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The Dialectical Thought of the Yin–Yang and Five Elements Theory in Vietnamese Culinary Culture

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ABSTRACT

Vietnamese cuisine is not merely the art of food preparation but also a profound expression of Eastern philosophy, particularly the dialectical thought embodied in the Yin–Yang and Five Elements theory. This paper analyzes how this philosophical framework is reflected in Vietnamese culinary culture. In doing so, it clarifies the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, as well as between the material and the spiritual, within the national cultural context.

Keywords: *Vietnamese cuisine, Yin–Yang, Five Elements, dialectics, Eastern philosophy, national culture.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Cuisine is an essential component of a nation's cultural structure, vividly reflecting the worldview, human outlook, and philosophy of life of a community. In Vietnamese culture, cuisine transcends material needs to become a profound expression of Eastern philosophical thinking, particularly the dialectical thought rooted in the Yin–Yang and Five Elements theories. This worldview governs how the Vietnamese select ingredients, combine flavors, prepare dishes, and organize both daily meals and traditional rituals. It is this integration of philosophy that shapes the unique identity of Vietnamese cuisine within the broader context of East Asian culture.

Dialectical thinking in Eastern philosophy is most prominently expressed through the Yin–Yang theory, which views all phenomena in the universe as a dynamic interplay of opposing forces - yin and yang, stillness and movement, cold and hot, soft and hard - that do not negate one another but coexist in mutual interdependence and transformation. Life can only flourish when these dualities reach a state of harmony and balance. Complementing this is the theory of the Five Elements - Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth - which describes the cyclical transformation of all things through patterns of mutual generation and mutual restraint, symbolizing the closed-loop cycle of nature. According to Nguyen Tu Chi (2003), theoretical

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systems such as Yin-Yang and the Five Elements not only shape the Vietnamese cosmological worldview but also permeate every aspect of cultural life, from medicine and architecture to cuisine.

Vietnamese cuisine serves as a vivid medium for reflecting this philosophy. Each dish and every meal embodies the balance of yin and yang in ingredients, colors, flavors, temperatures, and cooking methods. The combination of the five fundamental tastes - sweet, sour, spicy, bitter, and salty - based on the Five Elements not only ensures a harmonious palate but also promotes internal balance, health, and adaptability to the living environment. Tran Ngoc Them (2006) emphasizes: "Vietnamese cuisine is not just for satisfying hunger, but for living in harmony with nature, for nourishing both the body and the soul." This pursuit of harmony explains why Vietnamese people instinctively pair "cooling" dishes with "warming" ones, or use herbs and spices to adjust the energetic quality of the main dish - a practical application of dialectical thinking in everyday life.

However, amid rapid modernization and globalization - especially in the age of industrialized food - the deep philosophical values embedded in traditional culinary culture face the risk of being forgotten. Studying and systematizing the dialectical principles of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements in cuisine is not only of scholarly significance but also a vital means of preserving and promoting Vietnamese cultural identity in the context of international integration. Acknowledging this, the present paper focuses on analyzing the specific manifestations of these philosophical theories in Vietnamese culinary culture. In doing so, it affirms the enduring value and vitality of traditional knowledge in contemporary life.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Vietnamese cuisine is a vivid embodiment of Eastern philosophy, particularly the theories of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, which form the core of traditional dialectical thinking in East Asian cultures in general and Vietnamese culture in particular. To fully understand the depth of these ideas as expressed in cuisine, it is first necessary to approach the theoretical essence of these two doctrines from philosophical and cultural perspectives.

A. Eastern Dialectical Thought: The Concept of Movement and Harmony

Eastern philosophy does not construct its worldview through analytical and inductive reasoning like Western philosophy, but instead leans toward holistic and intuitive thinking. It emphasizes the interconnectedness between human beings and the universe within a unified and harmonious whole. Eastern dialectics is characterized by the interaction and transformation of opposing forces, as illustrated in the theories of Yin-Yang and the Five

Elements - doctrines that originated in ancient China but have been deeply localized and internalized in Vietnamese culture through the process of cultural adaptation.

According to Yu-Lan Fung (1983) in *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Eastern dialectics is not based on antagonistic contradictions, as in the theories of Hegel or Marx, but rather on the coordination of opposites within a process of transformation aimed at balance. This is the foundation of the "middle way" (zhong dao), a key principle that runs through cultures influenced by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

B. The Yin–Yang Theory: Philosophical Basis of Life and Movement

The Yin–Yang theory first emerged during the Western Zhou Dynasty (around the 11th century BCE) and was later systematized in the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), a classic text of Chinese philosophy and cosmology. Yin and Yang represent two opposing but complementary forces that coexist in all phenomena: Yin is associated with darkness, cold, softness, passivity, and femininity; Yang is associated with brightness, heat, hardness, activity, and masculinity.

Nothing is purely yin or purely yang; each contains the seed of the other. Life only exists and flourishes when there is dynamic balance between these two forces (Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, 2002). This is the essence of Eastern dialectical thinking: opposites do not negate but complement and transform into each other. This principle has been deeply applied in traditional medicine, geomancy, wellness practices, and especially in the culinary arts.

In cuisine, every ingredient has either a yin or yang nature, and their combination requires subtle knowledge to maintain energetic balance within the body. For example, ginger (hot, yang) is used to balance the cold nature (yin) of seafood; hot dishes such as dog meat are often accompanied by pickled apricots or fermented vegetables (cooling in nature). The renowned physician Hai Thuong Lan Ong (Le Huu Trac) emphasized: “Health preservation lies in the balance of Yin and Yang in the body’s energies. Food must follow the same principle; one must know what is hot and what is cold to combine them appropriately.”

C. The Five Elements Theory: A Model of Cosmic Movement and Its Application in Cuisine

The Five Elements (Wu Xing) theory is a foundational philosophical concept in the East, reflecting the belief in constant transformation and movement of the cosmos and life through five elemental phases: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. These elements do not exist in isolation but operate within an interrelated system governed by two core principles: mutual

generation (sheng) and mutual restriction (ke).

The principle of mutual generation reflects supportive and promoting relationships - Wood generates Fire, Fire generates Earth, Earth generates Metal, Metal generates Water, and Water generates Wood - while mutual restriction reflects balancing and controlling interactions - Wood controls Earth, Earth controls Water, Water controls Fire, Fire controls Metal, and Metal controls Wood. These two laws ensure harmony and equilibrium in both nature and the human body.

This theory has been widely applied in traditional medicine, feng shui, and architecture, but it also plays a profound role in culinary practices, particularly in maintaining bodily balance through food.

According to Vietnamese traditional medicine, each element corresponds to a fundamental taste in cuisine: Metal – spicy, Wood – sour, Water – salty, Fire – bitter, Earth – sweet. These tastes not only contribute to flavor but also influence internal organ function: spicy disperses cold, sour constrains, salty nourishes the kidneys, bitter clears heat, and sweet strengthens the center and boosts energy. Do Tat Loi (2004), in *Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Vietnam*, affirmed: “Cuisine is not merely for sustaining life, but for regulating Yin and Yang, and the Five Elements within the body. Each taste has a specific function associated with the internal organs and elements.”

Therefore, an ideal dish in Eastern culinary philosophy is one that combines these tastes harmoniously, achieving balance without excess, thereby nourishing the body and aiding in disease prevention and treatment.

In Vietnamese culinary culture, the Five Elements theory is applied flexibly in cooking, not only to satisfy flavor preferences but also to adapt to ecological conditions and seasonal climates. In summer - associated with the Fire element - Vietnamese people favor cooling dishes like sour soups, mung bean sweet soup, and herbal drinks (Water element) to balance body heat. In contrast, during the cold winter months - when Water is dominant - spicy and warming dishes like beef hotpot, grilled meats, and ginger porridge are preferred to generate warmth and enhance circulation. This adaptive approach illustrates the dialectical thinking of the Vietnamese, who use food not only for survival but as a means of harmonizing with the environment, thereby elevating cuisine to the level of an applied philosophical system.

The Five Elements theory is also expressed in the selection of dish colors corresponding to each element: white (Metal), green (Wood), black (Water), red (Fire), and yellow (Earth). A traditional Vietnamese meal is often composed to include all these colors, reflecting visual,

nutritional, and symbolic balance with the cosmos. This aesthetic arrangement not only pleases the eye but also embodies the spirit of harmony, moderation, and reverence for nature - hallmarks of the Eastern way of life. Vietnamese cuisine, therefore, is not merely about satisfying material needs but is a microcosmic model of the universe, where all elements are intricately interconnected through the lens of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements.

D. The Synthesizing Perspective: Cuisine as a Microcosm of the Universe

In Eastern philosophy, humans are not separate from the cosmos but are seen as a “microcosm” (small universe). Therefore, a meal - with its diversity of colors, flavors, ingredients, and arrangement - mirrors the operation of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements in miniature. Tran Ngoc Them (2004) noted: “A traditional Vietnamese meal often includes all five elemental colors - white (Metal), green (Wood), black (Water), red (Fire), and yellow (Earth) - along with the corresponding flavors. This not only satisfies the palate but also reflects the harmony between human beings and nature.”

Even in ritual offerings such as ancestral worship, the food tray is not just a collection of dishes but a cosmological representation: xoi gac (red – Fire), boiled chicken (white – Metal), bamboo shoot soup (yellow – Earth), vegetables (green – Wood), and dipping sauce (black – Water). The spatial arrangement often follows the five directions (East, West, South, North, Center), reflecting a deep philosophical understanding of order and harmony in the universe.

III. MANIFESTATIONS OF YIN–YANG AND FIVE ELEMENTS THOUGHT IN VIETNAMESE CUISINE

In the intellectual tradition of the East, the doctrines of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements are not merely abstract metaphysical systems; they are cosmological and anthropological foundations that influence various spheres of East Asian life, including culinary culture. Eastern philosophy does not view reality as a collection of isolated entities, but rather as a dynamic, unified whole characterized by the harmonious interaction of opposites and the continuous interrelation between human beings and the cosmos. This mode of thought is clearly expressed in the Vietnamese approach to food - from the selection and combination of ingredients to preparation and consumption - embodying the Eastern dialectical principles of the middle path and harmonious synthesis.

First and foremost, the Yin–Yang theory is concretely manifested in the classification of food according to its “yin” or “yang” properties. According to this perspective, yang foods are typically warm or hot in nature, spicy, and thermogenic, suitable for stimulating bodily

functions. In contrast, yin foods are cool, detoxifying, and often used to balance excess heat. This classification is not based on physical temperature but on qualitative assessments of how foods influence bodily energy and blood circulation. For centuries, the Vietnamese have maintained the habit of "balancing yin and yang" in their meals to preserve internal harmony. For instance, in a meal featuring goat meat (yang, heat-producing), it is customary to pair it with cooling herbs such as mustard greens or perilla leaves, or to drink coconut water (a yin beverage) to neutralize the thermal impact of the main dish. This dynamic equilibrium between hot and cool, active and passive, vividly reflects the dialectical essence of Eastern thought, where opposing forces do not negate but coexist and regulate one another.

The Five Elements theory - structured around the movement of the universe through the five phases: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth - is also flexibly and creatively applied in Vietnamese culinary arts. This philosophy is not limited to explaining natural phenomena but permeates everyday life through the concept of the five fundamental tastes: spicy (Metal), sour (Wood), salty (Water), bitter (Fire), and sweet (Earth). Each taste not only corresponds to an element in the cosmos but is also intricately linked to the five vital organs in the human body, according to traditional medicine. Skillfully combining these flavors in a single dish, or across an entire meal, ensures not only a balanced taste but also physiological equilibrium. This reflects a unified dialectical thinking that bridges body and spirit, human and universe.

A quintessential example is the Southern Vietnamese dish *canh chua ca* (sour fish soup). From a philosophical standpoint, this dish is more than a culinary delight - it is a symbolic model of Five Elements harmony: sourness from tamarind representing Wood; saltiness from fish sauce and salt corresponding to Water; spiciness from chili symbolizing Metal; sweetness from tomatoes and sugar relating to Earth; and the mild bitterness from herbs like rice paddy herb or Vietnamese balm signifying Fire. The synthesis of these elements creates not only sensory satisfaction but also reflects a deeper philosophical principle: aesthetic and ethical correctness in cuisine emerges from balance among the fundamental constituents of the universe.

Beyond the ingredients, the Vietnamese also adapt their eating habits to seasonal and environmental conditions - a direct application of dialectical thinking. Each season is associated with a particular element: summer corresponds to Fire (heat and energy), and winter to Water (cold and constriction). Choosing seasonal foods thus represents a practical enactment of the interdependent generation and control (*sheng-ke*) cycle. In summer, cooling foods such as pennywort soup, mung bean sweet soup, or herbal teas are consumed to counteract the dominance of Fire. In winter, when Water is abundant, warming and spicy foods like ginger, pepper, garlic, grilled meats, or glutinous rice wine are favored to generate

internal heat. This adaptation is not merely a biological response but a philosophical behavior reflecting the harmony between the human body and the natural environment - a notion emphasized in classical works such as the Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon) - a foundational text of traditional Chinese medicine (Unschuld, 2003).

Philosophical thought extends beyond material composition to ritualized dining behavior and social etiquette in Vietnamese culture. A traditional family meal is organized not only for nutritional balance but also to express social hierarchy and moral order - elements conceptualized through yin–yang dualism: elders (yang) sit at the head of the table, children (yin) at the opposite end; those who invite others to eat are typically senior, while juniors are expected to accept and wait their turn. Dining rituals - such as inviting others to eat, offering food, or observing the sequence of consumption - follow principles of duality, regulation, and harmony, thereby constructing a symbolic space of social interaction. During ceremonial events such as Tet (Lunar New Year) or ancestral worship, the offering tray is not merely functional but represents a cosmological model, featuring all Five Elements in color - white, red, yellow, green, black - and the “tam sinh” (three-sacrifice) offerings symbolizing Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. In this way, eating is not simply a survival act but a ritual laden with cultural and cosmological meaning.

From a philosophical perspective, Vietnamese cuisine serves as a living space for the expression of Eastern dialectical reasoning. Food is not merely physical sustenance but a medium of communication - between humans and nature, individuals and community, the material and the symbolic world. The infusion of Yin–Yang and Five Elements thought into cuisine demonstrates the interdisciplinary, integrative, and coherent nature of Eastern philosophy, where thought is never divorced from life but becomes living knowledge, capable of being felt, practiced, and preserved.

IV. DIALECTICAL THOUGHT IN EATING BEHAVIOUR AND RITUAL PRACTICE

While most manifestations of the Yin–Yang and Five Elements doctrines in Vietnamese cuisine are visible through food selection, spice combination, and culinary techniques, at a deeper level, Eastern dialectical philosophy is subtly embodied in eating behavior and ritual practices - where food is not merely a consumable substance but a medium for expressing philosophical worldviews and social order.

According to Eastern philosophical understanding, the universe is an ever-changing whole governed by pairs of opposing yet interdependent categories: yin–yang, motion–stillness, heaven–human, material–spiritual. This dialectical worldview is not merely a cognitive tool

but a method for organizing life. In the context of cuisine, it is reflected in how the Vietnamese structure eating spaces, conduct ancestral rituals, and observe etiquette during daily meals. Every action, however small, contains philosophical ideas of harmony, regulation, and respect for the operating principles of both the cosmos and society.

In the traditional Vietnamese meal, nothing is arbitrary - from the seating arrangement to the sequence of dishes. Elders and parents - symbolizing yang and order - usually sit at the center or head of the table, while the younger generations - associated with yin - sit on the sides or at the end. Adults initiate the meal by inviting others to eat, and children must wait for the elders to take the first bite before beginning their own. This is a vivid expression of the yin–yang principle embedded in social structure, where hierarchy is not enforced through administrative rules but through ritualized behaviors that convey an ethical and metaphysical worldview. As cultural researcher Tran Ngoc Them (2004) observed: "In Vietnamese culture, food is not merely for sustenance but serves as a reflection of social values - hierarchical relations, filial piety, and collective harmony."

In ancestral worship ceremonies - especially during Tet (Lunar New Year), the seventh lunar month (Vu Lan Festival), or death anniversaries - the offering tray is not merely a gift to the ancestors but a symbolic representation of the cosmos. The layout of dishes often includes items representing the Five Elements (white – Metal, green – Wood, black – Water, red – Fire, yellow – Earth) and the "tam sinh" (three life-forms): egg (yang life), meat (terrestrial life), and shrimp or fish (aquatic life), which reflect the threefold composition of all beings according to ancient belief. The acts of offering, praying, and sharing food afterward express the concept of cosmological communion, wherein humans, through food, establish a connection with deities and ancestors - bridging the past, present, and future within the flow of national cultural identity.

Dialectical thought also manifests in the organization of family reunion meals during major festivals such as Tet. The act of family members gathering around a shared meal signifies more than physical nourishment - it represents a miniature model of social harmony. Within this space, each member plays a different role - old and young, male and female - yet all interact based on the principles of yin–yang complementarity and Five Elements mutual generation, ensuring cohesion, stability, and mutual growth. This reflects the triadic cosmological principle of Heaven–Earth–Human Unity found in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist worldviews, where human beings live in harmony with the natural and moral order.

It is important to emphasize that Vietnamese culinary rituals are not static but constantly

evolving and adapting to the socio-cultural context. While the forms of certain traditions may change, the core philosophy of yin–yang harmony and Five Elements interdependence remains preserved. Even in modern families, practices such as offering incense to ancestors, preparing ritual meals, or sharing holiday dishes continue as part of a “living philosophical culture” - a form of philosophy embodied in daily life and collective memory, rather than confined to books (Nguyen Tu Chi, 2003).

From a philosophical perspective, it can be affirmed that Vietnamese culinary rituals are not merely “tangible culture” but also an intangible heritage of philosophical thought. Each meal and ritual carries symbolic and metaphysical significance: where humans do not merely fulfill biological needs but seek connection with the community, ancestors, and the cosmos. This embodies the spirit of Eastern dialectics: no absolute opposition exists between the individual and society, the body and the spirit, the mundane and the sacred. Rather, life is structured as a fluid, regulated, and coexisting system of transformation and symbiosis.

V. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAM

The study and affirmation of the philosophical value of the Yin–Yang and Five Elements doctrines within Vietnamese culinary culture carry not only academic significance but also a wealth of practical applications in contemporary life. In the context of globalization - marked by rapid shifts in consumer habits, lifestyles, and cultural perceptions - revisiting traditional philosophical principles such as Yin–Yang and the Five Elements provides Vietnam with a sustainable foundation for cultural, medical, touristic, and educational development.

First, in the domain of cultural and moral education, the thought of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements can be integrated into interdisciplinary curricula that bridge philosophy, history, biology, and civic education. Lessons centered on traditional cuisine can serve as an effective medium for students to gain a deeper understanding of Eastern dialectical thinking, the interconnectedness between humans and nature, and the balance between individual and community. This forms the basis for cultivating a younger generation that lives harmoniously, moderately, and with a profound appreciation of national identity. Incorporating such principles into education is not merely about preserving traditional knowledge, but about modernizing it through a grounded philosophical lens.

Second, in traditional medicine and modern nutrition science, the principles of Yin–Yang balance and Five Elements coordination have been applied in macrobiotic practices, preventive healthcare, and wellness strategies. Dietary plans based on seasonal changes, body constitution, and the intrinsic properties of food exemplify the concept of *yi shi wei yao*

(“food as medicine”), which was articulated as early as the Huang Di Nei Jing (Unschuld, 2003). Therefore, Vietnam can pursue integrated culinary–medical approaches, such as traditional medicine–based meal planning, balanced five-flavor menus for schools, hospitals, and wellness resorts - particularly relevant amid rising rates of lifestyle-related chronic diseases.

Third, in the realm of cultural and culinary tourism, reinterpreting the Yin–Yang and Five Elements philosophies can yield a distinct category of tourism that prioritizes deep cultural experiences over superficial consumption. Each region of Vietnam possesses unique dishes, rituals, and customs that reflect local climates, agricultural cycles, and belief systems - all of which are rooted in these ancient doctrines. Designing culinary tours around Eastern philosophical themes (e.g., “Seasonal Cuisine of Northern Vietnam,” “The Five Elements in Hue Cuisine,” or “Tet Ritual Meals and the Five Flavors”) can appeal to international visitors while simultaneously rekindling cultural pride among the Vietnamese people.

Additionally, in the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage, a deeper and legitimate engagement with the philosophical underpinnings of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements can help elevate the value of food-related customs and rituals in community life. Traditional practices such as New Year feasts, ancestral worship, or seasonal festivals - which embody symbolic expressions of cosmological harmony - should be properly documented, studied, and communicated. One recommendation is the development of a “Philosophical Index for Vietnamese Culinary Culture,” as a tool to bridge indigenous knowledge preservation with strategic cultural sustainability.

Finally, in today’s context - where food technology, social media, and evolving consumer trends are reshaping traditional eating patterns - the revival (but not restorationist revivalism) of Yin–Yang and Five Elements thought offers a promising path toward developing a smart culinary culture: one that ensures nutrition while preserving depth of identity. This requires cross-sector collaboration - among philosophy, nutrition science, food technology, cultural media, and tourism - to design effective application models that reflect the spirit of Eastern dialectics: flexible transformation without abandoning core principles.

VI. CONCLUSION

The dialectical thought embedded in the doctrines of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements is not merely a system of cosmological and anthropological philosophy within Eastern thinking, but also a profound theoretical foundation that shapes every aspect of traditional Vietnamese cultural life - particularly in the realm of culinary arts. Through the internalization of

philosophical principles into the practices of ingredient selection, food preparation, the organization of communal meals, and ancestral rituals, the Vietnamese people have constructed a highly symbolic culinary system that reflects a harmonious relationship between human and nature, between matter and spirit, and between the individual and the community. Under the lens of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements, Vietnamese cuisine becomes a vivid expression of Eastern dialectical reasoning: operating on the principle of harmonizing opposites, emphasizing flexible adaptation to circumstances, and situating human beings within the dynamic flow of cosmic processes. This explains why each traditional Vietnamese meal is not simply a biological activity, but a cultural–philosophical space that re-enacts social order, national identity, and a unique worldview. Especially in the context of modernization and globalization - which have brought ruptures in consumption patterns, living environments, and traditional lifestyles - the thought of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements offers not only historical value, but also practical implications for sustainable development. These philosophical principles can be meaningfully applied in areas such as moral and cultural identity education in schools; the development of macrobiotic diets and nutritional models inspired by Eastern medicine; the promotion of cultural–culinary tourism with a distinctive Vietnamese character; and, most notably, the systematic preservation of intangible cultural heritage based on a solid philosophical framework. Thus, identifying and reconstructing the dialectical thought of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements in Vietnamese cuisine not only deepens our understanding of national cultural identity but also contributes to shaping a modern cultural development strategy grounded in indigenous knowledge. This, in turn, serves as vivid evidence of the vitality and adaptability of traditional philosophy in contemporary life - where philosophy is no longer confined to abstract theorizing, but emerges as a living philosophy that guides individuals toward moderation, harmony, and responsibility, both to themselves and to the broader community.

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