

18

WHAT'S IN A WET MARKET?

ANTHROPOLOGY OF FOOD AND ASIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Sarah G. Grant

When my university closed the door to face-to-face instruction in March 2020, my upper-division Global Ethnographies of Food class had already discussed the ramped-up xenophobia at Chinese restaurants across the United States. In fact, we had been discussing the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, since January. Although the pandemic felt distant at the time, thousands of miles away in East and Southeast Asia, my students had pressing questions about the pandemic and how it related to food and zoonosis. Before too long, the questions I always dread in discussions of food, fieldwork, and cultural difference came up: Have you ever eaten bat, rat, or dog? Or, what is the weirdest thing you have consumed in Asia? Primed by travel shows, the intrigue of cultural difference, or simply the Western gaze, students who ask these questions have likely not thought sincerely about what we *all* eat every day and how we procure it.¹ I felt obligated to position emergent media about food and COVID-19 within a larger critical food studies framework. Given our frequent encounters with the media spectacle of “bat soup,” wet markets, and “wild” or “bush” meat, there was a sense of urgency to unpack these matters with requisite cultural relativism and thoughtfulness. Pandemic or not, I wanted my students to leave the course furnished with an understanding of Orientalism, equipped with a toolbox to critique the exoticizing and often reductionist representations of food in Asia. I also wanted to leave my students with a curiosity about the politics

of representation in Asia. Guided by my experience conducting ethnographic research in Southeast Asia, I found that teaching Asia during a pandemic harkens back to fundamental questions about the language, culture, and history of place.

This essay elucidates why it is important to unpack the cultural significance and context of “wet markets” in Asia. Tamara Giles-Vernick’s essay, “Should Wild Meat Markets Be Shut Down?” points out the ubiquitous use of the “wet market” across social media platforms and in discourse about the origin and spread of COVID-19 in China. This essay furthers this dialogue by encouraging students to think about a deceptively big question—What is a wet market?—and position it in a larger, empirically informed understanding of the wet market itself.² Part ethnographic narrative, part teaching resource essay, it outlines why teaching about the pandemic *through* the anthropology of food and Asia will help develop critical thinkers and holistically trained students via classroom activities. It also offers recommendations on how to avoid exoticizing Asian wet markets and perpetuating racist tropes while recognizing the significance of cultural difference—perceived or otherwise. Even the long-addressed question of zoonotic transfer in wild animal meat markets requires careful empirical study before blanket bans are issued to the primary food sources for many people living in Asia. Pandemic pedagogy is necessarily rapid response pedagogy, but it must not come at the expense of guiding interdisciplinary tenets such as cultural relativism.

Rapid Response Pedagogy

Immediately after revising my syllabus to accommodate a new remote learning environment, my anthropology of food students had the option of listening to and discussing a *Code Switch* episode about anti-Asian discrimination and xenophobia.³ The intent was to provide some additional context prior to our asynchronous, chat-room-based, virtual discussions of food and COVID-19. Students subsequently shared their own articles and background research with the class—there was no shortage of articles about “bat soup” and Wuhan wet markets in March 2020. One of the first questions posed by a student after reading through our collective resources was: What is a wet market? The term racked their imaginations seemingly out of nowhere. Follow-up questions helped me redesign my course to include rapid responses to burning questions while framing the pandemic in the purview of my expertise and training.⁴

When I realized that my proposed food and commodity journalism project was no longer feasible, I asked students to instead develop a COVID-19 eating and food procurement journal. I kept my own journal alongside the class, partially to offer a working example and stimulate discussion but also out of personal curiosity. I could not help my tendency to compare pandemic buying, hoarding, and toilet paper and egg shortages in the US to the food situation in specific



Figure 1: Market in Dalat, Vietnam. Source: Unsplash,
<https://unsplash.com/photos/GCbiB49XskU>.

regions of Vietnam where stockpiling and hoarding were not common or even possible. The practices of hoarding and pandemic buying, however, were not uniform across Southeast Asia, or Asia for that matter. In Taipei, Hong Kong, and Singapore, for example, consumers faced shortages of many supplies and empty shelves.⁵ In a “COVID-19 Dispatches” series, Tram Luong describes the pandemic atmosphere in Ho Chi Minh City, where “to dissuade people from panic buying, state-sponsored messages popped up on all citizens’ mobile phones every other day” assuring people “of the steady supply of essential goods.”⁶ Thinking back to my own wet market experiences in Vietnam, I explained to my students what it is like to purchase fresh produce daily and how distinct it is from the bulk warehouse shopping we were largely familiar with in urban California.

While living in Dalat, Vietnam (2010–2012), to conduct ethnographic research on the commodity coffee industry, I frequented many wet markets in my neighborhood and the larger Central Highlands region. The market I frequented most often I will refer to as “Chợ Hẻm” (“Alleyway Market”). Chợ Hẻm specifically served the neighborhood I lived in. Fish, shellfish, snails, pork, and chicken made up the bulk of available meat options while fresh produce, rice, tofu, noodles, fish sauce, and flowers rounded out the other small stalls and carts. Chợ Hẻm was a wet market not because of the live fish splashing about in aerated plastic containers, but because of the requisite hosing down and cleaning at the end of every day. The use of “wet” in “wet market” implies a dichotomy: wet/dry. But markets in much of Vietnam do not fall neatly into the “wet” or “dry” category—wet markets are amalgamations of wet and dry and anything in between. Where, for example, does a locally made but neatly packaged and sealed tofu fit into the dichotomy? Wet markets in Vietnam, for all of the wet seafood sold, habitually sell dried squid and shrimp. The largest and certainly most widely recognized market in Vietnam is Chợ Bến Thành, in Ho Chi Minh City.⁷ Like other markets, the wet and dry sections of Chợ Bến Thành, although spatially delineated, are still in one centralized marketplace where locals—and tourists in the case of Chợ Bến Thành—go to purchase “wet” goods (fresh meat, eggs, and produce) but also “dry” goods (rice, dried spices, cooking ware, oil, fabric, etc.). In Dalat, neighborhood residents frequented Chợ Hẻm daily and sometimes multiple times each day to purchase fresh goods for meal preparation. I often saw my neighbor rushing off before sunrise to catch the best bánh mì cart and to purchase the freshest snails, clams, and flowers. Later in the afternoon, she would return home with vegetables and pork. The wet market is also an important social space where neighbors catch up and learn about various food chain supply issues and town gossip. Above all, the wet market is the primary source of sustenance for this particular community.

Pandemic Anthropologies of Asia

If the pandemic has taught me anything about the anthropology of Asia, it is that the field is thriving and innovative. Within days of statewide university closures, colleagues and friends had posted thoughtful editor-reviewed resources—pedagogical and research-oriented—across the field’s many platforms. For faculty who may be new to thinking about the cultural politics of zoonotic transfer or ethnographic perspectives about wet markets, or the politics of eating and representation in the Asian American diaspora, there are resources aplenty. Before jumping into class discussions about pangolins and wet markets, however, I encourage my colleagues to consider some of the reflective essays that have emerged in the past months. I recommend that faculty prepare themselves to frame the topic with background material about xenophobia; Orientalism; wet markets and epidemic photography in China and elsewhere in Asia; or any recent publications from your own disciplinary background and best practices.⁸ The emerging literature about markets and COVID-19 in Asia are reminders of the preexisting precarity in places intertwined with both wet markets and wildlife markets. This precarity is exacerbated by the pandemic and rampant media representations of wet markets in Asia, often conflated with wildlife markets. Regardless, the introduction of wet markets and wildlife markets to our everyday vernacular engender important questions about the meaning and effects of these markets. Smith and Theriault in particular, bring up important questions about the long-term implications of wildlife markets, pointing out that, “Wherever wild lifeforms are extracted for sale in distant markets, human communities bear the direct consequences of this lost ‘biodiversity’ and of corresponding efforts to securitize it.”⁹ Beyond questioning the conflation of wet markets and wildlife markets, it is worth thinking about how these markets always operate in larger geopolitical, economic, and ecological spheres.

Lesson Plan: What’s in a Wet Market?

The following lesson plan includes resources for both synchronous and asynchronous classroom spaces. It is designed to unpack the following questions:

1. How is the visual and media-based representation of the pandemic shaped by underlying xenophobia and stereotypes about food consumption?
2. What are our preconceived notions and norms about markets and food procurement—how do we procure our food and what do markets look like cross culturally?
3. What does an anthropological perspective on the wet market tell us about the everyday experiences of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19,

and why are wet markets the subject of continued scrutiny and concurrent mistrust of those who rely on wet markets as a primary source of sustenance?

Whether teaching synchronously or asynchronously, begin the lesson with a series of open-ended icebreaker questions broken into two themes: (1) wet markets and (2) food procurement. In a large-enrollment class, it is worth breaking students into groups by using virtual features such as “Breakout Rooms” and assigning each group one theme.

Theme 1: Wet Markets Discussion

The first theme requires students to reflect on the following questions: What is a wet market? What do you know about wet markets? How do you know what you know about wet markets? Chances are, students have heard the term “wet market” at some point during the pandemic, but these questions encourage them to think through the context in which they have heard past utterances of the term. Perhaps students have watched the late travel show host Anthony Bourdain visit a wet market in Asia or they have traveled or lived in a place with wet markets and already have this experiential knowledge. The student responses are important because they open the door for discussions with epistemological objectives about overgeneralizations, truths, observations, experiences, and how our preconceived norms about cultural practices shape the way we consume print and visual representations of a place and its culture.

Theme 2: Food Procurement Discussion

The second theme requires students to reflect on the following questions about food procurement: Prior to the pandemic, how did you procure food for yourself? Where did you purchase food from? Describe the accessibility and availability of food and your shopping frequency. How did these practices shift during the pandemic? These questions encourage students to think about the cultural specificity of food procurement and set the groundwork for instructors to ask about the advantages and disadvantages of supermarket shopping. It may also open the door for follow-up questions about freshness, differences in food costs, and food traceability. This is also a good opportunity to introduce anecdotes about food hoarding and panic buying in the United States.

Mini-Lecture and Collective Reading

Using their discussions as an impromptu formative assessment, you should next deliver a mini-lecture that defines or clarifies important concepts such as xenophobia, Orientalism, cultural relativism, and wet markets. By providing specific examples that draw on your own area of thematic and geographic expertise or focusing on the many unfolding examples of xenophobia and Orientalism in

the era of COVID-19, you ground the class in meaningful, personal experiences. For synchronous classes, you can provide this mini-lecture in a mere seven to ten minutes.¹⁰ After contextualizing these terms, ask students to read “Should Wild Meat Markets Be Shut Down?” The article is open-access via hyperlink and available directly through the Somatosphere website, where you can download a PDF version. As they read, encourage students to consider what experts already know about zoonotic transfers and wet markets from cross-cultural contexts (Africa in this case) and how this knowledge might shape a global response to the pandemic in Asia. After reading, return to small groups, discuss the article, and eventually share your own perspective. If wet markets or wild meat markets in Asia are beyond the scope of your experience and expertise, consider thinking about the *many* ways in which live animals circulate in everyday Asia.¹¹

To end the lesson, as a class, read the 2017 VN Express International article, “A Hanoi Wet Market at the Crossroads of Modernity.”¹² As students read, ask them to consider the challenges facing wet market vendors in 2017 and think about what new challenges might emerge in 2020 and beyond. Watch the video embedded in the article, “Hanoi Wet Market Draws a White Line to Enforce Social Distancing,” paying close attention to the perspective of the sellers and shoppers in the market during the pandemic.¹³ Conclude by asking students to think about the future of wet markets, grounded in a reflexive consideration of their own eating and food procurement norms.

Learning Outcomes

1. Distinguish “wet markets” from “wildlife markets” and reflexively think about the future of wet markets and those who rely on them for food procurement
2. Understand how COVID-19 is not experienced evenly across the world, with attention to the ways particular places are stigmatized and people questioned for their cultural practices
3. Normalize the many cross-cultural ways people procure food for household consumption

Notes

¹For more on the subject of cultural representation through popular television, see James B. Hoesterey, “The Adventures of Mark and Olly: The Pleasures and Horrors of Anthropology on TV,” in *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology*, eds. Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Wesch (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2012), 157–176.

²Tamara Giles-Vernick, “Should Wild Meat Markets Be Shut Down?” *Somatosphere*, March 6, 2020, <http://somatosphere.net/forumpost/wild-meat-markets/>.

³Natalie Escobar, “When Xenophobia Spreads Like a Virus: Code Switch.” *National Public Radio*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/02/811363404/when-xenophobia-spreads-like-a-virus>.

⁴My students, above all else, wanted to know what constitutes a wet market and where they could find reliable information about zoonotic transfer and the multispecies relationships that we inhabit alongside the animals we consume. For more on these relationships and multispecies ethnography in Asia, I recommend Natalie Porter, *Viral Economies: Bird Flu Experiments in Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) and Frédéric Keck, *Avian Reservoirs: Virus Hunters and Birdwatchers in Chinese Sentinel Posts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

⁵Shashank Bengali and Ralph Jennings, “Coronavirus Outbreak Spurs Hoarding in Asia,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-02-12/virus-fears-asian-shoppers-hoarding-rice-noodles>.

⁶Tram Luong, “COVID-19 Dispatches from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam,” *Anthropology Now* 12, no. 1 (2020), 46.

⁷See Ann Marie Leshkovich, *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014) for a comprehensive ethnography of social life in the Ho Chi Minh City marketplace and beyond.

⁸Joey S. Kim, “Orientalism in the Age of COVID-19,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 24, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/orientalism-age-covid-19/>; Christos Lynteris, “The Prophetic Faculty of Epidemic Photography: Chinese Wet Markets and the Imagination of the Next Pandemic,” *Visual Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2016), 118–32.

⁹Will Smith and Noah Theriault, “Seeing Indigenous Land Struggles in the ‘Multispecies Cloud’ of Covid-19,” *Covid-19, Fieldsights*, April 16, 2020, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/seeing-indigenous-land-struggles-in-the-multispecies-cloud-of-covid-19>.

¹⁰For asynchronous classes, I recommend recording a mini-lecture and posting it to your course site with supplemental materials and references for further study. Discussion boards are also a good space for students to share their responses to the icebreaker questions. There are numerous tools and guidelines for best practices in an asynchronous classroom, but I recommend building community through short, digestible lectures that use multimodal approaches to student learning—your lecture should point students in the direction of additional audio-visual material and accessible readings such as those provided throughout this essay. Depending on your circumstances, you may be preparing the entire lesson asynchronously. If that is the case, consider including a brief voice and/or video recording about your own wet market experiences or perspectives on pandemic food purchasing alongside supplemental materials that students can easily access for free and through a variety of access points (phone, tablet, laptop).

¹¹For an ethnographic study of human-animal relations, kinship, and sacrifice, see Radhika Govindrajana, “‘The Goat that Died for Family’: Animal Sacrifice and Interspecies Kinship in India’s Central Himalayas,” *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 3 (2015), 504–519.

¹² Bao Yen, "A Hanoi Wet Market at the Crossroads of Modernity," *VN Express International*, June 12, 2017, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/travel-life/a-hanoi-wet-market-at-the-crossroads-of-modernity-3588516.html>.

¹³ Huy Manh, "Hanoi Wet Market Draws a White Line to Enforce Social Distancing," *VN Express International*, April 13, 2020, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/video/hanoi-wet-market-draws-a-white-line-to-enforce-social-distancing-4083886.html>.