Global Panic, Local Repercussions: Exploring the Impact of Avian Influenza in Vietnam

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Abstract

Despite deliberately marked and guarded political and cultural boundaries, the current global state is one where epidemic is the norm and disease travels across the globe through the transnational movement of people and international trade. While developing countries or countries receiving foreign aid are at the centre of disease fatality and transmission, the rhetoric of blame serves to strengthen socio-economic divisions that divide East from West and North from South with adjectives like "modern" and "primitive," "hygienic" and "unhygienic." Using chicken as a metaphor, this paper draws attention to the paradoxes and misconceptions of avian influenza in Vietnam and through the exploration of local voices, comes to a better understanding of how the disease rhetoric has affected the social and cultural landscape. This research is situated in the discipline somewhere between the anthropology of infectious disease and the anthropology of food, while also incorporating themes from anthropological theory pertaining to borders, hegemonies and race. Moving beyond the epidemiological study of avian flu, I draw attention to the phenomenology or lived experience in a state of disease as residents voluntarily omit chicken, a valuable source of protein, from their diet in order to stay healthy.

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Introduction

Since 1997, avian influenza has had a steady flow of media attention. The surge of interest in the topic has accordingly created a state of panic about the possibility of the next pandemic. Although reporters, development workers, and interested scholars disagree on the likelihood, potential sources, and probable paths of a pending pandemic, an international discourse about the avian flu has emerged in which the lifestyles of those in farming communities throughout Southeast Asia are represented as "ignorant," "primitive," and "in need of modernization" (Grain 2006). This discourse is striking in light of the current activity of non-governmental and international aid organizations across the region, many of which are introducing, as forms of sustainable development for the rural poor, the very food-rearing practices now under scrutiny. Contrary to the goals of development programs in the region, the global discourse pertaining to avian flu appears to substantially reinforce problematic dichotomies between North and South, "modern" and "primitive," "hygienic" and "unhygienic." Significantly, it also focuses worries about an impending pandemic on this region of the world.

This paper seeks to elucidate how the global forces that shape the understanding of the next pandemic are experienced in local communities. Drawing from my experiences in Vietnam during the initial stages of disease spread, avian flu becomes a metaphor for much larger global processes and fears. As Wailoo writes, "the ways in which diseases are defined, characterized and dramatized provides a window on social relations and social values" (2001, 2). This sentiment is especially potent when considering avian flu, an emerging and global disease, because a new discourse has surfaced to reveal the most recent and current fault lines in a world intricately connected through compromised global relations. Avian flu not only serves to reinforce global inequalities, it also strengthens disparities within Vietnamese society between emerging social classes.

Through an analysis of food habits and the production of food, this paper examines the phenomenological aspects of the disease in Vietnam. It highlights the changes to farming practices and consumptive patterns as many people voluntarily omit chicken, a valuable source of protein, from their diet in order to stay healthy. This paper also creates a conceptual diagram of the spaces and places where food is considered "safe" and "clean" amongst the rhetoric of vaccination and culling of birds and the social status that accompanies these locations. I argue that local inequalities mirror those taking place globally; therefore, the distinction between "North" and "South" at a smaller scale divides the elite and the poor, rural and urban dwellers. Chicken and other poultry products, such as ducks and eggs, shift in meaning and materialize as status food. Finally, this paper seeks to elucidate some of the ironies of international development which promote the intensification of poultry rearing in particular areas of the world while chastising the same practices in others. In Vietnam, for example, corporate chicken farms are regarded as "safe" and "clean" spaces to rear chicken, meeting the international standards of health and safety. Similar intensive poultry farms in North America, however, are marked as unsanitary and a threat to global health and safety. When Bird flu was discovered in some birds reared in British Columbia's poultry enterprises, intensive farming came under close scrutiny, and free range farming practices have been actively encouraged (BBC news, CBC news).

Global Foodscapes

This research draws its theoretical base from a variety of social scientific literature including: the anthropology of infectious disease where scholars have tracked the spread of disease across the globe and drawn attention to the social and political causes of suffering as well as the environmental causes (Farmer 1999; Washer 2005; Bashford 2004), and the anthropology of food, especially the symbolic and social meanings of food across cultures and classes (Mintz 1999; Watson 1997; Bourdieu 1984, Briggs and Marini Briggs 2003). This paper also heeds attention to the literatures pertaining to borders, health and global inequality (Crehan 2002; Bashford 2005; Ferguson 2005; Wailoo 2001). Recent scholarly attention to avian influenza has largely been devoted to epidemiological questions, such as the evolution of viral strains, tracking the spread of the disease, and understanding how it is transmitted (Ito et al 1998; Monto 2005; Scholtissek 1992; Stohr 2005); almost nothing is known about its effects on local food producers living in its epicentres. Responding to this void in the literature pertaining to the flu, this paper is grounded in history and political economy to address how the discourse moulds the lives and well being in people residing in local communities (Mintz 1985; 1999).

More specifically, this paper explores the ways in which the fear of a global pandemic shapes and reshapes the landscape of food and eating throughout Vietnam, the Vietnamese foodscape, if you will (Appadurai 1991). Food metaphors act as a window into local understandings of avian flu and make it possible to outline how local people respond to the global forces that shape their economic potential. There is a large body of literature about the ways in which food has significance well beyond its nutritional value (Mintz 1986; 1999; Lupton 1996; Watson 1997; Caplan 1997). In Vietnam, food supports national, regional, and gendered identity, demarks social class, mediates social relationships and is closely connected to feelings of health and well being. One evening, I cooked a meal for the host family I was living with in Hue, and no one would eat because the taste was too strange. “Vietnamese food is very simple and low in fat,” the father explained, “we do not like to eat anything else but Vietnamese food.” Most of my experiences in Vietnam were connected to food; I ate an elaborate meal to celebrate Mr. Bihn’s PhD, ate street food to celebrate Ms. Hoa’s new haircut, and received candy from different regions of the country each time someone I knew traveled between the cities. My taste for Vietnamese cuisine was interpreted as a sign that I was a Vietnamese woman in a previous life. In short, food is both a popular topic of conversation and a window into life in Vietnam. This phenomenon is heightened during a time of disease as food takes on new meanings, and a taste for chicken emerges based on social class (Mintz 1985; 1999; Bourdieu 1974). The focus here is on how the meanings of food are shifting in the Vietnamese landscape. Borrowing ideas from geography (Bell and Valentine 1997) I will re-examine the sporadic occasions when I ate chicken in Vietnam, and map out the spaces and places where food was considered “clean” and “unclean” (Anderson 1995; Douglas 2000; Chakrabarty 1999).

Methodological Approach

I spent four months conducting fieldwork in central Vietnam, from September 2005 through January 2006 (Lockerbie 2006). My study period was composed of weekly trips to rural fishing communities bordering the Tam Giang lagoon to interview fisher families about how they were experiencing recent development initiatives in the region, such as the introduction of aquaculture and resettlement programs moving fishers off their boats and into homes on the land (see Figure 1). I interviewed twenty-five people in total, both men and women, including a range of livelihood strategies such as: aquaculturalists, natural fishers, and those who combined one or both of these activities with raising poultry or farming rice. I was specifically interested in exploring how this affected local nutrition and feelings of health and well-being. Interviews were opportunistic and

unstructured. Although they were largely informal, I audiotaped and transcribed each interview (Lockerbie 2006). I gained access to these communities through my affiliation with Hue University of Science (HUS), and the Center for Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH) in Hue city. In addition to my primary research goals, which were to explore how the shift to aquaculture was affecting local nutrition and well being, a good portion of my time in Vietnam was grounded in the urban community. I was working alongside others in the city who were working on various projects in the lagoon regions: I volunteered at the CSSH, which was involved in community development projects in Vinh Ha commune, and I taught English to biology and ecology graduate students who were involved with the investigation of the environmental impact of recent developments in Tan Duong.

This arrangement was ideal because I was situated to move between urban and rural settings, and to explore a range of questions related to avian flu. Given my interests in food and well-being, and the timing of my fieldwork, bird flu was a natural topic of interest to me. More importantly, bird flu was of interest to the people I spoke with above and beyond my primary research questions because of the alarm the disease created and the ensuing drama of massive chicken slaughtering. The timing of my research was integral in shaping the direction of this research. I was in Vietnam shortly after the panic of avian flu erupted in 2005; similarly, I was present during the SARS scare in 2002. Questions about food and eating naturally lent themselves to conversations about bird flu because local understandings of the disease are deeply enmeshed in narratives of chicken, as many people have lost their household flock or stopped buying chicken to feed their families. I developed the outline of this project while in Vietnam, and accordingly, it is community-driven. It responds to the sense of urgency and attends to the issues people desperately wanted me to know about. When I told the director of the CSSH about the possibility of returning to Vietnam to explore questions surrounding the pending pandemic in Vietnam she replied with much enthusiasm, “I support you one hundred percent!”

The bulk of my analysis draws on this four-month period of fieldwork, but is supported by ongoing correspondence with friends, former students, and colleagues in Vietnam through email and Internet chat mediums. I have drawn from observations and informal “conversations with a purpose” (Burgess 1991) in my trips to the field site or while going about my daily routine of buying food from street vendors, shopping in markets, or eating in restaurants. Predicting my future work on this topic and responding to the general desire to discuss it, I inserted questions about bird flu into my interviews. I also monitored the Vietnam News (an English daily newspaper) from October 2005 until January 2006, for articles pertaining to the issue (VNS 2005-2006). In order to monitor the interplay between the global discourse and local reactions, I have also drawn from current media and scientific research between 2003 and 2007. It is worth noting, however, that this is preliminary research based primarily on observation, candid conversation and interviews, with people in fishing communities, and continued correspondence in urban settings, rather than with poultry farmers or in communities that rely more heavily on chicken as a means of livelihood. Owing to the fact that my original research questions were not directly linked to avian influenza, this paper counter-intuitively lacks an explicit concentration on poultry farmers, or on poultry rearing communities. Indeed, future research, including interviews and participant observation with those directly involved in the poultry industry, would contribute greatly to this analysis. This research is significant in its own right, however, because it conveys how widespread and comprehensive the impact of avian influenza is across the Vietnamese landscape. A focus on urban dwellers and rural fisher families, both of whom experience the impact of avian influenza more indirectly than poultry farmers themselves, highlights the consequences of government and public health strategies to curb the spread of avian influenza in unexpected locations.

Situating bird flu

Avian influenza was first discovered in birds and humans in Hong Kong in 1997: eighteen human cases -- six of which were fatal -- were identified at the time, and 1.4 million birds were slaughtered to stop the spread (WHO; CBC News ; Nikiforuk 2006). Since that time, the spread of disease has been divided into three waves. The first wave (2003 - March 2004) seems to isolate the virus in Asia, where avian flu was detected in birds in China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Indonesia, with human cases in Vietnam and Thailand. In the second wave (June -December 2004), Korea and Japan were officially declared disease-free, while Malaysians found the H5N1 virus in their poultry and quickly reacted to remove international stigmatization. Malaysia was declared disease-free the same year. Vietnam and Thailand, however, have not been as successful in eradicating the disease; both countries have experienced an increase in both poultry and human cases, and the slaughter of birds continues. In the third phase (January 2005-present), bird flu has spread further in Asian territory to include Indonesia and Cambodia (both human and poultry cases) and has made its way to Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Turkey, Romania, Croatia, Canada (in BC, and most recently in PEI), and the US (four states) (WHO 2006; CBC News 2006). Although human cases were never found in many of the listed countries, the media seems to gloss over the distinction between the strain commonly present in bird populations and the virulent and pathogenic z- strain which is potentially fatal in humans (Monto 2005; Butler 2006). The media's conflation of the strains adds to the panic, and in response to this misinformation, birds are culled at alarming rates across the globe. One report estimates that close to 200 million birds have been slaughtered (Nikiforuk 2006). Moreover, the borders of trade, especially for poultry and domestic birds such as parrots, are tightly regulated, and delegates from the developed world meet to create a plan of action (WHO 2006; CBC News 2006).

Currently, Vietnam is at the center of avian flu panic and is featured throughout all three phases of the disease. It is the most heavily affected region, with ninety-three confirmed human cases and forty-two deaths (WHO 2006). Paradoxically, as the fear of the next pandemic increases, so does the government's drive for economic growth. An export-based economy has been introduced as a form of developing the rural poor and individual regions are beginning to concentrate on a particular item for export; food items such as rice, dragon fruit, farmed shrimp, chicken, and fish sauce are all moving into the global market (VNS 2005). Asia's commercial bird industry has increased from rearing four to sixteen billion birds in the last decade (Nikiforuk 2006). This is striking because the scientific literature indicates that the intensive farming and fishing practices promoted as development tools are linked to influenza. The H5N1 virus has been harmlessly present in birds for millions of years. It was not until chickens were kept in cramped spaces, creating an optimal scenario for viral commerce, that the disease emerged into public view (Stohr 2005; Herring 2006; Scholtissek 1994; GRAIN 2006). Accordingly, Nikiforuk has named it a "predictable man-made plague" (2006, 6), and reveals the corporate chicken at the heart of the epidemic. The intensity and overcrowding of commercial chicken farming threatens the livelihood that the NGOs and international aid organizations have been nurturing. Ironically, it is the backyard farms and wild birds that bear the blame, not the factory farms.

> Men in white rubber suits and gas mask chasing down chickens in rural villages...Chickens sold and slaughtered in live markets...wild birds flying across the sky...These are the typical images broadcast by the media and its coverage of the bird flu epidemic. Rare are photos of the booming transnational poultry industry. There are no shots of its factory farms hit by the virus, and no images of its overcrowded trucks transporting live chickens or its feedmills converting poultry by products into chicken feed (GRAIN 2006, 2).

Tracking the sequence of global disease transmission provides an interesting site for further analysis on the ironies of international development, and the persistence of global and racial inequalities. Similar to other critical medical anthropological analysis (Farmer 1999; Wailoo 2001; Baer, Singer & Susser 2003), the appearance of H5N1 virus creates an environment where certain people suffer disproportionately both from the disease itself and from the condemnation for creating the space allowing the disease to emerge. Bird flu is understood as an "Asian problem," in terms of both etiology and fatalities (GRAIN 2006, 11). Moreover, Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam become the focal point of blame. This construction underlines the notion of "us" and "others," and reinforces power distinctions between the Global North and South.

It is also remarkable how countries strive to be disease-free in order to lift (or prevent) trade bans, and how even the most remote possibility of a case poses a threat. In Britain, for example, the H5N1 was found in a parrot, but because it was in quarantine this did not "affect the nation's disease-free status" (BBC News 2006). Such responses lead to inaccurate perceptions of the disease. Developed countries like Canada have faced embarrassment for falling below "First World" standards of sanitation when one type of flu strain was found in some poultry in British Columbia. In turn, Canada suffered temporary economic repercussions and trade bans, despite the expert knowledge that the strain found was not the virulent form with the potential to infect humans (CBC News 2006; BBC News 2006). It is striking how corporate farms have been the focus of blame for the eruption of bird flu in Canada, when those are the very farms promoted as safeguarded against bird flu in Asia. Beyond corporate farms in Canada, Southeast Asian countries are still held responsible for bird flu found across the globe. It seems that Southeast Asians are not only indicted for endangering the world's health, but for threatening the movement of food across borders and therefore the world's economy.

The meeting of First World representatives to create a global strategy for the eradication of the disease is equally problematic because it is removed from the context of the disease, and in turn, promotes ideas such as the slaughter of chickens without any regard for the effects to the social and economic landscape in the countries that these policies target. A recent headline on *Nature.com* claims that "Vaccination will work better than culling," because regardless how often birds are culled, the virus will continue to resurface (Butler 2005). The Vietnamese government continues to order massive slaughtering of chickens reared outside of government-sanctioned farms. This is a deliberate public relations attempt to preserve an international image and to restore faith in foreign investment, however it makes little sense in local communities. The justification for culling over and above vaccination stems from the difficulty in distinguishing infected birds from vaccinated ones (Butler 2005). This claim is absurd in rural villages where families are rearing their own birds. In one of my interviews, the respondent said "we know our birds are safe, we vaccinated them ourselves." Culling chickens, and spraying farms and humans in contact with infected chickens with disinfectant reinforces the construction of certain places and spaces as "clean" and "modern" and others as "unclean" or "polluted." The global perception of the virus is markedly erroneous; government-sanctioned and commercial farms are construed as "safe" and "clean" spaces in the developing world when much of the research indicates just the opposite. Corporate interests have shaped the media's portrayal of the disease to fit into popular narratives that construe Southeast Asian countries at the undeveloped end of the naturalized progression towards modernity.

Locating the Global in Vietnam

"Without the chicken, there will not be a banquet."

-Chinese Proverb cited in Nikiforuk 2006, 1

The global reaction and media panic has had a profound impact on the lives of local people in Vietnam. In contrast to the global debates that frame chicken in terms of threatening borders of trade, the foremost value of chicken in Vietnam, is that of nourishment. Chicken is food, a prized portion of a nutritious meal, and a link to feelings of well-being.

Due to recently imposed restrictions from government officials responding to avian flu, chicken is much harder to obtain for daily consumption. Fowl are only raised in government-sanctioned and sanitized farms, and rural farmers have had their chicken and ducks forcibly slaughtered. Backyard farms are known to be "small scale, free range, scattered and informal," and therefore in their very nature too difficult for government control (GRAIN 2006). Without family farms, rural villagers are without access to poultry meat in their diets. This is noteworthy, because according to statistics compiled by GRAIN researchers, this accounts for a third of the protein intake in rural dwelling households (GRAIN 2006). It was not the case in the fishing villages where I did my research; in these locations, only a handful of families were raising ducks and chickens for subsistence. In Vinh Ha commune,[1] people rely on fish as their primary source of protein. These birds, however, do take on local significance beyond the role as a source of protein; they are embedded in social meaning. A bird is slaughtered to commemorate special occasions, such as a wedding, or a festivity in memory of deceased ancestors. It is celebratory food endowed with symbolic meaning. On successful days of fishing and selling to middlemen, I would ask villagers what they would buy with the extra money made that day; chicken or beef were among the items most commonly listed. Even though in fishing villages the ban on raising chickens does not have an impact on the daily diet, it is greatly missed as a food for special occasions.

Likewise, city dwellers have limited access to chicken. Many have become wary of buying chicken in the marketplace because it is impossible to ensure that it comes from a safe and reliable source. Government sanctioned farms produce chicken officially identified as "safe and clean," but the chain of hands it passes through by the time it reaches the market is nebulous; urban markets are too disconnected from the original source on chicken farms. One man explained to me that "anyone can say that their chicken comes from a government farm" (Quan 2005). He added that even though his wife may know and trust the vendor, it is impossible for her to trust each person along the commodity chain. It is in urban settings where the commodity chain separates consumers from the producers that people are afraid of eating chicken. Indeed, a peril of modernization akin to Marx's description of the alienation of consumers as corporate interests prioritize chicken for its quantitative value of exchange over and above what he terms "use value," which is the quality of the object and what it means to its consumers (Marx 1974, 42-50).

The fear of chicken in the urban centres contrasts my experiences in rural communities; people could speak with more confidence about the source of their chicken. Why is it that urban dwellers fear bird flu the most, and yet it is people in rural communities who suffer the most from a threatened livelihood? I must reiterate the irony of the international understanding of the disease, which blames rural and "primitive" farming practices. While the media notes that those infected with the disease are from poor and rural villages, the communities I visited rarely eat chicken from outside their commune. People are not afraid of contracting avian influenza because they vaccinate their own animals, or buy their poultry from the neighbours who they know to be trustworthy. This type of

response is mirrored in the GRAIN research, in which one rural farmer says "free range chickens are healthier because they get to run around. I pay attention to them and know when they get sick. In the factory, nobody pays attention and it's hard to tell when one is sick" (GRAIN 2006, 10). My interviews only marginally included conversation about chicken; however I did talk to people about farmed and natural fish. Their responses were strikingly similar and reflect more general notions about food quality: "fish caught naturally is more delicious because the fish that live in the lagoon are living in an open-ended area, the fish are more comfortable themselves, and so in the end they taste better" (Mr. Dao), or "natural fish is much more delicious because they are free and they eat all sorts of different foods in nature. The farmed fish are raised on manmade food and they use a lot of chemicals to keep them well. These substances are not good for your health and make them taste unnatural and have less nutrition" (Mr. Tai) (Lockerbie 2006). Whether fish or chicken, natural or free -range meat is imbued with symbolic meaning embedded in local ideas of well-being. This meaning goes beyond animals reared completely for economic purposes.

For many, finding chicken requires a certain amount of social and cultural capital. Akin to what Bourdieu (1984) labels "tastes of luxury" or "tastes of freedom," in the context of avian influenza chicken becomes a status food because of its limited nature; it is not the food in itself that is important but the cultural capital it takes to obtain it. Amidst the panic around bird flu, I ate chicken at a holiday celebration among the elite of Hue city at Christmas time. I watched as the guests ate the chicken with ease and asked why they were not afraid to eat it in this setting. There seemed to be an underlying assumption that in this prestigious environment that the chicken was safe to eat. The guests simply assumed that the person catering the event must have had the necessary connections to ensure its quality because most of Hue's local elite and foreign residents were in attendance. In a similar vein, my friend working for the CSSH told me that she eats chicken when she goes to a wedding or to a party where all the food is paid for (My, Yahoo! Messenger October 2006). I attended enough of these sorts of events (sometimes in her company) to know that these are occasions when rice is not even served because rice is ordinary food; instead meats and vegetables and plenty of beer are served for display rather than nourishment. Chicken seems to have taken on heightened importance in these settings. My friend, for instance, chooses to err on the side of caution and avoids eating chicken in her daily life, but on special occasions she acknowledges the host's display of privileged access to quality chicken. Through webs of social connections, these elite spaces decontaminate food, and accordingly, chicken emerges as status food.

Chicken also becomes an elite food under the shadow of avian influenza; the people who feel confident in eating chicken in their daily routine are those with cultural capital or those who can afford to eat in more expensive restaurants. I made friends with a local woman in her thirties working for an NGO aimed at capacity building and alleviating poverty in rural communities. She spoke perfect English and the project she worked for was funded by a foreign agency; therefore, she had regular contact with Westerners. We sometimes went out to nice restaurants, and knowing that my host family no longer ate chicken, she would order it almost in mockery, commenting on the absurdity of people avoiding chicken when she was certain that it was safe to eat as long as it was well cooked. She would order it without questioning the cook about the origins of the chicken. Eating poultry became a symbol of her education, a demonstration of her position well connected to knowledge, and her regular association with Westerners. The scientific community, however, is less confident about the safety of cooked chicken. An article on *Nature.com* speaks to this topic: " many flu scientists are concerned that, although they risks are low…there is not enough evidence to say that the virus cannot be transmitted by eating infected poultry…Direct evidence of oral infection is lacking but so too is proof against" (2006). In the same conversation with my friend, she explained how she and her colleagues had bird flu insurance, because her work of traveling to rural villages put her at a higher risk of exposure to the disease. From an extended friendship with this woman, it became more apparent how carefully divided spaces of eating are clearly demarked by social class, education and

concepts of sanitation.

In the context of avian flu, chicken also becomes more deeply entrenched in ideas of national identity. Like the case of beef in Britain during the BSE scare (Washer 2000), Vietnamese chicken is described with special emphasis. The father of my host family, for instance, told me that "Vietnamese chicken is the best chicken in the world," and that "it's too bad you cannot enjoy Vietnamese chicken, it is my son's favourite" (Quan 2006). In previous research among Vietnamese immigrants in Nova Scotia, I asked my research participants what they missed most about home. Without exception, the responding narratives involved food images, a marker of a national identity strongly linked to cuisine. This sensation seems only to be heightened in the food's absence (Lockerbie 2007). Therefore chicken, to those who no longer consume it, affects local notions of identity as people long for its return into their diet.

It is worth noting, however, that the images I have created do not encapsulate the experiences of everyone living amongst the flu scare in Vietnam. There is a tapestry of reactions where some have ignored or not been unaffected by the fear spreading across the landscape. A former student in my English class told me that some people are afraid, but it has not really affected her life (Yahoo! Messenger October 2006). The social and cultural meanings of chicken have remained constant throughout the avian flu scare for some, such as my friend Phap, a PhD student of information technology. In a conversation over Yahoo chat recently, he told me "I eat chicken every day." I proceeded to inquire whether he is afraid of bird flu and he explained that he has not heard anything about it, and he responded, "I thought it was only in Indonesia" (Yahoo! Messenger, October 2006). Living alone and working very hard, he has not been reading the newspaper or hearing the buzz from the news. While eating at street stalls, as many people living away from their families do, he is not likely to be warned against eating chicken. As most street stalls specialize in one or two items, those selling chicken dishes are probably pretty thankful for his continued business.

Aside from the more abstract processes that serve to redesign the landscape of food and eating in Vietnam, bird flu has more concrete and more realized consequences as many people have lost access to poultry products. It is not only chicken, but also ducks and eggs that have come to embody the set of fears linked to avian flu. Beyond chicken, eggs are a significant and potentially detrimental omission from the Vietnamese diet, because they are inexpensive, high in protein and a major component of street food. In accordance with Paul Farmer's (1999) discussions of structured suffering, it is apparent that in Vietnam in the context of avian influenza, the disadvantaged suffer disproportionately from the consequences of the global discourse. Despite the muted panic in the countryside, government officials have ordered the slaughter or the vaccination of the majority of poultry to appease the global panic that focuses on Vietnam and the backyard farms. There have been 251 cases of avian flu in humans, and yet more than 230 million domestic birds have died or been culled (Webster and Govorkova 2006). While the wealthy and educated urban dwellers have continued access to these foods, it is precisely those who need it the most who are kept from it and food and its connection to health and well-being reinforce the discrepancies between the social classes. The urban elite have better access to nutrition than rural dwellers because a variety of products are somewhat restricted in their availability or affordability, like milk and red meat. Chicken, ducks, and eggs can now be added to the list of foods unavailable to rural communities.

Conclusion

The global discourse surrounding the threat of the next pandemic has real consequences on the Vietnamese landscape; livelihoods and well being are being moulded by a transnational dialogue that serves to protect corporate interests over those of human beings. Development schemes that promote the intensification of food procurement practices degrade food quality; food for the global market

becomes a commodity devoid of symbolic meaning because "the natural fish is more delicious [than farmed fish] of course" (Mrs. Ly cited in Lockerbie 2006). In an environment abound with the panic of avian influenza, chicken takes on a new identity as status food. Poultry is reserved for the elite, the educated, and the urban, while becoming a symbol of social and cultural capital. Large efforts aim to protect chicken as a commodity for the world market, while chicken for local consumption is slaughtered because it is allegedly too difficult to monitor which birds are infected outside of factory farms.

While this paper illuminates the emergence of chicken as status food due to current change in political and economic conditions, and highlights the threats to local nutrition and well being, especially in rural households, it is also speaks to much larger issues of global inequality. While Vietnam is construed as a "backward" and "unsanitary" place in the world, and a natural epicentre of disease, Canadians are attacking the corporate farms in Vancouver for threatening the national economy (albeit temporarily). Such polarized responses in two very different parts of the world speak volumes to the deliberate misunderstanding about the disease in Southeast Asia. It is striking how in light of development goals of eliminating poverty and decreasing the gap between rich and poor, that social inequality seeps in and is perpetuated; development goals of building economies also build walls of social inequality. Avian flu needs to be researched beyond its physical and epidemiological properties; it is a valuable means to explore a range of issues pertaining to the development goals in Southeast Asia, and more broadly the intersection of local and global context.

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Notes

1. Vinh Ha commune is made up of many villages, including Ha Trung one through five and Ha Giang.

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Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition

The Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition was created in January 1998 following the designation of globalization and the human condition as a strategic area of research by the Senate of McMaster University. Subsequently, it was approved as an official research center by the University Planning Committee. The Institute brings together a group of approximately 30 scholars from both the social sciences and humanities. Its mandate includes the following responsibilities:

- a facilitator of research and interdisciplinary discussion with the view to building an intellectual community focused on globalization issues.
- a centre for dialogue between the university and the community on globalization issues
- a promoter and administrator of new graduate programming

In January 2002, the Institute also became the host for a Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada where a group of over 40 researchers from across Canada and abroad are examining the relationships between globalization and autonomy.

The WORKING PAPER SERIES...
circulates papers by members of the Institute as well as other faculty members and invited graduate students at McMaster University working on the theme of globalization. Scholars invited by the Institute to present lectures at McMaster will also be invited to contribute to the series.
Objectives:

- To foster dialogue and awareness of research among scholars at McMaster and elsewhere whose work focuses upon globalization, its impact on economic, social, political and cultural relations, and the response of individuals, groups and societies to these impacts. Given the complexity of the globalization phenomenon and the diverse reactions to it, it is helpful to focus upon these issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.
- To assist scholars at McMaster and elsewhere to clarify and refine their research on globalization in preparation for eventual publication.

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Global Panic, Local Repercussions: Exploring the Impact of Avian Influenza in Vietnam

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