

# WHOSE TASTE MATTERS?

By Natalia Duong  
DRAMATURG

In many ways, phở can be considered the national dish of Việt Nam. It's certainly the most recognizable Vietnamese dish around the world, but it has of course been influenced by the many different cultures that occupied the region now called Vietnam, and the vast array of Vietnamese diasporic communities that bring their own flair to the soup today. Every family has their own signature way of cooking phở, and even as recipes have been shared across generations, they've been adjusted to fit the changing tastes of migrating and displaced communities. In *Colonialism is Terrible but Phở is Delicious*, Dustin H. Chinn presents us with one possible origin story: that phở was developed from a combination of noodles brought from China and the robust beef and slow stewing technique of French cuisine. Beyond speculating about the origins of phở, the play challenges ideals of authenticity and singular authorship, and ultimately poses the question, "whose taste matters?" The play asks us to consider the multitude of ways that colonialism and imperialism operate, and how we are complicit in these ongoing occupations. This is part of what makes this play so layered and resonant, even as we find ourselves laughing at the challenge of

communicating across languages and the clashing of powers over culture.

Across the three parts of the play, we witness how power changes hands over a bowl of phở. In part one, during the early French occupation of Indochina, French cuisine is posited as the manifestation of enlightenment values, and serving in a French kitchen is portrayed as a vastly better alternative to the violent work of rice and rubber plantations. Today, French words persist in contemporary Vietnamese culinary terms: for example, cheese is called phô mai after the transliterated French word fromage and a potato is called khoai tây meaning "Western tuber." In early conversations, Dustin shared with me that the Michelin Guide to restaurants was in fact established in 1889 by the Michelin tire company, who wanted to promote automobile travel to hotels and restaurants so that patrons would eventually buy more tires. The rubber plantations of occupied Indochina provided the raw material for the Michelin tires, and ultimately, as culinary valuations grew, so too did the meaning of being a Michelin-rated restaurant.

The rich history of imperial occupation and cultural diplomacy through food in Vietnam continues through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which parts two and three of the play are set. In 1994, US President Bill Clinton ended the trade embargo between Vietnam and the US, marking the official beginning of attempts to repair foreign relations after the Vietnam-American war. In order to demonstrate this new affinity, Clinton visited Vietnam in November 2000 and ate phở at the newly minted, and appropriately named, Pho 2000 in Ho Chi Minh City. A few decades later, in 2016, US President Barack Obama visited Vietnam; he toured cultural institutions and Buddhist shrines, held a townhall with young tech and art entrepreneurs including Vietnamese rapper Suboi, and sat down with Anthony Bourdain to eat bún chả at Bourdain's favorite hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Hanoi. The restaurant is now affectionately nicknamed Bún Chả Obama, as Obama's visit marked yet another new era of US-Vietnam relations that was performed through shared cuisine.

As Vietnamese and Vietnamese American chefs gain notoriety amongst culinary elites, the status of "authentic" food becomes even more muddled. In Vietnam, there are restaurants where you can order a \$100

bowl of phở that includes black truffle paste, which is fifty times as expensive as the average street cart. In the US, Vietnamese American chefs claim that access to more robust chickens and cows result in tastier soups, while some US chefs argue that the cows and chicken that are grown in Vietnam uphold the true meaning of cage- and hormone-free livestock. These debates complicate what is considered "elevated" food, and challenge us as consumers to reconsider how we value different tastes and how we demonstrate our values through our financial investments.

In watching this play, my hope is that you will recognize parts of yourself in these characters, and that you may even be surprised by how this recognition could shift between characters as the play progresses. Ultimately, as you settle into your seat after your preshow dinner, or debate its politics at a late night phở restaurant nearby, I hope you will pause to reconsider how colonialism continues to inform the land, resources, and opportunities that are available (or not) to you. As you digest this story, consider how you might work to dismantle colonialism's insidious and ongoing harm, even when it may appear as harmless as a delicious bowl of phở.

