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Taste and place of Nanxiong cuisine in South China: A regional analytical framework

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Taste and place of Nanxiong cuisine in South China: A regional analytical framework

Food taste should be considered in-place. This paper employs a regional analytical framework that is suggested by new regional geography to analyze relations between taste and place, and broadly, people and cuisine. We problematize fixed links between place and taste by asking how tastes are developed as rooted qualities of a place and its cuisine. Focusing on spicy taste as a cultural construct in China's context, climate and landscape characteristics, geographical proximity, and inhabitants' collective engagement are examined and identified as three factors that co-influence the construct of spicy taste, which we see as a vital shaper of the cuisine of Nanxiong in the mountainous north of China's southern Guangdong Province. We build a spatial regional hierarchy centered on spicy taste and find a correct and meaningful scale—the region of Guangdong Province. In highlighting the importance of considering the flavor principle in place, we call for more efforts to adopt a regional perspective in exploring multi-scalar and place-bounded food and taste issues.

Keywords: taste and place; flavor principle; Chinese cuisine; chili pepper/spicy taste; region; scale

1: Introduction

Different cuisines have varying geographical implications and mental connections for people as reflected in the saying: “we are where we eat” (Bell and Valentine 1997). In contrast, one frequently used Chinese saying that is concerned with material factors is that “One sort of water and earth [local environment] breeds one sort of person” (*yifang shuitu yang yifang ren* 一方水土养一方人). It is not just material tastes that differ in different regions, but cultural conceptions of tastes differ among various populations. In an age of mass tourism and mobility, local foods with an authentic taste are increasingly favored by people and are significant in promoting place image (Bessièrè 1998).

However, there is only a limited literature that directly links taste and place through a

regional lens.

The overarching aim of this paper is to examine how a regional analytical framework can contribute to explaining the relationships between taste and place, and to offer thereby a new perspective that illuminates ways in which cuisine and place identity are constructed. It is obvious that regional cuisines indicate important regional differences; we narrow it down to the topic of taste—in this case, spicy taste. Like Weiss (2011), we problematize fixed links between place and taste by considering what factors can convincingly explain local tastes that have been developed as the rooted qualities of a place and have interacted with the local population. There are two contributions that follow on from this analytical framework. First, with an eye to the ‘soil’ that fosters a cuisine, we identify three important factors—climate and landscape characteristics, geographical proximity, and inhabitants’ collective engagement. Second, this paper sketches out a complicated spatial and scalar hierarchy in relation to taste perception and a cuisine’s identity—something that is rarely seen in other research. In doing this, we consider how the construct of taste is internalized in a specific place and region and how this connects to other regions. Thus this paper also contributes to cultural analyses of gastronomic region (Bell and Valentine 1997; Cai, Zhu, and Situ 2011).

Rather than viewing taste as an abstract concept, this paper rethinks how people construct the basic taste of spiciness within the lens of regional cuisine and embody the spiciness of chili peppers. The literature on food ingredients has analyzed both seasoning ingredients of archetypal dishes and recipes (Ahn et al. 2011; Sajadmanesh et al. 2017) and “artefacts associated within certain cultures” (Yamamoto 2017, : 60). These works, however, fail to provide sufficient explanation of how place-bound differences influence local people’s perceptions of, and ways they identify with, a

particular taste. In addition, jumping from a single taste to taste combinations (flavor principle), this paper enriches the debate on the construction of cuisine and place identity.

Spiciness is not generally recognized as a basic taste in Western cuisines. However, traditionally, the Chinese have seven basic tastes: salt (*xian* 咸), sour (*suan* 酸), sweet (*tian* 甜), spicy (*la* 辣), bitter (*ku* 苦), umami (*xian* 鲜) and astringent (*se* 涩) (Zhao 2006, : 333). Spicy has been promoted into one of these basic tastes as a result of its prevalence in several regional cuisines. Thus, spicy tastes warrant further exploration in the Chinese context. Chinese cuisines are complicated and diverse, and share a distinct food ideology (Anderson 1988; Li and Hsieh 2004), and this provides some insights into these debates. Given its location in the northernmost part of Guangdong Province, on the border with Jiangxi and Hunan provinces, Nanxiong has a cuisine that makes it an appropriate subject of an investigation into “subtle differences in taste preference from one region to another” in China (Nakayama and Kimura 1998, : 257).

Clearly, a place-bound taste may not be explicitly homogeneous; rather, there is a series of culinary contradictions. As will be shown in this paper, people in Nanxiong eat spicy food, but Nanxiong is in Guangdong Province, where generally the food is not spicy. The food of neighboring provinces, Jiangxi and Hunan, is spicy, though not necessarily in the same way as in Nanxiong. This paper tries to explain these interesting phenomena, and will argue that particular contrasting or striking tastes may cause culinary boundary conflicts (Cesaro 2000) and awaken regional consciousness.

In the next two sections, relevant literature on taste, cuisine and place and on the regions as an analytical framework are reviewed. Section 4 introduces Nanxiong and its cuisine as the empirical case examined in this paper. Section 5 discusses the construct of spicy taste in Nanxiong cuisine, and place identity from the perspective of the *region*.

Sections 6 provides some concluding remarks.

2: Taste, place and cuisine

Taste has long been at the core of understanding food practice and cuisine. Good taste is the most significant factor for successful food and cuisine when it comes to both everyday food and special occasions. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2017), the concept of taste is threefold: first, in a direct physiological sense, “the sensation of flavor perceived in the mouth and throat on contact with a substance”; second, in an interpretational sense, “a person’s liking for particular flavors”; and third, beyond food into fashion, “the ability to discern what is of good quality or of a high aesthetic standard”. Obviously, the taste concept is derived from food and, for convenience, “taste” in this paper is confined to food and food practice. The concept of taste is complicated because of its many forms and ranges (Narayanan 2016, : 19). For example, a “taste profile” (Weiss 2011, : 446) includes various dimensions and degrees such as texture (tenderness, chewiness, juiciness), aroma, shape, and temperature (Green et al. 2010).

Although a Bourdieusian lens that sees taste as a marker of social class distinction dominates the sociological study of food, of the recent theories in social science, material and embodied lenses are popular and promising in deconstructing the seemingly self-evident concept of taste. Some scholars are more concerned with the material quality or ecology of food: for example, Chi and Jackson (2011) highlight the importance of physical or material qualities of food as a symbolic marker of taste. Psychological research contributes a lot to summarizing the dynamics of basic taste (e.g. Rozin 2007; Rozin and Schiller 1980), which encourages exploration of taste as a sense and embodied taste. A familiar taste embodies subjects and prompts feelings, edible memories, and changing identities (Johnston and Longhurst 2012; Jordan 2015).

However, it is beneficial to bring the factors that affect taste into place, making taste more grounded, that is, to consider the material or social factors in the context of region as the appropriate scale of place. For example, the practice of undertaking aquatic farming with wet-rice agriculture in some areas of South China shows “mutual feedback and a mutual[ly] beneficial relationship between taste and ecology” (Anderson 1988, : 143). Jordan (2016) studies taste in place, and argues that food production and consumption change landscapes, causing material and social consequences. Using heirloom tomato as an example, she further addresses the roles of temporal and spatial qualities of taste in the process of changing meanings of food (Jordan 2007). However, her two papers mainly focus on the differences that the locations of crop fields and consuming sites make, and do not go deep into the embeddedness and connections of taste and place. Ideas concerning the taste of place are frequently connected to the advocates of slow, organic, and local foods (Weiss 2011, : 439), and are particularly useful in helping discern fluid relationships between changing foodways and local contexts. In geographical research, there have been academic efforts to link taste and place using the French word ‘*terroir*’ (Trubek 2008; Vaudour 2002). Mainly employed in wine-related research, *terroir* has spatial and locational meanings that trace material realities of plants and cultivated soil (Trubek 2008, : 18), and their influences on cultural and commercial aspects. This concept refers to “a collective taste memory, which has matured over a long time, through several generations of people, and refers to geographically referenced products” (Vaudour 2002, : 121). However, this leaves room to generate a systematic outlook of place-bounded tastes.

More broadly, cuisine, taste, and place identity are closely interrelated. Sense of place can be achieved through food: place is tied to cuisine, which generates an attachment or feeling of home or territory which is experienced when a particular meal

is eaten. Cuisines are rooted and connected within the lives of local populations, and predicate “a collective understanding of taste” (Narayanan 2016, : 4). Reflecting the concept of edible memory that involves connections to the past, a cuisine can reflect “the complex web of history and geography in which we dwell” in ways both collective and individual (Jordan 2015, : 3, 15). In an age of mobility, the cuisine of a specific place belongs to a resurgence of exclusivist localism, and residents may yearn for authentic and local tastes that label their cuisine, and thus uniqueness (Henderson 2014).

Additionally, the idea of the flavor principle, first discussed by Rozin (1973), approaches cuisine in terms of frequently used and familiar flavors and tastes which result from local flavorings, seasonings, and ingredients. These flavor patterns can be applied to the creation of new recipes within this cuisine. Flavor principles shape the identity of a group and are a principal carrier of the identity of a cuisine (Yamamoto 2017). However, to our knowledge, the investigation of the implication of the flavor principle with place receives rather scant attention. We introduce next some theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis of relations between taste and place, cuisine and place identity.

3: A regional analytical framework

Regional geography has been revitalized, especially since the mid-1970s (Gilbert 1988, : 208). Although this has occurred mainly in economic geography, this paper principally follows a humanistic and cultural framework to explore ‘region’. The region is the articulation of relationships and social processes within a given place and time; a region is also a way of thinking about elements within it (Gilbert 1988, : 209, 211). Although regional geography focuses on the triangle of nature, people, and society, more attention needs to be paid to people’s sense of region and place.

Within this framework, at least three aspects can be identified. First, with “a

longer historical duration” (Paasi 1991, : 249), region is usually more concrete and larger than place (MacLeod and Jones 2001, : 676). Elements consist of not only material aspects, but also their historical and cultural relationships to generations of people, and the ways people value and understand them. Furthermore, addressing time-space sedimentation, MacLeod and Jones (2001: 677) stress the historical fusion of inhabitants and nature that forms the specificity of places, life histories, and lived experiences, usually collective ones. Paasi (2002b: 805) argues that regions are based on multiple practices in which actors produce and refresh hegemonic narratives of a specific regional identity. Second, the regional framework focuses on a region’s connections to outside regions and wider sociospatial contexts, and therefore spatial experiences and regional identities are highlighted (Paasi and Metzger 2017, : 22). Regional differentiation is essential because a regional analysis inevitably involves a comparative approach (King 2016, : 27). As Agnew (1999: 93) writes, “Regions both reflect differences in the world and ideas about differences”. Differences and connections within and beyond the region are socially constructed. Third, following Paasi (2004: 539), scales are included to interpret the relationships and processes that may cross scales: different scales indicate different “time-space-specific structures of signification and domination” (Paasi 1991, : 247). In analyzing regionalization, there is a need to establish region both in its spatial structure and in “the wider regional matrix” (Paasi and Metzger 2017), and examine the regional (popular) consciousness (MacLeod and Jones 2001, : 681). Paasi (2002a: 140) writes, “Regional consciousness is a hierarchical phenomenon in that identities are nested... draws together personal memories and experiences from locations and regions”. In this process they stress the important roles of a meaningful scale, representations, hybrid identities, and narratives of place (MacLeod and Jones 2001).

As Bell and Valentine (1997: 150) write about constitution of region, “What better way to do this than by thinking the region through food?” Taste can be explored from the perspective of the population of a certain region, and a cuisine is historically situated in line with the climate, people, and culture of a region. For example, in China’s context, Ru (1992: 36) argues that Southern Chinese taste (*nanfang fengwei* 南方风味) that is loosely characterized as being sour, salty, sweet and bitter becomes a particular worldview enhancing an understanding of nature (represented by soil, water, and mountains) in South China. Kown (2015) thinks that linking ethnic food with the region from which it comes helps to deepen the discussion of food. Lamine, Garçon, and Brunori (2019) suggest a territorial agricultural system approach that considers diverse actors and actions to study food system; however, they do not focus on spatial and scalar hierarchy of the region. Nevertheless, the place-taste/cuisine relationship has yet to receive satisfactory treatment from a regional perspective.

4: Case study and methods

Nanxiong is a county-level city in Shaoguan Prefecture, in the northeast of Guangdong Province, South China, in the border area neighboring Jiangxi and Hunan provinces (see Figure 1). Historically, Nanxiong has deep connections with Hunan, as reflected in the saying—“[Nanxiong] Leaning on Hunan, crossing Guangdong”, and it sits along the old Meiguan highway that used to be the most vital communication route from Jiangxi to Guangdong, making Nanxiong a commodity distribution center linking these two provinces. The whole area of Nanxiong and nearby counties and towns in Jiangxi and Hunan forms a historical zone with shared communications. In terms of topography, the county is located at the southern foot of Dayu Ridge, with a mountain range that runs from east to west with an uneven basin in the middle—the Nanxiong Basin (Nanxiong

County Committee of Local Records 1991). Overall, Nanxiong has a humid subtropical climate, which contributes to its ecosystem and agriculture. It is near the Tropic of Cancer and has four seasons: spring has more rainy days, followed by a hot, wet summer, whereas the autumn is dry, followed by a cold and rainless winter (Committee of Nanxiong Annual 2015). When it comes to ethnicity, Nanxiong is well-known for being a central part of the belt of land in which Hakka people form the majority of the population. Hakka ethnicity forms the foundation of rituals, traditions, and society all across the county. Nanxiong is experiencing rapid urbanization and modernization especially after the Reform and Opening up in 1978, and many young adults work in cities of the Pearl River Delta region, the most developed area of the province, returning home for the New Year holiday.

[Insert Figure 1 near here]

Figure 1. The location of Nanxiong, on the borders of Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Hunan provinces. Source: author.

The foundation of Nanxiong cuisine is Hakka cuisine, one of three main cuisines in Guangdong Province (the other two cuisines being Cantonese and Chaozhou). These three cuisines in Guangdong are generally regarded as not being spicy ones. In terms of basic ingredients, Nanxiong cuisine uses poultry, mountain foods (for example, field rat), mushrooms and river products such as crabs. This cuisine mostly uses braising, stewing and stuffing. Some signature dishes are stuffed bean curd, braised duck, spicy goose, stir-fried pork with pickled cabbages, and yellow dumpling stuffed with pickles.

In order to generate an overall understanding of this cuisine, we used flexible ethnographic methods: participant observation, group interview, and in-depth interview.

Both written and verbal consents were sought, audio-recording was used once permitted, and fieldwork data were transcribed and kept safely. In total, fourteen group interviews and thirty-eight in-depth interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to 2 hours, were conducted during the fieldwork from December 2015 to June 2016. In particular, we held some of the group interviews at the restaurant table, allowing for simultaneous enjoyment of the dishes and discussion; a rough note following the group conversation was drawn up immediately after the meal by each attendee. We call it a ‘tasting’ group interview because while eating, it was possible to draw on participants’ on-site emotions and experiences and allow them to make comparisons with other cuisines.

In addition, the first author worked at a local restaurant as a waiter for ten consecutive days. He worked from 10 am to 3 pm, assisting in every basic service except cooking the dishes. The staff and the owner, who is also the chef, shared their knowledge and culinary experience of chili pepper within and beyond Nanxiong as they were cooking; the first author also recorded professional skills during working hours. In addition, domestic food practices were surveyed, and for example, with permission, the first author entered his friend’s house and observed her cooking meals. Alongside this, he kept a field diary when engaging in participant observation, as suggested by Crang and Cook (2007), and collected a number of recipes, both written and oral.

5: Connecting taste and region

Some regions may have differences in taste variety. “Taste perception varies according to [the] context” of culture, condition and environment, and personal experience (Chandrashekar et al. 2006, : 293). In this respect, we can analyze the regional taste preferences and flavors in Nanxiong. In this section, we discuss the topic of spicy taste from the perspective of region and think more broadly about the relationship between place and taste. Subsection 5.1 considers aspects of climate and landscape

characteristics, geographical proximity, and collective engagement to analyze the construct of spicy taste, subsection 5.2 explores the scales and regional hierarchy that are centered on spicy taste, and subsection 5.3 discusses how the flavor principle celebrates rooted qualities of place.

5.1: The construct of spicy taste: a regional perspective

Different from normal Hakka cuisine, Nanxiong cuisine uses lots of chili peppers. It does not take the visitor long to realize that the overall tastes of Nanxiong are distinct from other cuisines of Guangdong. The commonly-used chili pepper is *chaotianjiao* (*Capsicum annuum L.* 朝天椒) which is tiny but very spicy. According to the narrative of a local chili-sauce producer named *Bahuangjiao*, the chili peppers were introduced in Nanxiong in late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Traditionally chili peppers are locally grown, and every winter when chili peppers mature, every households collect and dry them in the sun for preservation. They are usually chopped into small pieces; they are also made into a chili sauce that serves as a side dish or seasoning. In restaurants chili seeds are removed in case they char. In cookery, chili peppers are usually stir-fried in oil before being mixed with other ingredients so that their spiciness comes out fully. Therefore, there is a strong pungent smell in Nanxiong kitchens when food is being cooked. Because they are red, chili peppers are used for color matching by chefs. In Nanxiong, most meat dishes are cooked with chili peppers, with Hakka stuffed bean curd as an exception. Vegetable dishes and soups are also free of chili peppers. Nanxiong people eat spicy dishes every meal. However, those who are sick or elderly may avoid eating chili peppers for health reasons.

The consumption of chili peppers is well suited to Nanxiong's climate and landscape characteristics, and is said to build resistance to cold and protect against the wind and

damp, indicating that the chili pepper both constructs and reflects the qualities of a place.

Zhuzhu, a middle-aged man, further explained this idea:

“Why does this place, Nanxiong, have this eating habit? It’s because it’s cold, with strong cold air [in the winter]; you will not feel that cold when eating chili.”

(Interview, May 15, 2016)

Geographic proximity makes sense in the construct of spiciness as well, but an uneven landscape of taste may be caused in this process. The eating of chili peppers is also common in neighboring Hunan and Jiangxi provinces, which have both been “wet and wild regions” throughout history (Ru 1992, : 327). Nanxiong county, too, has been wet and wild historically and has close geographical proximity to Hunan and Jiangxi cuisines featuring spicy taste profiles. Although we could find no documentary proof that the consumption of chili peppers is influenced by neighboring Hunan or Jiangxi provinces, when the author asked Nanxiong people why they like to eat chili peppers, a number of participants mentioned the county’s close geographical proximity to these two provinces. In addition, the border of these three provinces is traditional Hakka region, where cuisines share a lot of similarities (Cai, Zhu, and Situ 2011); this fact shortens the cultural distance between Nanxiong and neighboring areas. Place-bound taste is not homogeneous but has the feature of regional orientation (Avieli 2005, : 287). These narratives point to Hunan and Jiangxi provinces rather than other parts of Guangdong that are also geographically close, showing a taste-oriented geographical proximity narrative in explaining the habit of eating chili peppers in Nanxiong.

Nanxiong people have had close contact with chili peppers for a long historical duration and from past to present. From a historical perspective, when he led a military operation in Nanxiong in 1930, Mao Zedong who was from Hunan said, “Nanxiong people have a tradition of revolution, because they like eating chili peppers and are easy

to get warm-blooded after eating chili peppers” (apocryphal comment widely attributed to Mao). In 1952 at the start of collectivization in Nanxiong, local leaders were called chili-pepper leaders by their counterparts outside the county (Nanxiong life 2019). Nowadays, chili peppers have developed as an essential seasoning ingredient, without which people do not have an appetite, and chefs could not cook a ‘satisfying’ dish. One informant linked chili peppers with agricultural work, “Without consuming chili peppers, farmers do not have the energy to do farm work” (Guoli, young man, group interview, 23/01/2016). Collective engagement with chili peppers enriches the sense of place belonging in Nanxiong.

Paasi (1991: 249) argues that the “historical accumulation of experiences” contributes to cultural and historical relations between regions and people. This claim is supported by the construct of spicy taste in Nanxiong, which is achieved by at least three overlapping factors—climate and landscape characteristics, geographical proximity, and long collective engagement.

5.2: The spatial regional hierarchy surrounding spicy taste

Scale is another feature that distinguishes the region (Paasi 2004), and this subsection combines the analysis of scale and region in order to depict the spatial regional hierarchy surrounding spicy taste in Nanxiong.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

Table 1: A spatial regional hierarchy ‘centered’ on spicy taste

Administrative factor matters. Guangdong is the meaningful scale and region here because of the many centuries during which Nanxiong has been a county of

Guangdong Province. In particular, Nanxiong has historically been of geographical and military significance to Guangdong Province; indeed, it is known as the ‘great pass [leading to] Guangdong’, indicating its important historical role along the principal route connecting Guangdong and outside the region. In addition, within Guangdong, Nanxiong people are depicted as the ones who eat the greatest amount of chili peppers (Nanxiong life 2019).

In this case, in terms of spatial structure (MacLeod and Jones 2001, : 681; Paasi 1991, : 246), the habit of eating chili peppers in Nanxiong can be interpreted particularly by comparing with other sub-regions in Guangdong Province and through the popular consciousness of spicy taste. Distinctiveness is refreshed and celebrated when comparing with non-spicy Cantonese and Chaozhou food through one’s personal understanding of Guangdong cuisines. The process of distinguishing is achieved via (striking) contrasts in taste experience, but more importantly, this process is significant in view of the characteristics of Guangdong cuisines. Through intra-provincial comparisons, the taste tensions reaffirm the provincial scale rather than the scale of South China as the correct and meaningful scale in explaining Nanxiong’s spicy taste. There is a three-scale administrative hierarchy, Nanxiong county-level city, Shaoguan Prefecture, Guangdong Province, but Nanxiong cuisine is apparently constructed at the scale of Guangdong Province rather than Shaoguan Prefecture, forming a two-scale hierarchy. In this sense, this case has implications for where the process of regionalization is negotiated and contested, a key issue in new regional geography (Jonas 2011).

“Tourists [from other parts of Guangdong] are accustomed to eating here [in the restaurants]. They order dishes such as bean curd, fish, vegetable, spicy goose. The spicy goose here is good, but too spicy. Why do so many tourists still eat goose? [Because] they have this experience of eating intense spicy goose, which leaves a

deep impression. Even the belly hurts after eating. Next time they will also bring friends to visit the restaurant again because of the good taste [of the goose].”

(Zhuzhu, middle-aged man, interview, May 05, 2016)

Paasi (2002a) contends that regions are integrated by regional symbols and narratives and, in this case, spicy taste has been constructed as a main difference or symbol at the intra-provincial scale. Reduced from the region-wide scale to sub-regions within the province, chili peppers are one common way that outsiders represent Nanxiong: according to Zhuzhu, the consumption of chili peppers is one of the most obvious features that distinguishes Nanxiong from other parts of Guangdong. And this difference is bodily experienced. People from other sub-regions of Guangdong generally find the spicy taste of Nanxiong dishes unpalatable. In an interview at a restaurant in Guangzhou that serves Nanxiong cuisine, before the meal Gangan from Gaozhou in west Guangdong expressed concerns about the spiciness of dishes and his tolerance of intense spiciness. After two bites, he said the spicy duck was too spicy and he felt his whole mouth burning. From the quotations below, we can see that Nanxiong cuisine challenges the general perception among Chinese people that ‘Guangdong people don’t eat spicy food’. Spicy Nanxiong food complicates Guangdong cuisines in the consciousness of people in the wider China context.

“Today is my first time eating this kind of cuisine, and until now I didn’t realize that there are Cantonese people who eat spicy food. Some dishes are even hotter than [well-known] spicy Sichuan dishes. My previous perception was that both Cantonese and Hakka people avoid chili peppers.” (Qianqian, young woman, group interview, January 09, 2016)

“It [spicy goose] is a famous dish in Guangdong [Province], and is a particular case in Guangdong cuisines. Because Cantonese food features light [taste], [skill in] steaming and [a preference for] fresh [produce],... if spicy goose is well-promoted, everyone will want to try it and wonder what this spicy Guangdong dish is.”

(Junjun, young man, group interview, February 16, 2016)

The region is open, and two aspects of outbound connections to regions beyond Guangdong in South China can be identified. This case shows that spicy taste is constructed beyond Nanxiong in Hunan, Jiangxi and Sichuan provinces. Firstly, we heard narratives that distinguish Nanxiong's variety of spiciness from that of other provinces. Grown in Nanxiong's red soil, *Capsicum annuum L.* is very high in Scoville heat unit (qualities of spiciness), whose skin is of bright colors (Zhang 2015). The southern part of China—more specifically Jiangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, and Guizhou provinces—is regarded as a 'spicy zone'. In fact, the narrative that we heard expresses a nuanced differentiation from other regions, and reflects the sense that many Nanxiong people have that their habit of eating chili peppers springs from a 'unique' cuisine.

“Nanxiong dishes are spicy and the spicy taste is strong and not static. And the aftertaste of spiciness differs from the fragrant spiciness in Hunan cuisine.”

(Chang, middle-aged man, interview, 25/02/2016)

Secondly, it is not only the narrative difference of spiciness but the nuanced difference between tasting experiences that can be fully appreciated when considering the opinions of outsiders or people with experience of cuisines elsewhere. Sichuan cuisine is the most significant hot and spicy cuisine in China, and has the unique flavor of Sichuan pepper. Qianqian is a young woman from Sichuan Province who spoke about chili peppers in different cuisines in this comparative way:

“[Nanxiong food] is less oily and less salty than Sichuan food, so the spicy taste is more prominent. Take the fried duck today as an example; the first bite is hot on the tip of the tongue, and the spicy taste is obvious. However, with fried duck in Sichuan, the first feeling on the tongue is salty, fragrant and crisp, and then slowly the spicy taste begins to spread out, which I call 'fragrant spicy'. So I think there's a temporal and hierarchical difference [in spiciness] between the two cuisines.”

(Qianqian, group interview, January 09, 2016)

Certainly, the outbound connections to regions outside Guangdong are consistent with the priority of cultural analysis of a region that is concerned with “the human purposes which give sense to places and regions” (Gilbert 1988, : 211). Nanxiong people use these connections to justify their liking of chili peppers. From outbound connections to regions outside Guangdong and contrasting differences to other sub-regions within the province, these discussions argue that regional flavors (tastes) attributed to their cuisines do not just influence “the hierarchy of regional cuisines” (Klein 2007, : 526), but can lead to the justification of the cuisine of a given place.

Regional consciousness is argued to be a collective, large phenomenon, and is then examined. In this case, the cultural boundary conflicts caused by taste differences demonstrate the ways identities and experiences are nested in regional consciousness (Paasi 2002a, : 140). Two conflicts are addressed here. First, on the one hand, in terms of administrative divisions and place identity, Nanxiong people are Guangdong people, and most participants believe that Nanxiong cuisine is also part of Guangdong cuisine. The regional consciousness of Guangdong enhances people’s identity of Nanxiong cuisine. On the other hand, there are contrasts between Nanxiong cuisine and other Guangdong cuisines, and similarities between Nanxiong cuisine and neighboring provinces’ cuisines in terms of spiciness. Second, Nanxiong is in an overwhelmingly Hakka region, and its inhabitants are predominantly Hakka; however, the taste of Hakka cuisine is not spicy. Therefore, this heterogeneous situation shows that the debate over identities to spicy taste is contested and negotiated, and it is these conflicts that complicate the regional consciousness of Guangdong and sense of Hakka (cuisine), and that co-reside with the spatial regional hierarchy centering on the place of Nanxiong. In addition, as mentioned above, the intense spiciness is felt by diners from other sub-

regions in Guangdong, and this striking experience can to some degree function as a regional gastronomic divide or boundary, which enriches the discussion of regional differences in Guangdong cooking culture landscape (Cai, Zhu, and Situ 2011). That is, differences in experiences of spicy taste are more apparent when making comparisons.

In sum, the spatial regional hierarchy centered on spicy taste—a region and its connections with wider context in South China—is critical in the process. This subsection identified Guangdong Province as a meaningful scale: from within the borders of the region of Guangdong Province, the construction of spicy taste is completed through connections with other outside regions (Hunan, Jiangxi and Sichuan provinces) where people eat spicy food on the one hand, and contrasts with other sub-regions within the province where people are not used to eating chili peppers. It implicates the important role of administrative designations in explaining this spatial and scalar hierarchy. Within the province, chili peppers (spicy taste) take the role of a featured difference or symbol; beyond the region, outbound connections involve narratives and tasting experience differences around chili peppers and spiciness. In this way, chili peppers are localized and internalized into a spatial regional hierarchy ‘centered’ on the spiciness of Nanxiong cuisine, and recognized, perceived and experienced by insiders and outsiders. This subsection has shown that contrasting or similar tastes between cuisines make an impact on people’s identities, distinguish a cuisine from its neighbors, and nest regional consciousness.

5.3: Marker of place: embedding the flavor principle

This subsection extends from taste construction to flavor principle in order to give an all-round outline for taste-place relationships in Nanxiong cuisine. This happens through stressing the marker of places and focusing more on a belonging and identity to “time-space-specific, more or less abstract reference groups and communities” (Paasi

1991, : 251). This subsection includes another traditional seasoning, sour bamboo shoots, which are locally produced by households and have an impressive taste and odor to both insiders and outsiders. Sour bamboo shoots are missed by Nanxiong people who live elsewhere.

Taste can be extended to represent cuisine in a given place through forming a flavor principle (Rozin 1973). Chili peppers and sour bamboo shoots have been constructed as the “notable ingredients” (Sajadmanesh et al. 2017) in Nanxiong cuisine, ingredients that serve to define the cuisine’s overall flavors. The combination of these two tastes has been abstracted, constructed and refined as the flavor principle for Nanxiong cuisine’s recipes, as this extract from the website of the Shaoguan Tourist Center (2014) illustrates:

“When chili pepper meets sour bamboo shoot, the aroma of pepper and freshness of sour bamboo shoot are instantly activated; customers only feel combinations of pungency and freshness, freshness and aroma, aroma and acidity, acidity and sweet. Biting a piece of duck, customers will feel these tastes in the mouth and nasal cavity; they [tastes] are strong and thick... Braised duck with sour bamboo shoots might be found somewhere, but only in Nanxiong it becomes a specialty. Because of the addition of sour bamboo shoots, spicy taste and pungency are improved and strengthened. Your appetite opens and you cannot stop putting the duck into your mouth. If you leave it and eat it during the following meal, serve it hot, then, you will find infinite [thick/delicious] flavor of this dish.”

This extract provides a general illustration of how spiciness and the taste of sour bamboo shoots positively enhance their mutual intensity. These two seasoning ingredients have not been combined arbitrarily, and at least two reasons can be found for the combination. First, Nanxiong people think that with sour bamboo shoots, the intensity of spiciness is stronger. They both act as flavor enhancers. The quotation above about the blend of these two tastes provides empirical evidence for how “a few

key ingredients with specific flavors” of a regional cuisine can work together (Ahn et al. 2011, : 4). Therefore, it may be argued that a cuisine is predicated on a collective cultural understanding of a taste combination, not just a single taste (Narayanan 2016, : 4).

Furthermore, relatively limited seasoning sources enhance the core role of chili peppers and sour bamboo shoots in this one place, Nanxiong. By comparison, after tasting Nanxiong dishes in the Nanxiong restaurant in Guangzhou mentioned above, Kaikai opined that, “Generally speaking, Nanxiong cuisine mainly uses chicken, duck and goose, and doesn’t use many aquatic products; it is heavily oiled, and frequently uses ginger and onion. The [frequent] seasoning is salt.” (Young man, group interview, January 9, 2016)

The flavor principle implicates certain cuisine and place identities: the case of Nanxiong suggests that seasonings can even be abstracted and simplified as the signifier and marker not just of a cuisine but of family kitchens, restaurants, and even the place itself and its people. It was not uncommon to hear that Nanxiong is known for sour bamboo shoots and chili peppers (*Nanxiong jiu shi suansun lajiao* 南雄就是酸笋辣椒). This might be due to the easily recognizable taste and smell of the combination of these two seasoning ingredients and their ubiquity, especially in the archetypal local dishes. It is clear, therefore, that tastes, people, and place ‘fit together’ in Nanxiong. Moreover, emphasizing the role of taste in a place, we argue that Nanxiong cuisine derives, unlike haute cuisines, not from grand restaurants or palaces of the nobility, but from the flavor principle formed by a particular combination of chili pepper and sour bamboo shoot produced in family kitchens and local restaurants.

Personal and household histories and experiences shape our conceptualization of place (Paasi 2002b, : 807), and this case provides empirical evidence from the

perspectives of culinary identity and practice. Cultural identity towards the flavor principle is stronger than towards other aspects of the cuisine. Fufu, a young man, said that “Dishes like duck and spicy goose do not look good, and the [red] chili peppers turn brown a long time after the braising process”. The large number of ingredients used (green vegetables, bean sprouts, sour bamboo shoots, and so on) make it difficult to achieve a good-looking effect. Fufu added that there is a trade-off between taste and appearance, highlighting taste while neglecting appearance, which reveals the strong emphasis on the role and identity of the flavor principle in Nanxiong cuisine than in many others such as Cantonese cuisine.

In addition, the success of the flavor principle construction is further supported by the practice of language that make it more grounded in Nanxiong. As Paasi (1991: 250) argues, language that works as the “significant collective medium for structures of expectations” is essential for “the transformation of regions into places”. Materially, recipes of Nanxiong cuisine are not merely confined to these two defining seasoning ingredients. Rather, they are mixed to include other common spices in Chinese cuisine such as ginger, anise, dried tangerine or orange peel, garlic, cinnamon and cardamom, and commonly used seasonings include soy sauce, oyster sauce, liquor, and edible starch. The cuisine is sufficiently flexible to accommodate other tastes, but these do not overrule the flavor principle. Maybe because of this, Nanxiong people like to use the dialect term ‘*cu* flavor’ (*cuwei* 杂味), which lacks an adequate translation even in Mandarin. It broadly refers to the flavors being mixed in a harmonious way. Wusan’s understanding of *cu* flavor is:

“Spicy, fragrant, and salty, heavy taste, full of color, fragrance, and taste. The *cu* is Nanxiong’s sour bamboo shoots, chili peppers, sand ginger, anise, fragrant leaves, fragrant fruit, and *yujiao* [a local aquatic plant leaf 鱼椒]. That makes for a very strong taste.” (Middle-aged man, interview, April 17, 2016).

Wusan argued that it is this *cu* flavor that is liked by Nanxiong people, and a local chef added that “Nanxiong’s local flavor is invented”. The expression of *cu* flavor greatly synthesizes and abstracts Nanxiong’s overall tastes, enhancing the manifestation of this flavor principle. In this way, the flavor principle is expressed through collective narrative or language that is well acknowledged by the local population.

On the whole, the chili pepper and sour bamboo shoot, which define the flavor principle, effectively enhance each other, and have acted as the signifier of cuisine and place. Inspired by Paasi (1991: 250), the debate on region is here transformed to place via the structure of expectation, and the manifestation of such structure is the flavor principle, in this case because it gives meaning and culinary identities to a more concrete community (Nanxiong people as insiders) in a specific reference (Nanxiong).

6: Conclusion

This paper employs a regional framework to explain spicy taste in the place of Nanxiong. It finds that the eating of chili peppers is attributed to the cold weather in winter, geographical proximity to Hunan and Jiangxi provinces, and long historical contact with chili peppers. Different from other cuisines in Guangdong Province, Nanxiong cuisine uses lots of chili peppers, an eating habit resembling that in neighboring Hunan and Jiangxi provinces. In addition, Nanxiong cuisine has the particular flavor principle of chili peppers and sour bamboo shoots, which co-celebrate “the qualities of terroir” (Jacobs 2009, : 17). There are three conclusions.

First, the region, or regional analytical framework, is very suitable for an investigation of the relationship between taste and place, and broadly, cuisines that are rooted in a certain region. Tastes and cuisines are complex phenomena as a result of agriculture, climate, cultural tradition, and mobilities of people. The regional analytical framework

contributes to and is convenient in incorporating qualities of region—location, landscape and weather, and longer historical fusion of inhabitants and nature—and spatial scales of region in which material and imaginative connections, differences and influences take place. Within the process, regional consciousness and cuisine's identities are refreshed, reflecting individuals' experiences and understanding in relation to the region (Paasi 2002a).

Place identity, in this case, administrative factor, that influences people's culinary identity play a role. The regional analytical framework helps identify a correct and meaningful scale and region (MacLeod and Jones 2001), and in the case of Nanxiong, Guangdong Province is the meaningful region where the meanings, identities and narratives of spiciness are most significant and 'visible' because Nanxiong people believe that their cuisine is a constituent part of Guangdong cuisines. The success of the construct of spicy taste that is under the constraint of the region of Guangdong Province is achieved by outbound connections to neighboring regions and cuisines outside Guangdong, and taste differences contrasting to other parts inside the province. In this vein, the construct of spiciness is achieved in this regional hierarchy in which both the spatial experiences of insiders and outsiders related to Nanxiong cuisine are nested. For example, Qianqian from Sichuan, said, "Today is my first time eating this kind of cuisine, and until now I didn't realize that there are Cantonese people who eat spicy food."

Second, in terms of fluid relations between taste and place, this paper argues that place is a vital shaper of cuisine, more so even than ethnicity. Although the majority of the population are Hakka, their cuisine cannot be simply categorized as Hakka cuisine, which is light in overall taste. Because it frequently uses chili peppers, Nanxiong cuisine shares many similar flavors with spicy cuisines from neighboring Hunan and

Jiangxi. Place can play an increasingly significant role in defining cuisine and shaping the dominant food identity of local cuisine, as regional and cultural boundaries have been crossed. The habit of eating chili peppers reflects an uneven landscape of taste that causes some culinary boundary conflicts, and complicates culinary identities and refreshes regional consciousness. On the one hand, Nanxiong is part of Guangdong Province; on the other hand, there is a striking contrast between spicy Nanxiong cuisine and mild and light Cantonese cuisine.

Third, this paper approaches the flavor principle in place: it specifically concludes that the role of seasoning is not just to simplify the cooking (Sukenti et al. 2016, : 195), but it can be abstracted and simplified as an important signifier of cuisine, people, and place. Again, this discussion has shown that spicy taste is not only internalized in the spatial regional hierarchy, but also develops as a rooted quality of the place of Nanxiong through forming the flavor principle (with sour bamboo shoots) as perceived and sensed by local people. When he lived in Shenzhen, Xueyu said, “I didn’t know the neighbors, but I smelt the odors [sour bamboo shoot plus chili pepper] and I knew it was a Nanxiong household” (middle-aged man, interview, 08/03/2016). For him, in an age of mobility, the flavor principle declares the right sensory experiences and subjectivities “in place”.

In sum, this paper advances theoretical contributions to ground a regional analytical framework in taste and cuisine studies. It contributes to the cultural analysis of a region and the essence of a cuisine (Cai, Zhu, and Situ 2011). Through the empirical case, it answers the question of what difference it makes if one conceptualizes certain spatial entities as ‘regions’ (Paasi and Metzger 2017, : 27). This paper opens the analysis of taste in place (Weiss 2011), and has implications for subtle regional differences in taste preference in China (Nakayama and Kimura 1998, : 257).

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Table 1: the spatial regional hierarchy ‘centered’ on the spicy taste

<i>Place</i>	<i>(Wider) region</i>	<i>Other sub-regions in Guangdong</i>	<i>Outside the region of Guangdong</i>
Nanxiong	Guangdong	Guangzhou, Chaozhou, etc.	Hunan, Jiangxi and Sichuan provinces in South China



Figure 1. The location of Nanxiong, on the borders of Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Hunan provinces. Source: author.