

Creative Transformation and Preservation of Coconut Kingdom Cuisine Culture - The Story of Bread in Ben Tre Province

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ABSTRACT: Like other regions in Vietnam, in Ben Tre- the coconut kingdom, banh mi is sold almost everywhere, especially in the morning. In the context of a fast-paced life, you can find banh mi from urban areas to remote areas, because most workers still find it more convenient to grab a banh mi while sitting on the bus to work on major roads, or eating banh mi while riding a motorbike on small rural roads... Not stopping there, for Ben Tre people when traveling, due to the tight schedule of a fully booked tour, banh mi is the number one choice. With its wide popularity, banh mi in Ben Tre - a place deeply marked by Nguyen Dinh Chieu, can become a channel to educate the awareness of preserving coconut land culinary culture if it knows how to acculturate, convey traditional cultural values in the context of integration and creativity. The story of banh mi in the coconut land of Ben Tre is therefore not only interesting but also enriches and deepens the unique cultural features of coconut land cuisine from banh mi, thereby contributing to promoting the value of banh mi in the process of promoting tourism development and safe cuisine around the world..

1. INTRODUCTION

Nguyen Dinh Chieu, also known as Master Do Chieu (1822 - 1888), stands as a cultural phenomenon of 19th-century Vietnam, whose literary works have deeply resonated and remarkably endured in the hearts of the people. Nguyen Dinh Chieu was not only a pioneer of the patriotic anti-French literary movement in the latter half of the 19th century in Vietnam but also a representative author of this genre, leaving significant historical impacts on various fields, including culinary culture. Therefore, Master Do Chieu simultaneously marks a significant developmental milestone in culture in general and written literature in particular in the Six Provinces of Southern Vietnam. As a poet, an educator, and a physician, his activities across multiple domains shaped Nguyen Dinh Chieu into the qualities of a great cultural figure, recognized by UNESCO in 2022.

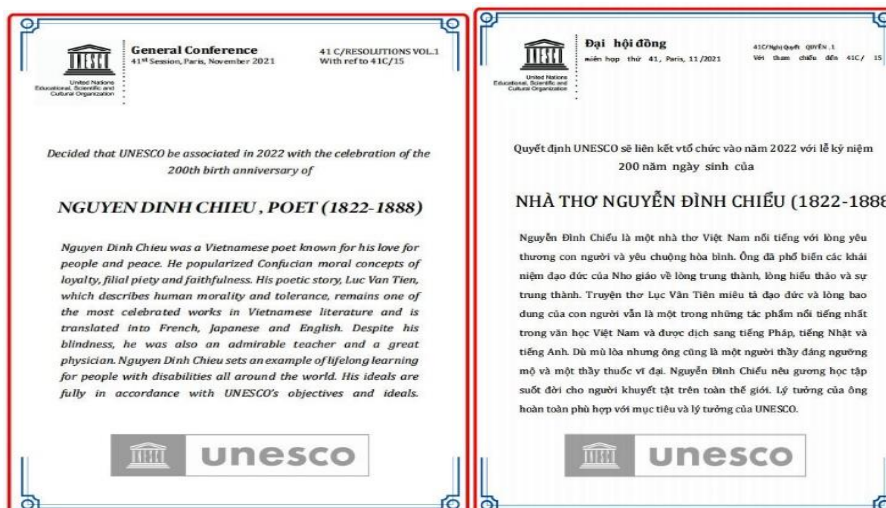


Figure 1 - The UNESCO Resolution in recognition of Nguyen Dinh Chieu.

Source: Archival data from the Ben Tre Young Creative Team.

Normally, when discussing Nguyen Dinh Chieu, he has often been perceived as a patriot and an ardent opponent of the French... However, during the research process for compiling the scientific dossier on Nguyen Dinh Chieu submitted to UNESCO in 2020-2021, adopting a fresh approach aligned with UNESCO's ideals, we discovered Nguyen Dinh Chieu's nuanced perspective on the French. This study, based on research data from archives, records, and interviews with Nguyen Dinh Chieu's descendants in Ben Tre, Long An, and other regions, reveals that Nguyen Dinh Chieu's legacy also includes the origins of a connection to banh mi in Ben Tre—a symbolic element in the global promotion of tourism development and safe cuisine..

2. NGUYEN DINH CHIEU AND THE STORY OF BANH MI IN BEN TRE - INVESTIGATING CULINARY CULTURE FROM LITERARY PERSPECTIVES.

"In 1859, the French arrived in Southern Vietnam, bringing bread with them into Saigon... Three years later, Nguyen Dinh Chieu—the leading poet of the patriotic literary movement of the late 19th century—and his family left Can Giuoc for Ba Tri, Ben Tre, where he dedicated himself to teaching, medicine, and literary pursuits. Nguyen Dinh Chieu's literary works hold significant and unique importance in many aspects; Ben Tre province was even once known as “Do Chieu Province” (Pham Van Luan 2020:195). Researchers have affirmed the aesthetic and literary value of Luc Van Tien—a work deeply rooted in the community. In terms of its international influence, aside from the Tale of Kieu, no other classical literary work of Vietnam, especially from the anti-French period, can compare with Luc Van Tien.

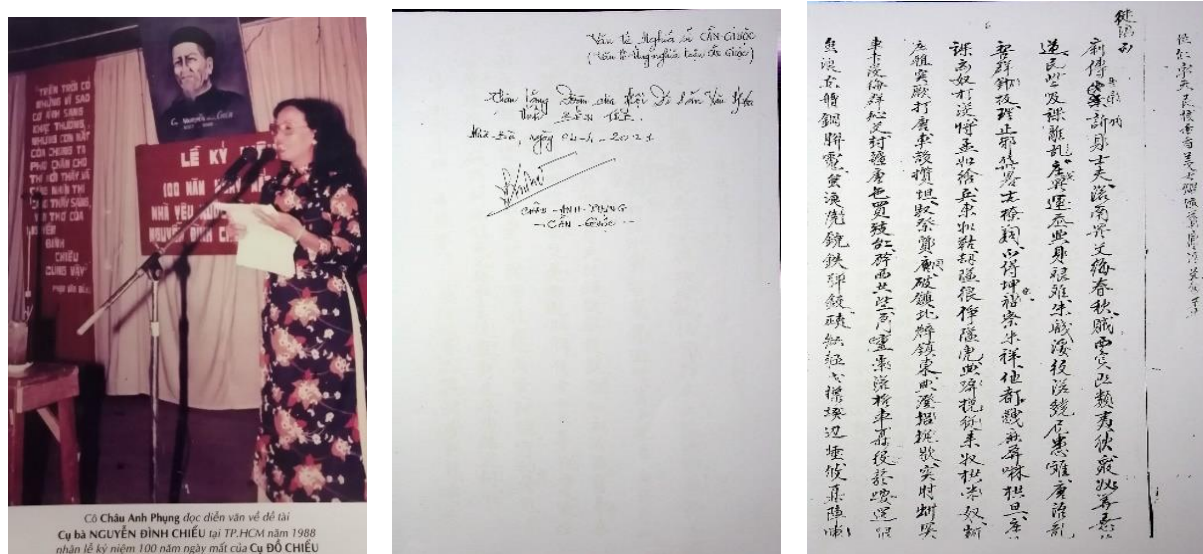


Figure 2 - In 1988, researcher Chau Anh Phung (left) with the handwritten version of Eulogy for the Righteous People of Can Giuoc preserved by her (right). Source: Ben Tre Young Creative Team.

While traditional culture and acculturated external cultural elements served as objective preconditions, Nguyen Dinh Chieu's talent was the subjective factor that determined the success of his works. Notably, with Eulogy for the Righteous People of Càn Giuộc (1861)—a literary monument to patriotism and the tragic war of the Southern Vietnamese people in the late 19th century—some issues have yet to be thoroughly addressed by researchers. Specifically, the bravery of the peasant soldiers in Eulogy for the Righteous People of Càn Giuộc created a unique impact: He was not only the first to transform the elegy, traditionally imbued with the mournful and sorrowful tones imported from China, into powerful proclamations that rallied the patriotism of the Southern Vietnamese people, but he was also the first Vietnamese to introduce bread into a literary work: 'What's the point of living as a corrupt soldier, sharing weak wine and gnawing on bread, only to feel more ashamed?' (Nguyen Dinh Chieu 1861). According to journalist Nguyen Ngoc Toan: “The first Vietnamese to record bread was Nguyen Dinh Chieu, the great poet of Gia Dinh—the land of Southern Vietnam” (Thanh Nien, 2022). However, some argue that upon its arrival in Southern Vietnam, bread was boycotted in line with Master Do Chieu's perceived spirit of resistance against the French, as evidenced by folklore claiming his refusal to drink French wine or wash clothes with French-made soap... This has potentially obscured Nguyen Dinh Chieu's contribution in introducing 'bread' for the first time into a literary work

Through our extensive field surveys, in-depth interviews, and direct interactions with the descendants of Mr. Do Chieu residing in Ben Tre and Long An, we have gleaned valuable insights. We have ascertained that while Mr. Nguyen Dinh Chieu harbored a resolute anti-French sentiment, his interactions with the French were not characterized by rigid or extreme stances, as commonly perceived. The accounts of the descendants of Mr. Nguyen Dinh Chiem (1869-1935), also known as Trong Vinh, Son Dau, a playwright, literary figure, traditional medicine practitioner, and educator at the same school as Mr. Tran Van Trong in My Chanh commune, Ba Tri district, elucidate this point. In the early 1930s, Mr. Tran Van Trong facilitated the marriage between Ms. Nguyen Ngoc My, the youngest daughter of Mr. Nguyen Dinh Chiem, and Mr. Le Van Minh. Mr. Le Van Minh (1908-1983), the

grandson of Mr. Nguyen Dinh Chieu, served as the secretary of the Ben Tre Provincial Court, commonly referred to as Teacher Ky Minh, and was the son of Mr. Ca Le Van Nhut from Huu Dinh village, Chau Thanh (Pham Van Luan, 2020: 261).



Figure 3- Ms. Le Thi Cuc, daughter of Mr. Le Van Minh, granddaughter of Nguyen Dinh Chiem, at her grandfather's altar (left) and Ms. Le Thi Cuc in discussion with the author (right). Source: Ben Tre Young Creatives Team.

It wasn't only his son-in-law who worked for the French; during his lifetime, Nguyen Dinh Chieu was also highly respected by the French. Upon assuming his position in Ben Tre in 1883, the Deputy Inspector Michel Ponchon visited Nguyen Dinh Chieu out of admiration for his literary talent and moral character (Dong Thap University & Ben Tre Department of Education & Training, 2022: 145).



Figure 4 - Descendants of Nguyen Dinh Chieu at the inauguration of the Eulogy for the Righteous People of Cần Giuộc (Left) and the home of Mr. Nguyen Dinh Phuoc, Nguyen Dinh Chieu's eldest great-grandson (right) - where the author conducted interviews (Right). Source: Mr. Nguyen Dinh Phuoc.

Individuals who have dedicated their lives to researching, collecting literary works, and studying the moral principles of Mr. Do Chieu, such as Bao phap Lu Minh Chau (Editor-in-Chief of the Cao Dai Magazine), veteran researcher Chau Anh Phung, Han-Nom scholar Tuc Tam, 105-year-old poet Nguyen Thi Ngoc Nha (Centenarian Longevity and Honoring the Content Value of Vietnam Records) <https://byvn.net/g6mf> (accessed March 27, 2025), and numerous members of the Luc Van Tien Poetry Recitation Club... assert that the French expressed empathy and respect for Mr. Do Chieu long before his recognition by UNESCO as a World Cultural Figure for the 2022-2023 term. Evidence of this lies in the fact that Luc Van Tien was translated and published in France even before it was printed in Vietnam. Perhaps it is due to this "warm sentiment" that in Ben Tre, where Nguyen Dinh Chieu sought refuge, lived until his final days (1862-1888), and rests eternally, people associate him not only with Eulogy for the Righteous People of Can Giuoc, but also with banh mi (Vietnamese baguette) - a special culinary item deeply intertwined with the daily lives

of the local population. Bánh mì has become a familiar and ubiquitous food, spreading from urban centers to remote hamlets, and has solidified its place as a distinctive feature of Vietnamese cuisine, recognized worldwide.



Figure 5 - Researcher Chau Anh Phung (center on the left) in discussion with the Director of the French School of the Far East (right on the left) and the author regarding the handwritten copy of “ Eulogy for the Righteous People of Can Giuoc” - Researcher Chau Anh Phung and the handwritten Nom scripts of Nguyen Dinh Chieu's works (right). Source: Ben Tre Young Creatives Team.

In contemporary Ben Tre, the location of the Special National Monument of Nguyen Dinh Chieu's Tomb and Memorial, the narrative of a past bánh mì boycott has receded. Instead, this culinary item is acknowledged as a significant cultural marker, symbolizing the integration of bánh mì into Vietnamese literature through a novel, culinary-focused literary lens. The adoption of this approach would provide an additional avenue for disseminating the ideological, personal, and ethical principles of the patriotic poet, educator, and physician Nguyen Dinh Chieu within tourism, cultural exchange, and global gastronomy. This establishes a basis for investigating interdisciplinary connections and expanding research into the intersections of literature, cuisine, and health-conscious tourism, utilizing the bánh mì narrative within contemporary society. Such a strategy offers a pragmatic contribution to enhancing the connectivity of the world cultural figure Nguyen Dinh Chieu during significant commemorative events, including his birth and death anniversaries, which coincide with Ben Tre's Traditional Culture Day since 1992.

3. VIETNAMESE BÁNH MÌ AND THE CULINARY AND TOURISM HIGHLIGHT OF BEN TRE COCONUT KINGDOM

Through the creative process of culinary cultural adaptation, the Vietnamese have indigenized the bánh mì, transforming the Western baguette and sandwich into a distinct Vietnamese culinary form characterized by its suitability to the local climate, culinary traditions, and Vietnamese palate.

3.1. The Global Phenomenon of bánh mì

The Vietnamese culinary tradition has positioned bánh mì as a cherished culinary staple, integrating it into the global landscape of tourism and gastronomy. Upon its introduction to Vietnam, bánh mì underwent a significant transformation, moving beyond its function as a mere sandwich or fast-food item common in France and elsewhere. The innovative application of diverse fillings, reflecting the unique culinary characteristics of each region, has redefined bánh mì. Nonetheless, despite these regional variations, Vietnamese bánh mì fundamentally consists of three primary components:

- The first category encompasses animal-based protein components, including roasted pork, minced pork stewed with spices, siu mai (meatballs), liver pâté, Chinese sausage, Vietnamese-style sausage, chicken, sardines, cheese, fried egg, Vietnamese ham, cold cuts, shredded pork skin, butter, scallion oil, and related items.

- The second category comprises vegetable accompaniments, such as sliced cucumber, cilantro (coriander), pickled vegetables (including white radish and carrot), scallions, onions, basil, and similar ingredients.

- The third category consists of condiments and sauces, including soy sauce, fish sauce, pepper, various sauces, seasoning powder, chili sauce, and related flavorings.

From these three main ingredient groups, chefs and diners classify and name bánh mì based on the filling combinations, resulting in a rich and evocative nomenclature, such as: Bánh mì thịt (pork bánh mì), Bánh mì xù mại (siu mai/meatball bánh mì), Bánh mì que (stick bánh mì), Bánh mì ốp la (fried egg bánh mì), Bánh mì gà (chicken bánh mì), Bánh mì bì (shredded pork skin bánh mì), Bánh mì chà bông (pork floss bánh mì), Bánh mì cá mòi (sardine bánh mì), Bánh mì patê (pâté bánh mì), Bánh mì đậu hũ

(tofu bánh mì, vegetarian bánh mì), Bánh mì phá lấu (offal stew bánh mì), Bánh mì chả cá (fish cake bánh mì), Bánh mì bơ (margarine bánh mì), Bánh mì heo quay (roasted pork bánh mì), Bánh mì bột lọc (clear tapioca dumpling bánh mì), Bánh mì khô rim (caramelized dried meat bánh mì)",...



Figure 6- International tourists discovering banh mi at the inaugural banh mi Festival, 2023. Source: Phuc Toan.

Beyond a mere name, each variant of banh mi encapsulates the unique cultural spirit of our cuisine. Its inherent qualities position it as an exceptional avenue for tourism promotion and cultural exchange, offering international visitors a gateway to Vietnam's vibrant and wholesome culinary landscape. This presents a significant opportunity for regional tourism growth, particularly when local areas skillfully incorporate indigenous ingredients. A testament to this is former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's impromptu visit to a Da Nang street vendor to savor the local banh mi..



Figure 7- The Australian Prime Minister (right) sampling street-side banh mi in Da Nang. Source: Ben Tre Young Creative Team.

3.2. Discovering tourism and cuisine via banh m in Ben Tre – the coconut kingdom

Driven by abundant creativity and the rich local resources of Ben Tre's coconut region, Banh Mi has evolved beyond a simple staple, becoming a vibrant stage for showcasing the safe and innovative culinary artistry of the local people. While the familiar Banh Mi, filled with fried eggs, grilled meat, and the usual array of spices and vegetables, offers a classic taste, the introduction of coconut heart as a replacement for traditional pickles brings an unparalleled crunch and sweetness. Our initial experiments with coconut heart in vegetarian Banh Mi have yielded promising results. However, to fully utilize coconut heart as a fresh ingredient, rigorous research and standardized processing techniques are essential¹, as current culinary practices rely primarily on traditional, experience-based methods.

¹ "Coconut Heart Preparation for banh mi: **Prepare the Soaking Solution:** In two separate basins, combine half a spoon of salt, the juice of half a lemon, and three minced garlic cloves in each. **Slice and Chop:** Select fresh coconut heart, removing any tough or fibrous parts. Thinly slice the heart, stack the slices, and finely chop them into the first basin of prepared solution. Ensure the coconut heart is fully submerged. **Initial Soak:** Stir the chopped coconut heart in the first basin, then drain. **Second Soak:** Transfer the

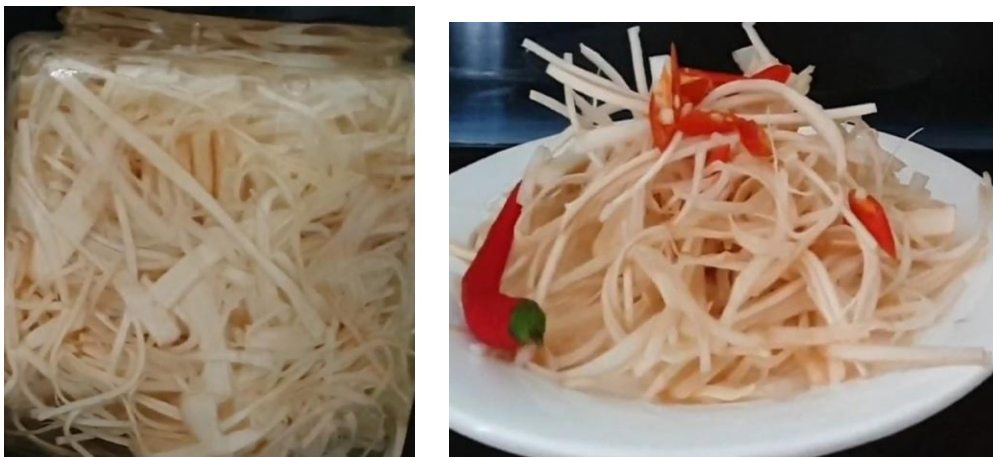


Figure 8- Coconut heart as a raw ingredient and coconut heart prepared for banh mi. Source: Phuc Toan.

While numerous milestones have marked banh mi's ascent to a Vietnamese culinary icon, the innovative introduction of coconut heart into this beloved sandwich is a unique creation of Ben Tre's coconut region. The allure of this particular Banh Mi doesn't stem from extravagant ingredients, but rather from the simple yet captivating crunch, aroma, and sweetness of the coconut heart. This, when harmoniously combined with eggs or meat and regional spices, yields an exceptional flavor profile. Visitors to Ben Tre's coconut heart Banh Mi today experience the region's signature ingredient in an unexpected and delightful way—a testament to the area's ability to transform the familiar and natural into something extraordinary. And, of course, no journey to Ben Tre is complete without acknowledging the ubiquitous and cherished coconut!



Figure 9- 'Coconut Heart Vegan Banh Mi' in Huu Dinh, Chau Thanh, Ben Tre. Source: Phuc Toan.

Beyond simply introducing a new filling, the culinary artisans of Ben Tre's coconut region are poised to innovate, freely incorporating diverse ingredients to cater to individual palates. This creative evolution aligns with the narrative of Nguyen Dinh Chieu's inclusion of banh mi in Vietnamese literature, enriching the sandwich's cultural significance. The impact of the Banh Mi story in this region transcends its novel and appealing taste, extending to profound diplomatic, cultural, and health-conscious tourism implications. These are derived from the historical account of world cultural figure Nguyen Dinh Chieu's interaction with the French, where “banh mi serves as the catalyst.” This narrative is rooted in a fresh approach to literary interpretation, viewing it through the lens of safe gastronomy within a globalized context—a vision that Nguyen Dinh Chieu himself foreshadowed nearly two centuries ago:

“When will the sun and moon shine brightly,
When will the four seas sing in harmony as one family?”²

drained coconut heart to the second basin and soak for 10 minutes. **Seasoning:** Add a touch of sugar and rice vinegar to the soaked coconut heart, adjusting to your taste preference. **Final Product:** The resulting coconut heart will have a uniquely crunchy and tender texture, with a balanced sweet and sour flavor, offering a superior alternative to traditional Banh Mi fillings. (Artisan Nguyen Thi Yen, Ben Tre City, February 2025)

² Excerpt from *Treatise on Chinese medicine*,, Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Chapter 40, From line 2870.

In the spirit of his profound humanitarian and communal ideals, it is our responsibility, as inheritors of his legacy, to foster global unity. We must find avenues for all people to converge, collaboratively addressing the enduring question posed by Nguyen Dinh Chieu. This can be achieved through the promotion of safe and enriching tourism and culinary experiences, showcasing Ben Tre's coconut region as a premier destination, all facilitated by the remarkable cultural bridge: the banh mi.



Figure 10- Co-author and experts at the first banh mi Festival in Vietnam, March 2023. Source: Phuc Toan.

4. STRATEGIES TO PRESERVE AND DEVELOP THE VALUE OF BANH MI IN BEN TRE'S COCONUT KINGDOM

As Nguyen Dinh Chieu's global recognition grows, the imperative to preserve and amplify his cultural legacy becomes paramount. This necessitates innovative strategies to disseminate and expand the unique cultural and heritage contributions of his life's work to communities worldwide. Consequently, the integration of banh mi preservation in Ben Tre with Nguyen Dinh Chieu's heritage resonates with contemporary societal evolution. While numerous initiatives exist to safeguard his cultural legacy, fostering Vietnam's socio-economic advancement, the specific exploration of banh mi's potential in Ben Tre's safe tourism and culinary sector remains notably absent.

Driven by a commitment to extract enduring lessons for modern society and to establish a sustainable framework for the preservation and advancement of banh mi, drawing upon the profound and practical insights within Nguyen Dinh Chieu's cultural legacy, we propose the following strategic solution:

4.1. Propose to further solidify the promising results of our initial research into integrating coconut heart into banh mi. This involves expanding our field studies and surveys to conduct a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of the cultural and health-conscious culinary dimensions related to preserving and promoting banh mi within Ben Tre's coconut region and its broader national context. Subsequently, we recommend organizing a series of multi-disciplinary conferences to gather insights from experts and the community, culminating in peer-reviewed research publications. These publications will serve to widely promote coconut heart banh mi, particularly within the growing sector of safe and sustainable tourism.

3.2. Organize the systematic collection and scholarly research of materials pertaining to Nguyen Dinh Chieu's narrative – the pioneering Vietnamese figure who integrated Banh Mi into literary discourse, thereby disseminating its presence within popular cultural traditions. Subsequently, we will undertake a rigorous comparative analysis to elucidate banh mi's emergence, importation, evolution, and the distinct creative adaptations of banh mi, particularly highlighting the regional influence of Ben Tre's coconut heritage. This initiative serves as a unique and impactful strategy for preserving and promoting the cultural significance of banh mi through interdisciplinary academic channels, concurrently fostering safe MICE tourism within the contemporary landscape.

3.3. Propose to develop and disseminate comprehensive promotional materials that showcase the diversity of banh mi, with a specific focus on the unique coconut-infused varieties of Ben Tre, for distribution across tourist itineraries. Subsequently, we recommend establishing a recognition program to honor artisans and culinary innovators who creatively advance the region's health-conscious coconut-based gastronomy through banh mi. This initiative will creatively preserve and enhance the brand equity of banh mi within Ben Tre's coconut region, drawing upon the rich culinary heritage of traditional coconut dishes.

3.4. Propose to cultivate collaboration among Chef Clubs and artisans by hosting Banh Mi-focused competitions, demonstrations, and skill exhibitions during the national Ben Tre Coconut Festival, held biennially or triennially. This initiative will facilitate the establishment of a premier Chef and Artisan Club dedicated to Banh Mi excellence, while also strengthening the Vietnam banh mi Association through the development of its branch and satellite networks. We aim to expand the association's influence and substantive operations by adopting diverse formats that resonate with local cultural traditions and build upon the region's rich heritage, exemplified by the legacy of world cultural icon Nguyen Dinh Chieu and the unique banh mi narrative of Ben Tre's coconut region.

3.5. Urge the prompt initiation of research and the development of a comprehensive proposal to officially establish Vietnamese Bread Day, as advocated by the Organizing Committee of the inaugural Vietnam Banh Mi Festival in 2023. This strategic move will enable us to effectively capitalize on the unique comparative advantage of banh mi – a globally acclaimed icon of Vietnamese gastronomy – within the expanding realm of safe and sustainable tourism.

5. CONCLUSION

On June 27, 1943, at Nguyen Dinh Chieu's tomb in Ba Tri, Cochinchina Governor Hoefel, during a commemorative address marking the 121st anniversary of his birth and the 55th of his passing, asserted, 'Nguyen Dinh Chieu stands as a brilliant literary figure of Vietnam, a cornerstone in the construction of our cultural renaissance' (Nguyen Ba The, 1957)³. Notably, Nguyen Dinh Chieu holds the distinction of being the first to introduce Banh Mi into Vietnamese literature through his 'Elegy for the Can Giuoc Martyrs,' a compelling testament to the enduring resonance of his cultural legacy within contemporary life, as evidenced by its culinary connections. This elegy has profoundly enriched the intangible cultural heritage of banh mi. Across generations, Nguyen Dinh Chieu's name is celebrated not only for his poetic artistry but also for the culinary significance illuminated by the Ben Tre Banh Mi narrative, values that have significantly contributed to the 'soft power' of Ben Tre's coconut region and Vietnam in the modern era.

The global celebration of Nguyen Dinh Chieu by UNESCO on his 200th birth anniversary highlights the profound and globally resonant impact of his Eulogy for the Righteous People of Can Giuoc. This recognition presents a unique opportunity to explore the universal significance of a literary work that also chronicles the early presence of banh mi in Vietnam. The community of Nguyen Dinh Chieu's literary enthusiasts and banh mi aficionados in Ben Tre earnestly seeks collaborative engagement from domestic and international agencies, academic institutions, and research centers. We aim to initiate tangible action programs that empower the people of Ben Tre to creatively synthesize their cultural heritage, tourism potential, and safe, coconut-centric gastronomy through the compelling medium of banh mi.

These impactful initiatives will significantly enhance and solidify the enduring legacy of Nguyen Dinh Chieu's cultural heritage, a source of enduring pride and inspiration for generations present and future. Consequently, they will catalyze a positive momentum in safeguarding and elevating the brand equity of banh mi within Ben Tre's coconut region, fostering safe and distinctive tourism and culinary experiences. This will transform banh mi from a mere culinary offering into a powerful conduit for intercultural exchange, serving as the most effective and secure platform for promoting Vietnamese culture and tourism on a global scale.

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