

Chilli peppers and the southeast asian identity



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Introduction

Chilli peppers are an integral part of Southeast Asian cuisine today. Many people associate chilli so closely with Southeast Asian cuisines that some shops in Western countries selling Southeast Asian food have had to add excessive amounts of chilli to their food in order to cater to what foreigners think is Southeast Asian food. However, chilli peppers were actually introduced into Southeast Asia a little less than 500 years. Therefore, they are not an indigenous aspect of Southeast Asian cuisine but rather a product of globalisation. Yet today, Southeast Asian cuisines display “ a penchant for chillies...with almost every cuisine claiming a variation of a chilli condiment” (Williams, 2010, p. 41).

In this essay, the key issues will be to explore why chillies became so popular in Southeast Asian in the first place and how their importance has evolved over the years to make them an integral part of Southeast Asian identity through the means of cuisine. Firstly, we will look at the history of chilli peppers and how they were brought into the Southeast Asian region. Secondly, we will see what Southeast Asian cuisine was like before chilli peppers became such an integral part of it. Thirdly, we will explore why chilli peppers caught on so quickly as part of the indigenous cuisine. Lastly, I will argue that the role of chilli has evolved in Southeast Asian cuisine and today, its popularity transcends culinary trends to form an integral part of Southeast Asian identity.

The History of Chilli

The colonial powers and the prevalence of trade in the Southeast Asian region were the key factors in introducing chilli peppers to the cuisines of Southeast Asian. Chilli peppers were the indigenous plants of the Americas from 6000 BC.

SEA Cuisine before Chilli

Southeast Asian cuisine before the introduction of chilli already indicated a local preference for spicy food. In Thailand, people were seasoning their food with ginger and peppercorns. This preference for spicy food might be an indication of local conditions that made the region more susceptible or accommodating of spicy food. Unsurprisingly, when the Portuguese introduced chilli peppers to the regions in the 1500s, the Thai were the quickest to adapt them into their food.

The Prevalence of Chilli in SEA Cuisine

The prevalence of chilli in SEA cuisine after its introduction to the region less than 500 years ago is the result of a combination of factors that include sociological reasons, culinary reasons, scientific reasons and geographical reasons.

It is hard to explain the popularity of chilli in the region due to biology. Recent studies have indicated that Asians 25% more likely than people of other races to be supertasters. Supertasters are more sensitive to certain tastes and Asians would therefore be more prone to experiencing the “burn” of capsaicin through chilli consumption. Yet despite this ethnic trait, the prevalence of chilli in SEA cuisine exceeds that of European or American

cuisine. I argue that the popularity of chilli in the region can be explained by a confluence of factors exclusive to SEA countries.

Firstly, rice is a staple food in all the SEA countries. SEA countries today are responsible for a larger than proportionate share of the global rice export market, with countries like Thailand and Vietnam being famous for rice planting. In the past, many people in SEA countries survived through subsistence farming and rice was a staple food because it was cheap and filling. Even when rice was not eaten, people substituted it with rice-based products like rice noodles. By making rice a staple part of the SEA diet, people could reduce their consumption of expensive meats and vegetables and therefore, lower the cost of their meals. With the introduction of chilli in the region, people began adding it into their meats and vegetables to give it extra spiciness. The extra spiciness of the meats and vegetables meant that the amount of meat and vegetables for meals could be further reduced since people ended up eating more rice to reduce the burn of the capsaicin from the chillies. By adding a relatively cheap ingredient like chilli to their dishes, SEA people could therefore reduce their consumption of more expensive foodstuffs, thus explaining the prevalence of chilli in the cost-conscious SEA region.

Secondly, chillies were adapted into a region which was already trying different methods to deal with food spoilage. In countries with landlocked areas and muddy rivers, it was not always easy to obtain the freshest of ingredients for the preparation of food. Vegetables grown in certain areas took on a weird taste and often contributed to what many people would consider unpalatable dishes in a meal. In a time with no refrigeration, it was

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not always possible to consume food before it started going bad in the hot and humid weather, which meant that rotting food was always a possibility during meals. To reduce food spoilage, fermentation of food (like shrimp paste) and sun drying ingredients (ie fish) had become a popular aspect of SEA cooking during this time. However, the resulting dried ingredients were more pungent and had a stronger taste than before and when added back into cooked food, could make it taste less palatable. With the introduction of chilli peppers into food cooked with dried ingredients, Southeast Asian cooks were able to

Thirdly, recent studies have shown that chilli-based cuisine is popular because it promotes the release of endorphins. The capsaicin in chilli peppers have been found to promote endorphin release in the human brain in order to deal with the “burn” of spicy food, thus making a torturously spicy meal paradoxically pleasurable. In Britain, researchers were looking into the popularity of curry in the United Kingdom and they concluded that the reason curry had grown so popular was because the spice in the curry caused people’s hearts to beat faster after consumption, mimicking the after-effects of sex. Assuming that these findings of Western researchers can be applied to Southeast Asians, we can thus see that there is a scientific reason to explain the popularity of chilli-based cuisine in the region.

Finally and most importantly, the popularity of chilli can be attributed to a self-perpetuating cycle of cultural transmission through immigration in a geographically connected area. Southeast Asian is a region of diverse cultures and religions and this regional trait expresses itself most clearly in the varied dietary restrictions among the different SEA countries. The

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Muslims abstain from pork, while the Hindus do not consume beef and the more religious Buddhists avoid meat altogether. However, chilli peppers are a plant-based cooking ingredient and do not violate any culinary restrictions of various SEA ethnic and religious populations. Being a geographically connected area that has long been involved in trade, SEA was exposed to the cultural transmission of chilli-based cuisines through local and foreign traders who eventually settled down in these lands as immigrants. As chillies became more widely used in local cuisines due to its culinary adaptability, more chillies were grown within the region itself and this resulted in a self-perpetuating cycle that cemented its place in Southeast Asian kitchens.

A combination of these factors explains the prevalence of chilli in the Southeast Asian region and it also accounts for why Filipino and Northern Vietnamese cuisines incorporate less chilli in their food compared to their neighbours. For the Philippines,

The Role of Chilli in Shaping SEA Identity

Due to their popularity in Southeast Asian cuisines, chilli peppers have transcended culinary traditions and come to occupy an exalted role in shaping Southeast Asian identity today. Spicy food is now part of the identity of the region while the ability to tolerate and even relish chillies is now seen as an informal rite of passage among SEA communities today.

Spicy food is now closely associated with the identity of the region in a globalised world. Southeast Asian cuisine seen in the eyes of non- Southeast Asian people is determined by the spiciness of the food and the excessive use of chillies in cooking. With the increasing influx of SE immigrants to

Western countries, Westerners are exposed to Southeast Asian cuisine and because Southeast Asians use more spices and chillies as opposed to salt and pepper, Westerners have come to view chillies as a defining aspect of Southeast Asian cuisine. If you visit any hawker centre in Singapore today, an order of almost any dish will invariably be accompanied with chilli condiments ranging from chicken rice chilli to sambal goreng to the freshly cut chilli peppers soaked in soya sauce. Due to cultural perceptions of Southeast Asian food, more hawkers are inclined to include a chilli condiment with the kind of food they serve and this in turn exposes more people to chilli-based food that they come to see as normal or even synonymous with Southeast Asian cuisine.

In many Southeast Asian communities, the ability to tolerate chilli-based food or even relish the taste of chilli peppers is the ultimate, albeit informal, rite of passage to adulthood.

The irony of associating chillies with regional and personal SEA identity is that not all Southeast Asians embrace chilli as part of their diet. As mentioned earlier, Southeast Asians are supertasters and theoretically more sensitive to capsaicin.

The absence of chilli in certain SEA based cuisines (Northern Vietnam & Philippines)