

Culinary Culture in Hai Phong City

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ABSTRACT:

This study focuses on analyzing the role of cuisine in tourism development in Hai Phong City, considering it an important element of local cultural identity and a strategic driving force for socio-economic development. Hai Phong cuisine is notable for its harmonious combination of abundant fresh seafood resources, traditional processing techniques passed down through generations, and authenticity expressed in flavors and service. These factors not only create unique tourism experiences but also act as a means of conveying historical and cultural stories and connecting the community. The research results also show that, in addition to the advantages of resources and identity, Hai Phong cuisine is facing many challenges such as commercialization trends, fluctuations in raw materials, and the lack of a synchronous promotion strategy. On that basis, the article proposes an orientation to combine preserving original values with innovation, developing experiential products associated with local culture, applying digital technology in marketing and building sustainable culinary brands, thereby enhancing Hai Phong's position on the domestic and international culinary tourism map.

Keywords: Local cuisine; Culinary experience ; Culinary culture; Hai Phong city.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and increasing cultural exchange, cuisine has become one of the important factors contributing to shaping local cultural identity, and at the same time playing a strategic role in sustainable tourism development. International studies show that cuisine is not only a nutritional need but also reflects the value system, beliefs, and social behavior of the community (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

According to Okumus et al. (2007), local cuisine can be considered a unique cultural product, both having material value through economic activities and spiritual value through maintaining traditions and identity. In Vietnam, many international studies have recognized cuisine as an inseparable element of national cultural identity, expressed through the harmonious combination of

yin-yang philosophy, the principles of "five flavors", "five colors" and the habit of using fresh ingredients with little industrial processing (Avieli, 2013; Le & Arcodia, 2018).

Hai Phong - a major port city in Northern Vietnam - possesses rich and diverse seafood resources and is also a place where many cultural streams converge and intersect due to its historical characteristics and geographical location (Nguyen et al., 2020). Specialty dishes such as crab noodles, crab spring rolls, fish noodles, crab cakes or mantis shrimp hotpot are not only famous domestically but also attract international tourists thanks to their unique flavors and preparation methods associated with local traditions (Phuong et al., 2025). This is consistent with Sims's (2009) observation that local culinary experiences play a key role in creating deep impressions and enhancing tourist satisfaction.

In addition to its cultural value, Hai Phong cuisine also has clear socio-economic significance. According to Ellis et al. (2018), the development of culinary tourism has the potential to increase income, create jobs and promote local supply chains. However, to maintain long-term attractiveness, destinations need to focus on preserving original values, improving service quality and ensuring food safety (Quan & Wang, 2004). Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen's (2016) study also emphasized the importance of combining traditional and innovative elements to meet the diverse needs of the global tourist market.

In this context, studying Hai Phong culinary culture from a scientific perspective not only helps identify core values and characteristics but also contributes to proposing solutions to preserve, develop and promote the local image. Qualitative research based on a theoretical framework of culture, tourist behavior and cuisine will be the basis for a deeper understanding of the relationship between cuisine, identity and sustainable development in Hai Phong City.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS

Concept of culinary culture and local cultural values

Culinary culture is understood as the sum of material and non-material elements related to the production, processing, distribution, consumption and enjoyment of food, associated with the natural, historical and social context of the community (Long, 2004; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). In an anthropological perspective, culinary culture is a symbolic system that reflects social structure, power relations and collective identity values (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Hjalager and Richards (2002) emphasize that local cuisine is the crystallization of environmental conditions (available raw materials), traditional processing techniques and contemporary creative elements, thereby forming the "identity mark" of a land.

In Vietnam, cuisine is considered a "living cultural entity", constantly changing but still retaining core values. Okumus et al. (2007) pointed out that linking local cuisine with historical stories and customs will increase the value of the experience for tourists, while helping to maintain identity in the context of globalization.

The role of cuisine in sustainable tourism development

Gastronomy plays a strategic role in destination branding, promoting economic development and raising public awareness of cultural preservation (Sims, 2009 ; Ellis et al., 2018). According to Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016), tourists who seek local culinary experiences tend to have a longer-term relationship with the destination, thereby increasing loyalty and promoting positive word-of-mouth. This is consistent with Everett and Aitchison's (2008) finding that gastronomy is an important tool for sustainable tourism development because it encourages the use of local ingredients, supports local supply chains and reduces environmental impact.

From the perspective of destination management, integrating cuisine into tourism products not only meets the diverse needs of tourists but also motivates local businesses to innovate and improve service quality (Okumus et al., 2007). For Hai Phong, with its rich seafood resources and rich culinary identity, cuisine can play a central role in the strategy of developing sea tourism combined with cultural experiences.

Theoretical framework of tourist behavior and culinary experience

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) provide a scientific foundation to explain how beliefs, attitudes, and social norms

influence tourists' food consumption intentions and behaviors. Quan and Wang (2004) separate the food experience into two main dimensions: (1) functional factors such as taste, price, food safety, and (2) symbolic factors such as cultural stories, traditional meanings, and social context of the food.

In a study in Hai Phong, Phuong et al. (2025) found that reasonable prices, food quality, convenience, and food safety were variables that strongly influenced Gen Z tourists' intention to participate in food tours. In contrast, advertising factors - although still influential - were less important than actual experiences, suggesting that tourists prioritize authentic experiences over media messages.

Vietnamese culinary philosophy and its application in Hai Phong

Vietnamese cuisine is characterized by a rice-based agricultural culture, in which the philosophy of yin-yang balance and the principles of "five flavors" and "five colors" play a central role in the preparation and presentation of dishes (Avieli, 2013). Le and Arcodia (2018) assert that the element of "culinary aesthetics" is not only to stimulate the taste buds but also to create an emotional experience and connection with the place. In Hai Phong, this philosophy is clearly demonstrated through the use of fresh seafood ingredients, combined with local herbs, spices and processing methods that preserve the natural flavors. The dish "banh da cua" is a typical example: the noodles are made from typical red rice, the broth is simmered from field crabs and pork bones, served with blanched water spinach and grilled pork wrapped in betel leaves, ensuring both nutritional balance and an unforgettable rich flavor.

Sustainability and innovation in local culinary development

According to Ellis et al. (2018), sustainability in local culinary development includes three elements: (1) maintaining the original value of the dish, (2) ensuring food quality and safety, and (3) adapting to changing market demands. Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) add that culinary product innovation - such as creating new dishes based on traditional recipes or improving service experiences - is necessary to attract the new generation of tourists who love novelty.

For Hai Phong, this could include hosting a seafood food festival, developing a "sea-to-table" tour, and using digital platforms to tell the story of

the food, chefs, and ingredients. The combination of preservation and innovation not only helps maintain the attraction but also turns cuisine into an effective tool to promote the local cultural brand.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

The role of cuisine in the travel experience

Cuisine plays a central role in shaping and enhancing the tourist experience in Hai Phong City. For the majority of tourists interviewed, enjoying local specialties is not only a simple way to satisfy their dietary needs but also a deeply cultural and social experience. Cuisine becomes a “gateway” for tourists to access and better understand the history, customs, habits, and lifestyle of the local community. This is consistent with Sims’s (2009) argument that local cuisine has the ability to vividly recreate the cultural context of a destination, thereby creating meaningful and unforgettable experiences for tourists.

Hai Phong cuisine is highly valued for its authenticity. Tourists, especially international visitors, feel the “authenticity” when enjoying food in local spaces, from portside eateries, traditional seafood markets to street vendors in old quarters. Factors such as fresh flavors, handcrafted preparation, and the use of freshly caught seafood ingredients create a distinct value compared to culinary experiences in other cities. Many tourists describe the feeling of “living like a local” when participating in choosing ingredients, chatting with vendors, and witnessing the cooking process on the spot. This experience reinforces Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen’s (2016) assertion that authenticity and community engagement are two core elements in creating sustainable emotional value for tourists.

In addition to its authenticity, Hai Phong cuisine acts as a powerful social connector. In many cases, meals become a space for interaction between tourists and locals, where stories about the origin of the food, cooking experiences, and folk legends are shared naturally. This interaction not only increases tourist satisfaction but also creates an emotional connection with the destination, thereby enhancing the likelihood of returning and recommending it to others. This result is consistent with Quan and Wang’s (2004) tourism experience model, in which symbolic values and social meanings play an equally important role as functional factors such as food quality or price.

Another aspect that has been emphasized is the role of cuisine in building a destination brand image. For Hai Phong, specialties such as rice noodles with crab, spring rolls with crab, or fried shrimp paste have become recognizable symbols

not only for domestic tourists but also on the international culinary map. Many tourists said that they chose to come to Hai Phong partly because of curiosity and the desire to experience dishes that “can only be found here”. This shows that cuisine is not only a complementary product for tourism but can become a key driving factor in the decision to choose a destination, consistent with the argument of Okumus et al. (2007) that local cuisine can serve as an effective marketing tool in a sustainable tourism development strategy.

From the above analysis, it can be affirmed that Hai Phong cuisine holds a special position in the structure of tourists’ tourism experiences. It not only contributes to creating a difference for the destination but also brings deep cultural, social and emotional values. Preserving and promoting this role requires a combination of maintaining originality, improving service quality and building an effective promotion strategy, thereby turning cuisine into a driving force for sustainable tourism development for the city.

Unique identity and value of Hai Phong cuisine

Hai Phong’s culinary identity is formed from the convergence of three main factors: abundant raw materials from the sea and delta, traditional processing techniques passed down through many generations, and the unique culinary style of the seaport community. Hai Phong possesses a long coastline and a dense river system, providing a diverse source of fresh seafood all year round, from field crabs, mantis shrimp, mantis shrimp, blue crab to fish, squid, clams, and snails. These ingredients not only ensure freshness but also have a clear seasonal character, creating flexible changes in the menu and helping to maintain the close connection between cuisine and nature.

One of the outstanding features of Hai Phong’s culinary identity is the harmonious combination of simplicity and sophistication. Famous dishes such as crab noodles, fish noodles, crab spring rolls, fried shrimp paste or spicy bread are not too fussy in appearance, but are prepared with meticulousness in every step, from choosing ingredients, preparing, combining spices to controlling cooking time. The crab noodles, for example, use a special type of red rice paper made from local rice, dried in the sun until it reaches its natural elasticity and color. The broth is simmered from hand-pounded field crabs and pork bones for many hours, creating a naturally sweet flavor without the need for industrial additives. This preparation process reflects a culinary mindset that emphasizes originality, while adhering to the

philosophy of "five flavors" and "five colors" typical of Vietnamese culinary culture (Avieli, 2013).

In-depth interviews with chefs and restaurateurs in Hai Phong show that they consider maintaining traditional recipes to be vital to preserving culinary identity. Many refuse to make too many changes to ingredients or cooking methods, despite the market demand for variations to cater to more diverse tastes. This is consistent with the observations of Long (2004) and Hjalager & Richards (2002) that local culinary identity is maintained and reinforced through adherence to traditional cooking standards and the integration of cultural stories into dishes.

Hai Phong's culinary identity is not only expressed through taste and preparation, but also through space and service style. Many visitors describe the dining experience in Hai Phong as a journey to discover the life of a port city: from small roadside stalls where vendors chat while preparing food, to long-standing restaurants associated with the memories of many generations. The dining environment here is often open and intimate, helping visitors clearly feel the local lifestyle. This makes cuisine not only a consumer product but also a comprehensive cultural and social experience, creating a deep impression in visitors' memories.

In addition, Hai Phong cuisine also has symbolic value for the community. Dishes are not only "specialties" sold to tourists but also part of daily life and traditional festivals. For example, crab spring rolls often appear in weddings or to entertain distinguished guests, while crab cakes are a seasonal dish, associated with the 9th and 10th lunar months, becoming an annual culinary cultural milestone. These connections reinforce the argument of Mintz & Du Bois (2002) that food and eating habits can act as a collective memory system, contributing to shaping community identity.

The unique identity and value of Hai Phong cuisine lies not only in the ingredients or processing techniques but also in the way the dishes are closely connected to the natural environment, historical stories and social life of local residents. This is an important foundation for developing sustainable culinary tourism, and at the same time, a unique competitive advantage of Hai Phong City on the tourism map of Vietnam and the world.

Challenges in conservation and development

Although Hai Phong cuisine possesses a unique value foundation and strong development

potential, the process of preserving and promoting this identity is facing many systemic challenges. One of the biggest challenges is the risk of losing authenticity due to the impact of commercialization and globalization. The rapid increase of modern food chains, which focus on standardizing products and processes to optimize costs and speed of service, can lead to the homogenization of flavors, fading traditional elements. Many veteran chefs have expressed concern that if this trend continues, younger generations will have less access to original recipes, leading to a breakdown of local culinary traditions.

In addition, fluctuations in raw material sources are a matter of concern. Due to the strong dependence of Hai Phong cuisine on fresh seafood, changes in weather conditions, marine environment and overexploitation have directly affected the supply. Some restaurant owners said that in recent years, raw material costs have increased and it is increasingly difficult to find seafood of stable quality. This not only affects selling prices and competitiveness but also poses challenges in maintaining the quality and unique flavor of the dishes. From a scientific perspective, this issue reflects the interdependence between natural ecosystems and culinary systems, as Ellis et al. (2018) pointed out in their study on the link between environmental sustainability and culinary tourism development.

Another challenge is the limitation in marketing and brand management. Currently, most of the information about Hai Phong cuisine is transmitted through informal channels such as social networks, personal blogs or word of mouth, lacking direction and a synchronous promotion strategy. This makes the city's culinary brand unclear in the international market, while also creating a fragmentation in image recognition. Compared to famous culinary destinations such as Hue or Hoi An, Hai Phong has not yet built a "brand story" capable of linking historical, cultural and specialty product elements to create sustainable attraction for tourists.

In addition, the training and human resource development system in the local culinary and tourism industry lacks specialization. Young chefs, although dynamic and creative, have not been properly trained in traditional cooking techniques and culinary culture knowledge. This can lead to excessive variations in dishes, losing the original values that are a competitive advantage. From the perspective of Hjalager & Richards (2002), this is a structural problem, requiring intervention from both the state management system and professional social

organizations to maintain the standards of culinary heritage.

The lack of linkages between stakeholders – including local authorities, tourism businesses, food service establishments and the community – is also a limiting factor. Qualitative research shows that initiatives to promote or preserve cuisine are often individual and do not create a ripple effect. The lack of a common coordination mechanism makes it difficult to develop cuisine into a strategic tourism product, leading to wasted potential and resources.

In short, these challenges are not only short-term obstacles but can also have long-term impacts on the maintenance and development of Hai Phong's culinary identity. Solving them requires a comprehensive approach, combining cultural heritage preservation, sustainable resource management, human resource training, and building a synchronous brand strategy. Without timely solutions, the city risks losing its unique competitive advantage on the national and international culinary tourism map.

Opportunities for innovation and sustainable development

Qualitative analysis results show that, in addition to challenges, Hai Phong cuisine is facing many opportunities for innovation and sustainable development, based on existing advantages in resources, identity and new consumption trends in tourism. One of the biggest opportunities is to maximize the exploitation of abundant and fresh seafood resources, which are considered the "strategic assets" of the city. In the context of increasing global demand for seafood cuisine and "sea-to-table" experiences, Hai Phong has the potential to become a leading destination in the seafood culinary tourism segment. Designing tourism products associated with the process of catching, processing and enjoying on the spot not only brings unique experiences to visitors but also creates added value for the local supply chain.

Another opportunity comes from the modern tourist's tendency to seek authentic and personalized experiences. Tourists, especially the younger generation and international visitors, increasingly prioritize interactive activities where they can directly participate in the preparation process or learn about the cultural story behind the dish. Hai Phong can absolutely develop experiences such as cooking classes with local chefs, early morning seafood market tours, or "a day as a fisherman" programs to enhance the connection between tourists and the community. This is consistent with the view of Björk and

Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) that the value of culinary experiences is enhanced when tourists participate and co-create the product.

The development of digital technology also opens up new opportunities for promoting and marketing Hai Phong cuisine. Social media platforms, short videos and virtual reality technology can be used to tell stories about the origin of dishes, processing techniques and characters associated with culinary heritage. Digital media campaigns can combine visual, audio and interactive elements to create a strong impression and reach global markets at a reasonable cost. According to Ellis et al. (2018), leveraging digital channels not only helps expand reach but also increases engagement, thereby promoting travel decisions based on culinary factors.

In addition, the context of international integration and cooperation in the field of tourism and cuisine is creating favorable conditions for Hai Phong to connect with regional and global culinary networks. Participating in events such as the International Food Festival, Vietnamese cultural weeks abroad, or cooperating with UNESCO organizations and the UNESCO "Creative Cities of Gastronomy" network can enhance the image of Hai Phong cuisine, while attracting investment and exchanging expertise.

Another important aspect is the trend of sustainable tourism and responsible consumption, which is gaining more attention from tourists. Hai Phong can take advantage of this opportunity to position its cuisine as part of its sustainable development strategy, by applying food safety standards, using local and seasonal ingredients, minimizing plastic waste in serving, and encouraging community-based business models. This not only helps to preserve the marine environment and resources but also creates positive brand value for the destination, in line with Sims' (2009) recommendation of combining local identity with sustainability principles.

The synthesis of the above factors shows that the opportunity for innovation and sustainable development of Hai Phong cuisine lies in the harmonious combination of preserving original values and creatively exploiting new trends. If implemented synchronously and strategically, these opportunities will not only enhance Hai Phong's competitiveness on the culinary tourism map but also make a practical contribution to the city's long-term socio-economic development.

IV. DISCUSSION

The research results confirmed that Hai Phong cuisine plays a role not only as a factor

serving the need for food and drink, but also as a core element of the cultural identity and local tourism experience. This result is similar to the assessment of Long (2004) and Hjalager & Richards (2002) that local cuisine is a combination of natural environment, processing techniques and social - cultural factors, creating a unique "identity" of the destination. In the case of Hai Phong, the convergence of abundant seafood resources, traditional processing skills and close service style has formed a cuisine that is both original and highly attractive to tourists.

Compared with international studies on culinary tourism, the qualitative results of this study reinforce the views of Sims (2009) and Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) that authenticity and community engagement are two important factors in enhancing tourist satisfaction and revisit intention. The responses from international and domestic visitors in the study showed that Hai Phong culinary experiences achieved both of these factors, especially through street food spaces and direct interactions with chefs. This suggests that maintaining authenticity is not only a task of heritage preservation, but also an effective competitive strategy in the tourism market.

However, the results also point to major challenges, especially the risk of loss of authenticity due to commercialization, fluctuations in raw material sources and lack of a clear branding strategy. This finding is consistent with the warning of Okumus et al. (2007) that when local cuisine is homogenized or distanced from its cultural origins, its appeal will decline rapidly. Maintaining fresh seafood sources, quality control and protection of the marine environment are not only economic requirements, but also prerequisites for preserving culinary heritage values in the long term, similar to the conclusion of Ellis et al. (2018) on the link between resource conservation and sustainable tourism development.

A notable point is that the opportunity to develop Hai Phong cuisine is associated with new consumer trends such as "sea-to-table" experiences, personalized tourism products, and the application of digital technology for promotion. The research results show that forms of experience with direct participation of tourists - for example, cooking classes, seafood market tours, or fishing experiences with fishermen - have the potential to create a clear difference compared to other culinary destinations. This is a practical proof of the observation of Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) that today's tourists seek experiential value through interaction and co-creation with the local community.

From a strategic perspective, the combination of preserving original values and innovation is the most suitable approach for Hai Phong. Preservation ensures the sustainability of culinary heritage, while innovation - through product improvement, organizing specialized events, or applying communication technology - helps increase competitiveness in the context of globalization. This is also consistent with the proposal of Le & Arcodia (2018) that the culinary tourism development strategy needs to be designed based on a balance between traditional and modern elements, in order to both meet market demand and maintain identity.

Thus, the discussion of the research results not only clarifies the factors that make Hai Phong cuisine attractive but also emphasizes the points that need to be prioritized in policy planning and development strategies. Specifically, the city needs to build a clear culinary brand strategy, invest in preserving traditional processing knowledge, ensure sustainable raw materials, and promote digital communication to connect with the global tourism market. These are key factors for Hai Phong cuisine to become a strategic driving force for sustainable tourism development and enhance the city's position on the international culinary map.

V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Qualitative research on culinary culture in Hai Phong City has shown that cuisine is not simply a consumption activity, but also a core element in preserving and promoting local cultural identity, and plays a strategic role in sustainable tourism development. Hai Phong's culinary identity is shaped by the convergence of rich seafood resources, traditional processing techniques and service styles bearing the mark of the seaport community. Specialty dishes such as crab noodles, fish noodles, crab spring rolls, crab cakes or mantis shrimp hotpot not only demonstrate sophistication in processing but are also closely associated with the historical and cultural stories of the locality, creating a special attraction for both domestic and international tourists.

The research results also show that Hai Phong cuisine brings tourism experience value beyond its culinary function, including factors of authenticity, community cohesion and the ability to position the destination brand. However, the development of local cuisine is facing a number of significant challenges such as commercialization, fluctuations in raw material sources, limitations in marketing activities and the risk of breaking processing traditions. In addition, the context of

integration and the shift in tourism consumption trends opens up many new opportunities for product innovation, digital technology application and international cooperation to enhance the city's culinary brand.

Based on the research results, some policy implications are proposed as follows:

Firstly, it is necessary to develop and implement a Hai Phong culinary brand strategy with a clear positioning message, combining historical and cultural factors and the original characteristics of the dishes. This strategy needs to be integrated into the city's overall tourism development plan, while effectively exploiting digital communication channels to widely promote both domestic and international markets.

Second, promote the preservation and transmission of traditional cooking techniques through vocational training programs for young chefs, support for family culinary businesses, and encourage the “culinary artisan” model. This helps maintain quality standards and the original value of dishes, while facilitating innovation based on tradition.

Third, promote the linkage of the culinary-tourism value chain by closely cooperating between fishermen, restaurants, travel companies and local authorities. The “sea-to-table” experience tour model or annual seafood festival events can both promote the image and create economic momentum for the community.

Fourth, focus on protecting raw materials and the marine environment through sustainable seafood exploitation management policies, applying food safety standards and encouraging the use of seasonal ingredients. This is a fundamental solution to ensure food quality and maintain long-term competitive advantages.

Finally, it is necessary to promote international cooperation in the field of culinary tourism through participation in international culinary events and fairs and connection with the UNESCO “Creative Cities of Gastronomy” network. This will not only enhance the position of Hai Phong cuisine on the world map but also create conditions for learning, exchanging experiences and attracting investment resources for the industry.

With the above orientations and solutions, Hai Phong cuisine can completely become a strategic driving force in the city's economic and tourism development, while contributing significantly to preserving and spreading Vietnamese cultural values to the world.

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