies, alternative food, and agricultural production to cope with anxieties about food hygiene and food safety (e.g., Ehlert and Faltmann 2018; Avieli 2018, Faltmann 2018). However, academic attention on the food charity network, which has gained prominence across Vietnam, is lacking. This article aims to fill this research gap by providing an ethnographic account of food charity in HCMC and discussing what this phenomenon reveals about the connection between the people involved as charity givers and their recipients, in addition to wider society.

It is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the food charity initiative in Vietnam, which has attracted the attention of many people. One of my contacts, an

1 Name changed to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

80-year-old Vietnamese woman living in Australia, told me that she was impressed by the new charity movement in HCMC when she returned to the country after many years living abroad. This movement refers to the charitable distribution of food in hospitals, orphanages, schools, and homes for the elderly. Notably, given the lower cost compared to other charitable activities, such as constructing houses, building bridges and roads in poor rural areas, many food charity projects are conducted by individuals, households, or grassroots charity groups, who start their activities in their neighborhoods and collect donations via personal networks of friends and families.

Food charity became even more prevalent and essential during the Covid-19 pandemic, which triggered several strict measures such as social distancing and lockdown in HCMC ("Những bếp ăn yêu thương," 2020; H`ồng Giang and Thu Hương 2021). The pandemic witnessed an outburst of street-level philanthropy in HCMC. Many religious and non-religious charity groups distributed dried food and raw ingredients as well as hot meals to passersby and people whose livelihood was affected by lockdown measures. During the strict lockdown applied in HCMC from July to September 2021, these grassroots charity groups changed their food distribution mechanism from static to mobile delivery by bringing food to quarantine centers, households, and neighborhoods in need, and even developed smartphone apps (for example, App Gạo for charity rice donation and distribution) so that the needy could call for food delivery at their home ("Ủng hộ gạo," 2020).

The ethnographic data presented in this article was collected before the pandemic, during my fieldwork in 2013, 2018, 2019, and early 2020 among the lay Buddhist practitioners in HCMC. Most of the practitioners I met were women who worked as petty traders in city markets, tailors working from home, small shop owners, and housewives. Among the Buddhist practices in which I participated during my fieldwork were preparation and distribution of charity food. I participated in the activities of four cooking teams in HCMC, three of which were associated with Buddhist temples, although their cooking activities were conducted and funded mostly by lay practitioners; one team comprised residents of a neighborhood in the city. The core members of this spontaneous group were Buddhist adherents. Most charity givers I met belonged to lower working-class backgrounds. This observation resonates with several studies which show that people involved in grassroots charitable practices in Vietnam often belong to the lower social strata (iSee 2015 and TAF and VAPEC 2011, cited in Hoang et al. 2019; Le 2020).[2]

Food charity is not merely a charitable practice, but a notable food network in HCMC. For many city residents facing economic difficulties, food charity is an alternative channel for food procurement. In their edited volume on alternative food networks (defined as production and consumption networks of food), Goodman and Sage (2014) use the concept of "food transgression" to highlight new agricultural schemes, agricultural fair trade, and organic food movements in different countries. The authors adhere to the original meaning of "transgression" as "exceeds boundaries" or "exceeds limits". The most basic boundary-crossing capacity of food lies in the fact that food connects the inside and the outside of the body, the self and the world, and thereby crosses the boundary of the body (Enhlert & Faltman 2018, 3). Goodman and Sage (2014, 2) extend this idea of bodily transgression by illustrating the various boundary-crossings related to food provisioning, connections between food producers and consumers, space and knowledge around food, and food networks. The concept of transgression is a springboard for the authors to explore new forms of morality in relation to food provisioning, distribution, new understandings of ecological and bodily health, and new food cultures and connections.

However, alternative food movements often refer to organic food and fair-trade movements, as well as other forms of community-shared food and agricultural schemes, and thus "focus on the needs of those

2 For discussion on the classed aspect of Buddhist charity in Vietnam, see also, Le (2020), Swenson (2020), Nguyen (2020).

with agency and capacity to engage with different ways of producing or obtaining food" (Caraher and Dowler 2014, 227) such as those in the middle-class niche. Caraher and Dowler (2014), in their contributed chapter, rightly ask to what extent the "current 'alternative' practices engage with the needs of poorer households and communities, for healthy food choices?" Charity food initiatives embody the transgressive quality by expanding food business to include the poor, while at the same time establishing a new moral discourse on care (Goodman and Sage 2014, 2).

This article examines Buddhist food charity as an alternative food network that transgresses the boundaries of domestic places, household duties, and moral care to bring home-cooked food to a wider population. Paralleling their charity work with care for the family, women charity givers see their activity as "care for all"—this resembles their caring labor at home, which is extended to embrace society at large. The enormous amount of work invested in preparing charity food imparts moral significance, similar to caring for family, to this activity. This "feminization of charity" (Nguyen-Marshall 2008, 80) is also found in media narratives, which emphasize the voluntary work in food charity. According to this feminizing rhetoric, not only do women undertake kitchen work to maintain the well-being of their households, but also to "keep the fire" burning in the society by sustaining happiness and solidarity within the larger social space. The kitchen thus transgresses the boundaries of the home and becomes a frontier for communal solidarity, especially during difficult times such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Additionally, food charity embodies concerns about various food-related issues in contemporary Vietnam, namely food quality, hygiene, and safety. While attempting to provide their recipients with wholesome and hygienic meals, Buddhist charity givers interweave their lay understanding of food hygiene and nutrition with moral principles that they embody in their daily lives. The concept of a 'wholesome and good meal' transcends that of household meals and becomes the benchmark for safe food for non-kin recipients. Meanwhile, safe food is not merely food free of contaminations, but also food cooked with care and affection.

Caring for Others like Caring for Family

Figure 1: Preparing charity hot meals at a Buddhist temple in Ho Chi Minh City. Photo credit: Le Hoang Anh Thu.

"We cook for strangers as wholeheartedly as we cook for our family."[3]

—Fieldnote, March 3, 2018

One early morning in March 2018, I joined the cooking team at the Trì An temple to prepare hot meals for patients at an oncology hospital. Three women—apparently in their forties or fifties—worked by the kitchen stoves as cooks, and 10 women—apparently in their sixties or seventies—served as kitchen hands. I joined the ladies sitting on the floor in the temple's main hall, in front of the Buddha's statue, washing and chopping vegetables. The menu of that day had three dishes: steamed rice, a vegetarian braised dish, and legume soup. Each of us had one chopping board and knives of different sizes and shapes in front of us. For three hours we sliced turnips into thin pieces and young jackfruit, tofu, carrot, kohlrabi and okra into small pieces. Meanwhile,

3 "Mình nấu cho người ta ăn cũng phải kỹ như mình nấu cho ở nhà."

a woman in her early seventies carried big basins of the vegetables that we just had cut to the water tap, washed them several times, and delivered them in the kitchen where three profusely sweating cooks laboriously stirred a massive quantity of vegetables and tofu in big frying pans on hot gas stoves.

Being the youngest member of this group, I received a lot of attention and comments from the ladies about my knife skills. Seeing how clumsy I was, a lady advised me to come to join them more often to learn how to cook, because, as she said, cooking will help me "keep the fire" (giữ lửa) burning in my family. The majority of their conversation revolved around cooking for the family. Most of them were the main cooks in their households. Although they were living with their children, they were in charge of the housework, including cooking, so that their daughters or daughters-in-law could work fulltime. One woman, who was a strict vegetarian, described how she prepared delicious meat-based meals for her family and seasoned the food with fish sauce without even having to taste it, as she was that experienced a cook. Another woman shared the recipe for the porridge that she made every morning for her grandchild. She tried to make as pure a soup stock as she could by using pork ribs and avoiding MSG. They agreed that cooking for charity is like cooking for the family: it requires a similar kind of effort and concentration.

I often observed this correlation between family and charity recipients when talking to my contacts about their charitable work. One woman who stayed in an orphanage where she cared for 20 girls praised my donation of some dried food to the children, encouraging me to "see these kids as your own" and "eat a bit less to share the food with your children." On a trip to the Mekong Delta to distribute dried food, such as soy sauce, spices, and rice in a village, I met a 72-year-old woman who had devoted herself to charitable work for many years—even during the years of her troubled marriage to an unfaithful husband. Years after her husband's passing, this woman still saw her charitable work as a parallel to her married life. She said:

My husband should have loved and respected me more for my charitable work. By doing charity, I became a better daughter, a better mother, and a better wife. Not only do I love and take care of my family, I take care of everyone (chăm lo cho bá tánh).

This connection between food charity and caring for family resonates with the anthropological discussion of kinship and how it is forged through feeding. In her classic study of kinship in Langkawi (Malaysia), Carsten (1995) argues that kinship is not merely procreation central, as in the Western understanding of the concept, but is also forged through exchange of substances, such as through feeding and sharing meals. The Langkawi people believe that bodily substances, such as blood and flesh, are made from food, and thus sharing meals becomes the "axis of relatedness operating through women" as women are the cooks in their families (Carsten 1995, 228). In addition to sharing meals among the people living in the same house, Carsten also mentions sharing food among people outside the family, to indicate the fluidity of kinship in Langkawi as it can be forged through social interaction and food sharing.

In Vietnam, several media outlets also connect charity in general, and food charity specifically, with the idea of national and ethnic kinship. Several news articles about charitable activities that distributed cooked and dried food during the Covid-19 pandemic draw on cultural terminologies, using phrases such as "sharing" (chia sẻ), "a complete leaf covers a torn leaf" (lá lành đùm lá rách), or "pumpkin and gourd care for each other" (bầu bí thương nhau) (e.g., Nguyễn 2020; "Nghĩa đồng bào," 2020; "Nặng sâu," 2020). Underlying this collective sharing and affection is the idea of shared origin, as is expressed in the repeated phrase "people from the same egg sac" (đồng bào), a terminology derived from a well-known myth that all the Vietnamese are kin derived from the same ancestors. The following excerpt from a news article about the Rice ATM—an innovative

charity allowing people to "withdraw" rice at no cost from a machine—illustrates this perception that national and ethnic kinship fuels people's kindness and sharing in times of adversity.

Rice ATM in Ho Chi Minh City is becoming widespread to assist poor laborers to temporarily overcome the difficulties during the pandemic. People who heard about this ATM joined hands to assist the vulnerable and those living in hardship. Loving and sharing is being spread to every corner of our country. (…) Every kilogram of rice possesses the spirit of mutual *protection*, *care* (đùm bọc), and *love for people from the same egg sac* (nghĩa đồng bào). (…) Every day in our country, amidst the adversity, we can feel the intensity of care and appreciate the meaning of the saying, "how beautiful is the moral affection shared among compatriots from the same egg-sac" (Nguyễn, 2020).

Although Buddhist food charity givers likened their activity to the care they gave to family, they, nevertheless, did not develop long-term or kin-like connections with their recipients. On the contrary, interactions between charity givers and recipients are brief, centered on giving and receiving. For example, the 700 portions of vegetarian hot meals prepared at the Trì An temple were distributed within an hour. There was little conversation between the givers and recipients: the charity team members were busy putting food into boxes and handing them to the recipients as fast as possible; the recipients received the food and quickly dispersed to let others move forward. Filling the boxes, I realized that this simple meal could be the lunch not only for the people in the queue, but also for their relatives in the hospital. I once paused to talk to a woman who came with several boxes, asking her how many portions she wanted. She smiled shyly and said, "Four; we have a family," but our conversation was immediately interrupted by my teammate who urged her to move aside, and reminded me to act faster.

This brief interaction between givers and recipients in food charity also indicates the absence of reciprocity between them. Food is usually meant to meet an instant need of others, unlike other charity gifts, such as houses, roads, or bridges constructed for people affected by natural disasters that cement a longer-term connection between givers and recipients. Food is often consumed right away, which does not entail a further reciprocal connection between givers and recipients. Mauss (1970), in his classical work on exchange systems in Polynesian and Melanesian societies, argues that gifts must be reciprocated even when it is the gift men exchange with gods or spirits, because transactions are always based on obligation and economic self-interest. Nevertheless, Bornstein (2009) reports that gift giving in some religious traditions, such as Hinduism in India, challenges Mauss' assumption that gifts must be reciprocal.

By the same token, Laidlaw (2000) draws on Derrida (1992)'s concept of "free gift" as a gift with no reciprocity, where both recipient and donor must not recognize the gift as a gift. Laidlaw (2000) explores Jain practice of *Supatra dan*, the alms given by householders to Jain renouncers who come to their houses unexpectedly for food. This practice contains several rules to keep the act of giving food by the householders as voluntary and disinterested and the act of receiving of the renouncers as autonomous as possible. Renouncers must not express liking or gratitude for the food they receive, and the portion of food they accept should be very little to the point that the loss is unnoticeable to the householders. Finally, the food collected from different households are mixed into one mass so that the renouncers can neither savor each separate dish nor recognize individual offering. The food in Jain alms giving is depersonalized and made to disappear once it is given, which makes it an example of a "free gift."

Although food in Buddhist charitable distribution does not entail a reciprocal relationship between givers and recipients in material terms, the painstaking efforts in food preparation imparts this form of charity its moral significance and a meaning equivalent to caring for one's family.[4] It forges a high

4 Additionally, as observed by Nir Avieli (2012, 49–51) in his

moral status for the givers, evident in the sense of responsibility that they have toward their recipients, and in their likening the activity with caring for their families.

Additionally, food charity involves a significant share of volunteering work that, to some extent, distinguishes it from several other forms of charitable work. For charitable construction of houses, roads, or bridges, charity givers are investors, rather than the doers. On the other hand, food charity depends largely on volunteering work. While monetary donation is important, volunteering work is crucial because free labor is needed to prepare and distribute food. The volunteers contribute with their culinary skills—their essential domestic duty for which they do not receive wages. This strenuous voluntary work renders food charity its moral heft and significance.

Keeping the Fire Alight: Kitchens as a Source of Communal Solidarity

Food charity activities organized by individuals, households, and religious institutions have regularly featured on Vietnam's national news. For example, a reality show titled "Kitchen of Love" (Bếp yêu thương) ran on the Ho Chi Minh City Television (HTV) from 2011 till 2014; its YouTube channel features charity programs about distributing food to the needy in Vietnam. Each episode is a combination of introductions to charity programs, game shows involving celebrities and locals, and interviews with food recipients and sponsors.

The central narrative of the reality show "Kitchen of Love" is to praise the kindness of the charity givers and seek donations from the audience to "contribute fire" (góp lửa) to these "kitchens of love." The press reviews of this program also praise the kind-hearted-

research on foodways in Hoi An (central Vietnam), at the time of his research in 2000, "humble" ingredients were used in Hoianese home meals: mostly "cheap carbohydrates and vegetables and miniscule amounts of inferior animal protein." The value and art of the meals lie in the enormous work and skill that Vietnamese women put into turning these cheap materials into elaborate and delicious meals for their loved ones. This observation resonates with most charity hot meals in whose preparation I participated; they were made from cheap ingredients, such as tofu, eggs, fatty pork, cheap vegetables, etc. However, their value lies in the wholehearted involvement of volunteers in soliciting donations and cooking, transporting, and distributing meals to recipients.

ness of the charity givers, many of whom are themselves struggling to make a living, for devoting their time and labor to "sustain the fire of the kitchens of love" ("Ấm áp tình người" 2011).

One charity meal, one pot of rice porridge full of affection, one warm New Year's eve, one free medical examination … all the "ones" keep the fire always alight in the kitchens, warming up the hearts of people who are living difficult lives all year round ("Ấm áp tình người" 2011)

Central to the portrait of food charity in this TV program, as well as in several media coverages of food charity, is the connection between mundane items related to the household kitchen (e.g., meals, pots, vegetable, legume, tofu, fire, warmth, etc.) and larger social issues, such as alleviating suffering in the society, helping those who need food, and so on. The charitable work of cooking and distributing food is called "keeping the fire." The plight of charity recipients in the show is compared to "a kitchen stove where fire is rarely lit" (bếp ít khi đỏ lửa).

The kitchen holds a central place in any Vietnamese home. It is where the family gathers during meals and discusses various private matters. It is the domain of women where they prepare life-sustaining food (Avieli 2012, 51; McAllister and Luckman 2015, 112). As such, the kitchen stove, which is central to the household kitchen, represents family life and connections and cooperation between family members. The kitchen stove, or fire, is considered "the center of life," as "it is from the kitchen that life is granted" (Huynh Ngoc Trang 2014, cited in McAllister and Luckman 2015, 112). The Vietnamese people perform a ritual for the Kitchen God on the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month, one week before the Vietnamese New Year, as they believe that on this day the Kitchen God of each household returns to Heaven to report to the Jade Emperor all the actions—good and bad—committed by the members of the household within the past year (McAllister and Luckman 2015). Calling the voluntary work of charity givers as an act of "keeping the fire" (giữ

lửa), which is also a metaphor for sustaining a happy and peaceful family, the media juxtaposes food charity with maintenance of communal solidarity and peace. Kitchen and preparation of food thus transgresses the domestic space and is placed in a wider context to become a source of national solidarity and unity.

As shown in Nguyen-Marshall's (2008, 75–76) work, while Vietnamese women's charitable work during the colonial time was meant more as social and political participation, as well as a way to challenge their subjugated sexual roles, the rhetoric behind their activities drew on their domestic work to justify their social involvement. They did so by feminizing benevolence and presented their philanthropic work as an "extension of the domestic sphere." Nguyen-Marshall also indicates that "this feminization of benevolence made it difficult later on to justify political rights on the basis of equality" (p.76).

In the present, the "feminization of charity" (Nguyen-Marshall 2008, 80) is visible in the case of food charity. By highlighting volunteering for kitchen work in this charitable practice, Vietnam's media and State showcase this movement as an act of kindness akin to a woman's moral duty to preserve the peace and well-being of their families. Women's unwaged domestic caring work forms the center not only of their households, but also of the community and the nation, becoming a force of communal solidarity.

By feminizing food charity and defining it as domestic work, the State frames food charity as a socially beneficial activity that does not pose a threat to the State's authority and credibility. This highly gendered portrait of food charity overlooks the structural issues that underlie the deprivation and suffering of the people who receive charitable food—a practice not unique to Vietnam. Studies on food initiatives for the poor in developed countries also show that these activities do not challenge the State and the welfare systems (e.g., Caraher and Dowler 2014, 236; Caplan 2016, 9). Caplan (2016, 9) indicates that food banks and food aid are "highly depoliticizing" and "allow the state to evade its obligations" of assuring its citizens the right to food, while "still maintaining a degree of control." Likewise, Caraher and Dowler (2014, 236) contend that food initiatives for the poor do not significantly challenge the State and welfare assistance projects.

Moral Care Involved in Preparing Wholesome and Hygienic Meals

Caring for others like family also manifests in the preparation of wholesome (đ`ầy đủ chất bổ dưỡng) and safe (sạch) meals for charity recipients. To ensure both of these qualities, charity givers apply their personal understanding of the causes of food pollution and how to keep the food clean and safe for their recipients (similar to the discussions of "lay epidemiologies" [Orlando 2018, 4], or "embodied food knowledge" [Enhlert and Faltmann 2018, 21], which mean personal and not scientific understanding of the causes and chances of illness).

Providing wholesome meals to recipients was the priority when deciding the menu of several charity meals I participated in making. Wholesomeness is not measured by a scientifically-determined measurement of nutrition, such as calculating portions of fiber, vitamin, grain, and dairy products. Rather, it accords with what makes a typical Vietnamese family meal. A wholesome hot meal usually includes steamed rice (cơm), soup (canh), which is a vegetable-based dish, and a braised or salty dish (món mặn), which is usually a meat-based dish. A family with greater means would include in their daily meal a stir-fried dish (món xào), which is a combination of vegetables and meat or seafood, and dessert (tráng miệng), which is fruits or sweets.

Although charity hot meals are of very low cost, ranging from 5000 VND (22 US cents) to 20,000 VND ($1 USD), charity cooking teams try to include at least three dishes: steamed rice, soup, and a braised or stir-fried dish. Most team leaders I met

were very proud about the quality of the hot meals they prepared for their recipients. They shared in detail what their hot meals included, and how delicious they were. For example, a leader of a charity team was extremely proud to tell me that her group provides patients of a hospital in the city with delicious and wholesome meal once a month. Her group comprised lay followers of a neighbourhood temple and neighbours. During the early days of their activity, they made vegetarian meals because they were Buddhists and several of the team members were strict vegetarians. However, they soon decided to switch to meat-based meals as people under medical treatment would need nutrients from meat for quick recovery. On one occasion when I volunteered with this team, we made 1,000 portions, each of which contained steamed rice topped with braised pork and egg, one nylon bag of beetroot soup, and one sachet of fish sauce. An 80-year-old woman, who organized charity trips to a temple-based old people's home in the Tây Ninh province (approximately 90 kilometers from HCMC), shared that even though she and her friends could visit that temple only sometimes, their hot meals were eagerly anticipated and highly appreciated. The elderly there daily ate steamed rice with salted cabbage prepared by the monks. That was why her team's hot meals, which included stewed beef, was a luxury for the elderly.

Charity groups that prepare vegetarian meals also follow the formula of a proper Vietnamese household meal, replacing meat with tofu and plant-based products. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, a lay Buddhist woman paired with the abbess of a Buddhist temple in her neighborhood to cook hundreds of hot vegetarian meals and left them at the temple's gate for any passers-by to take on every full-moon day. Talking to me on the phone, she exclaimed:

The food tasted so good, Thu! Everyone loved it and all the servings vanished within minutes. I made vermicelli with fried "meat"[5] *topped with thinly-sliced cucumber and onions.*

Food safety is another issue that concerns charity givers. As it is embedded in the wider food system of HCMC and of Vietnam, it is not surprising to see food anxieties manifest in charitable efforts. Food hygiene is among the most prevalent of food concerns in contemporary Vietnam (Ehlert and Faltmann 2018, 20). Safe food is perceived as "clean" food in Vietnam, as it is supposed to be "clean" of the multiple problems associated with food production in Vietnam, including overuse of chemicals, fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, GMOs in agricultural production, preservatives, chemicals, or colorants.

One observation that particularly intrigued me during my fieldwork was the concern about charity food being poisoned. I sometimes heard volunteers discuss the different scenarios under which the food they served could be poisoned, landing them in trouble. In one of the scenarios, food could be poisoned by nefarious outsiders. A few temples running food charity programs have installed security cameras in their kitchens, mainly to keep track of strangers entering the kitchen. As a general rule, strangers are not allowed inside kitchens.

Less serious than the anxiety about food poisoning is the concern about food becoming "dirty" or unsafe because of contamination during the production and distribution process. I often heard concerns about vegetables being sprayed with too much pesticide and fertilizers, or noodles and tofu being soaked in colorants and preservatives. These concerns about food poisoning and contamination reflect the "deep insecurities in the arena of food" and mistrust around food networks and management in Vietnam (Faltmann 2018, 192). Food safety issues are prevalent to such an extent that the line between safe and unsafe food is very thin—so thin that women who cook for their families or for charity constantly worry about crossing it. This reveals the general sense of skepticism prevalent in the society.

Nevertheless, while the inherent doubts surrounding food and social environment are troublesome, they can be offset with a charitable disposition. Despite

5 "Meat" was made from a paste of tofu mixed with mushroom.

these worries, most Buddhist charity givers I met did not think that these issues could hinder their charitable culinary practices. Rather, such problems are solved by a wholehearted involvement in the cooking process. Several charity teams equip their members with hair covers, face masks, aprons, and gloves for serving food to recipients and to prevent contamination. When cooking, vegetables and other ingredients are washed under tap water multiple times; a few groups do not let new members or visitors join the cooking process. Several groups require the recipients to bring their own lunch boxes to receive the food, and forbid the use of nylon bags as a food container. The team at the Trì An temple requested their recipients to bring reusable plastic boxes to receive the food, and refused to give food in nylon bags to educate their recipients about the environmental damage of plastic waste. In fact, their bigger concern was food getting contaminated in nylon bags. Despite their good deeds and good intentions, they may incur the blame of poisoning their recipients.

Besides the methods to eliminate the risk of contamination, what is more important is that charity givers' peaceful state of mind can bring merit to the food, making it soothing and wholesome. If the cooks are agitated or hold a grudge against someone, their food may harm the consumers. A lay woman explained to me:

If a woman holds a grudge against her husband, quarrels with him, and then cooks for the patients, her food will be like her mind. When patients eat her food, they will consume her anger. If we wish the patients a swift recovery, we must cook with a peaceful mind. Food cooked with a peaceful mind will heal.

Food's purity resembles mind's purity. As such, "clean" food is not merely food free of contamination—as is generally understood in Vietnam—but also free of moral impurities. A person who cooks wholesome food for others is someone filled with compassion not only for her own family, but for others as well. Using the family meal as the yardstick to measure the quality of charity meal, they attempt to cook as carefully as they do for their families. This care, protection, and wholehearted effort can offset the several food problems emanating from the wider environment. This observation echoes with Swenson's (2020) and Le Hoang Ngoc Yen's (in this special issue) highlight on the connection between food quality and emotional and spiritual states of people engaged in preparing and distributing food. In research on how the Buddhist understanding of karma integrates into the charitable cooking for cancer patients in HCMC, Swenson (2020, 35-6) shows that Buddhist practitioners believe the "thoughts, intentions, words, and emotions" they invest in their benevolent work have positive impact on the recipients' health and merit status. Charity workers can generate positive social change by "creating and circulating positive feelings of peace and joy" that enhances their recipients' karma and can turn back the rising cancer rates in Vietnam (p.55).

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the charitable activity of preparing and distributing food to the poor and needy in HCMC. Food charity is widespread in HCMC and has attracted many religious organizations, grassroots groups, and individuals who contribute with money and free labor. Long endorsed by State-run media for its social contribution, food charity received even greater applause and attention from the public and the State during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study contributes to the existing scholarship on food systems in Vietnam by exploring food charity as an alternative food network supporting many Vietnamese through adversities. Inspired by the concept of food transgression (Goodman and Sage 2004), this study examines the ways in which women's domestic care "transgressed" the household space to become "care for all" in the society, and how this extension of women's domestic care reveals the feminization of benevolent work in contemporary Vietnam (Nguyen-Marshall 2008).

This article highlights the roles of food and kitchen work in the continuing feminization of charity, as both of these are at the center of food charity and represent the conventional domain of women. Drawing on the sociocultural significance of the kitchen and the kitchen stove in Vietnamese people's family life as a source of life, vitality, well-being, love, and connection, Vietnamese media describes food charity as domestic work transcending the home to enrich the lives of underprivileged people in the wider society. The image of a kitchen fire is highlighted as a force to sustain the ties between members of the society. People who participate in food charity programs—most of them women—are those who "keep the fire" alight for society, which makes their volunteering work a source of communal solidarity and strength during difficult times.

The standards of regular household meals also impact charity meals. A wholesome hot meal for charity recipients should resemble a family meal comprising rice, soup, a braised or stir-fried dish, and sometimes dessert. Despite their low cost, charity hot meals often include these basic components of a proper family meal. Additionally, similar to the common concern of many Vietnamese women about feeding their families safe food, "clean" and hot meals are also a common topic of discussion among charity givers. Nevertheless, even though food sold in markets may be unhygienic—as is widely believed in Vietnam—food can be kept clean by a woman's wholehearted labor and purity of thoughts while cooking. Last but not least, spiritual and emotional dispositions of the cook can transfer positive energy into the charity food, making the food clean and safe for the recipients.

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About the Author

Dr. Le Hoang Anh Thu *is an associate professor of Asia Pacific Studies at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (Oita, Japan). Le holds a PhD of Anthropology from the Australian National University. Le's current research focuses on aging, lay Buddhist practice, and faith-based charitable practice in Vietnam.*

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