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Erica J. Peters, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam: Food and Drink in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2012. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. xvii + 303 pp. $75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7591-2075-4.

Review by Sean Takats, George Mason University.

A reviewer of the wide-ranging *Appetites and Aspirations* could evaluate this rich study along any number of axes: economic history, the history of imperial and colonial Vietnam, or the history of race and ethnicity, to name a few. Nonetheless, food is most emphatically Peters's preferred ground and where she anchors her argument that French and Vietnamese used diet to shape radically divergent identities in colonial Indochina. From this vantage she then dives into any number of related areas. This approach is not without its risks, and Peters acknowledges the perils of tendentiously linking food to broader historical trends. By offering a blistering critique of Brillat-Savarin's hackneyed maxim about the relationship between diet and identity, she implicitly distances herself from the legions of scholars who have reflexively embraced this shibboleth of food writing. Drawing on an impressive array of sources ranging from poetry and advertisements to economic data and colonial decrees, Peters instead turns the tables, focusing less on meals than on their associated practices, institutions, and politics.

The book's opening chapters aim to impart a sense of the heterogeneity of Vietnam prior to French dominion, challenging the notion that "Vietnam" even constituted anything approaching a coherent unit. Peters proposes that culinary imperialism formed a critical aspect of the newly established Nguyen dynasty's strategy to impose order following the late eighteenth century's devastating Tay Son rebellion. This policy was particularly important in the recently assimilated south, where well-established Chinese, Malay, Khmer, and Cham groups heavily outnumbered ethnic Vietnamese. Geography and topography further fractured Vietnam into distinct culinary zones. A vast network of village markets and feasts only loosely knit together this diverse landscape, which the Nguyen dynasty sought to integrate more tightly through trade.

With the physical stage set, Peters undertakes a sustained analysis of the nineteenth-century food economy of Vietnam. Here *Appetites and Aspirations* is strongest. Peters focuses particularly on the monopolies of production and trade exercised by the rulers of Vietnam, first imperial and later colonial. The French-imposed salt monopoly--a particularly galling imposition given that the Old Regime's hated *gabelle* was hardly ancient history--drove dramatic and unintended shifts in the price and quality of *nuoc mam*, the fish sauce essential to Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian cuisines. In the face of rising salt costs, *nuoc mam* producers delivered an inferior product that spoiled quickly, tasted awful, and contributed significantly less protein to consumers' diets. The colonial regime similarly disrupted alcohol consumption. It cloaked its alcohol monopoly in terms of hygiene and breaking the control of "foreign" Chinese producers, but consumers rejected these claims because, Peters argues, they favored the taste of spirits produced through traditional means (consumers doubtless also preferred the lower costs). In both case studies, Peters deftly synthesizes sizable corpora of specialized literature to make a convincing argument that subjective measures of taste were central to confrontations between the French colonial regime and its subjects.

The book's later chapters probe the racial and cultural divisions created and reinforced by French colonial practices. Peters deploys examples of Chinese and French cuisine to highlight the successes and failures (chiefly failures) of the colonial regime to assimilate and integrate into Vietnamese culture and society. Chinese cuisine, Peters convincingly shows, played an essential role in Vietnamese business relations. To the extent that French players refused to participate in Chinese banquet culture, they eliminated themselves from serious contention in the well-entrenched Chinese markets that dominated the Vietnamese economy, particularly in the south. Rather than adopt local customs, French businessmen instead imagined that a natural "racial affinity" between Vietnamese and Chinese inevitably led them to exclude Europeans from their commerce (p. 132). The effort by French officials to label ethnic Chinese producers and traders as foreign, and to divide "Vietnamese" from Chinese interlopers, was particularly problematic in the south and especially Saigon, where they comprised an absolute majority of residents.[1]

At times, Peters reflexively levels more criticism at the French than at other targets, with an undercurrent of skepticism if not hostility directed toward French actors. When Vietnamese emperors impose taxes or seek to control food, it is because they remain sensitive to the needs of the people. When the French do so, they are greedy and extractive. When French express taste preferences, they are squeamish or xenophobic. When Vietnamese do it, as they did in their mania for French champagne, they are sophisticated or refined. Peters explains the French aversion to local foods and preference for imported ones by arguing that colonial "French rhetoric insisted on the importance of a firm line between the French and Vietnamese diets" (p. 155). Indeed, when the French fail to savor or even to try local delicacies, Peters cites their arrogance: "In the colonies, the greatest advantage of the mythology of excellent French cuisine was not that it allowed French people to eat delicious food, but rather that it gave them an excuse for avoiding foreign foods, even in foreign climes" (p. 179).

Peters appears unwilling to delve too deeply into questions of taste and whether the French perhaps quite simply didn't like Vietnamese food, a preference which need not invariably be politically charged. In an era where *pho* and *banh mi* have entered the pantheon of American urban lunches, it is easy to embrace Peters's cosmopolitanism, but nineteenth-century diners and their predecessors clearly had other ideas. Even before the paint on the mythology of French cuisine was dry and long before overseas Europeans had recourse to imported canned foods, French visitors still despised Vietnamese cuisine. When Pierre Poivre's 1748-1750 trade expedition sat for a banquet hosted by Vu Vuong, the group was hardly delighted by "a dinner composed of rice, some bits of chopped pork and beef, with a shrimp curry salted and spiced beyond measure, all in filthy and disgusting little cups of crude porcelain with chopsticks according to local custom."[2]

Peters's investigation into the critique of Vietnamese domestic cooks reveals the fascinating transmission of cultural biases between metropole and colony. Derisive comments surrounding Vietnamese cooks and their kitchens drew on a rich tradition of fearing the filth that invariably pervaded domestic food production. Peters's retelling of the revolting story of a Vietnamese cook caught rolling rissoles up and down his bare body (p. 167) could be lifted from the pages of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who delighted in tales of filthy cooks and their horrified masters.[3] Finding one's Vietnamese servants drunk (p. 169) echoes the timeworn metropolitan conceit of unsupervised domestics gone wild. At the very least we can say that French observers were revolted by their kitchens until servants had been decisively banished from the house (very late indeed in the West, and still not the case for middle class and up in Vietnam). Here we remain a long way from imagining the kitchen as a warm and comforting domestic space. None of this is to say that race and place do not matter. As domestic service faded in economic and cultural importance in Europe, *Appetites and Aspirations* illustrates how old fears found new homes in the colonies. And certainly Peters has produced provocative evidence that colonial administrators drew sharp lines between Asian and European culinary needs when they offered vastly different allowances to Vietnamese and French wives of soldiers (p. 171).

Peters concludes *Appetites and Aspirations* with a brief examination of an "unusual cookbook" from 1889 which claimed to offer French recipes to a Vietnamese audience (p. 207). In one sense, this cookbook fits neatly within the broader context of contemporary French culinary literature: exhortations to keep a clean kitchen, to follow one's master's tastes assiduously, et cetera. Yet the bulk of the text was composed in *quoc ngu*, the romanized transliteration of Vietnamese only lately adopted as the official script of the colonial regime, which would limit the cookbook's reach to an exceedingly narrow band of elites. Indeed, even sixty years after the cookbook's publication and following decades of intensive literacy campaigns among French colonists and Vietnamese nationalists, the *quoc ngu* literacy rate stood well below 20 percent. Peters concludes that the cookbook necessarily targeted an emerging Vietnamese bourgeoisie eager to display its French sensibilities.

Although the bulk of *Appetites and Aspirations* is based on French language sources (often located outside Vietnam), Peters has sought to situate her study firmly among the works of Vietnamese specialists through consistent use of *quoc ngu* to refer to all but the most common names, e.g., Saigon. Readers not familiar with Vietnamese might find this burdensome, particularly when confronted with flourishes like "Hồ Chí Minh." Peters's fidelity to the original language also has occasionally introduced minor errors in the manuscript, perhaps during the production process. All the same, Peters is frank about the limits of the Vietnamese language in her study: for much of the period under consideration, *quoc ngu* was only in limited use, and French sources are abundant and easily accessible.

In this engaging and suggestive investigation of nineteenth-century Vietnam, Peters explores an impressively wide range of domains: colonialism, nationalism, medicine, ethnicity, and economics, to name a few. Although grounded in food studies, Peters's study tackles broader questions as she seeks to recreate the politics, markets, and culture of imperial and colonial Vietnam. It would be unfair to expect a study so ambitious to succeed equally well on so many fronts, and indeed it reaches into so many diverse areas that it cannot always undertake a sustained analysis of the rich material it unearths. Nonetheless, this fascinating and suggestive narrative of nineteenth-century imperial and colonial Vietnam will appeal to a wide range of general readers and specialists.

NOTES

[1] Thomas Engelbert, "Vietnamese-Chinese Relations in Southern Vietnam During the First Indochina Conflict," Journal of Vietnamese Studies 3/3(October 1, 2008): 193.

[2] "Histoire abregée de la Cochinchine," ANOM C/1/2, 166-167.

[3] Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam, 1782), 11:233.

Sean Takats
George Mason University
stakats@gmu.edu

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