

V U H O N G L I E N

Rice and Baguette: A History of Food in Vietnam

London: Reaktion Books, 2016. 256 pages. \$39.00 (hardcover)

Rice and Baguette is an engaging overview of the history of food and foodways in the region we now call Vietnam, from the prehistoric period to the present. Vu Hong Lien provides a nuanced perspective on how the Vietnamese today conceptualize their country and its history in large part through food.

Recent archeological findings show the importance of seafood, especially mollusks, to the local diet ten thousand or more years ago. The author paints a cheerful picture of the Hòa Bình culture (roughly 12,000 BCE to 6,000 BCE), as the proto-Việt began to use mortar and pestles to grind nuts and seeds, began cultivating fruit and root vegetables, and raised pigs, chickens, and water buffalo. Trade between the coastal regions and the inland mountains also developed in this period. During the Phùng Nguyên period (roughly 2,000 BCE to 1,500 BCE), archeological records show that fine pottery techniques emerged, allowing the proto-Việt to make clay pots, jars, serving bowls, and tableware. A branch of archeology known as palynology uses traces of pollen to determine that the local people were also eating greens, taro, yam, beans, lentils, citrus fruit, berries, melon, cucumbers, and bananas. Beautiful bronze artifacts from the Đông Sơn period (roughly 1,000 BCE to 100 CE) also allow historians to see that the local people used hoes and sickles and pounded rice in stone mortars.

Like many scholars of ancient periods, the author uses later sources such as the fourteenth-century *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* [Wondrous Tales of Lĩnh Nam] and the fifteenth-century *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* [Complete History

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of Great Việt] to tell a story of what may have happened earlier. Extant written sources date only from about 100 BCE and are Chinese texts created during an extended period of conquest and conflict over China's southern borders. These texts cannot be taken as straight forward histories of the southern people, whom they call the Yue. On the other hand, Vietnamese sources are even less reliable, given the many centuries intervening between the events and their transcription.

Vu Hong Lien is appropriately cautious in places where she refers to the sources as “semi-historical.” The parts of *Rice and Baguette* that go beyond archeology—telling appealing stories about ancient foodways—can be read as illuminating how the Vietnamese understand their own history through legends and nation-building texts. Thus, the author states somewhat polemically that “although three millennia have elapsed since the Phùng Nguyễn-Đông Sơn time, the Việt still eat the same types of food, cooked in similar earthenware in villages both on the plains and in the highlands” (37). Elsewhere, she interprets a famous legend about the mythical parents of the Việt people as an “embellished version” of the truth (23), suggesting ethnic minority groups were born into the Vietnamese nation rather than colonized by the nation.

The book presents a cogent analysis of cross-cultural influences during the early modern and modern period, from Việt settlers borrowing spices from Cham cuisine to colonial subjects adopting French charcuterie techniques. The author further explains that French food in the colony was distinct from what French people ate in the metropole, with a greater reliance on imported canned foods and bottled Maggi seasoning sauce. Still, Vu Hong Lien neglects some excellent resources by historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists such as Nir Avieli, Đinh Trọng Hiếu, Olga Dror, Hữu Ngọc, Kevin McIntyre, and Nguyễn Xuân Hiến. And in her discussion of Vietnamese cookbooks, she omits the earliest known culinary text in Vietnamese, the *Petite Cuisine Bourgeoise en Annamite* (Sài Gòn: Imprimerie de la Mission, 1889). Another oddity is the book's photo acknowledgments section, which is alphabetized by photo source. To find the source of an image, one has to search painstakingly through five pages in tiny font for the page number where the image appears in the text.

The strongest section of the book covers the period since World War II. Vu Hong Lien presents a succession of fascinating stories, interwoven to give a rich picture of the nation's successive food crises and the ephemeral treats that brightened people's experiences during hard times. In particular, she brings the 1945 famine vividly into view. Based on interviews the author did with living survivors, she shows that even those with money could only get one meal of rice gruel a day, along with perhaps some corn or a few root vegetables. In that terrible year, hundreds of thousands died of starvation and students were enlisted to walk the streets of Hà Nội picking up dead bodies each morning. The effects of the famine continued for decades in the form of widespread, lingering malnutrition and illness.

In 1952, a program of land reform and indoctrination in the northern countryside pitted landless villagers against property owners. The suffering rural population gained an increased stake in the rebellion against the French colonial state. Vu Hong Lien explains how this led people to maintain long supply lines for the troops and to feed those fighting the French at Điện Biên Phủ. The author also describes the intricate networks of tunnels cooks used to redirect smoke from cooking fires so they could provide fighters with hot meals without attracting the enemy's attention.

Food aid from the United States played a significant role in helping people in the Republic of Vietnam get enough to eat, but unfamiliar foods required innovative approaches. As in the colonial period where Vietnamese parents gave French canned milk to their children, in the mid-1950s parents offered their children cans of baked beans and frankfurters, along with Coke and chocolate. Slabs of American Cheddar found their way into a cheap *bánh mì* sandwich, *bánh mì phô mai* ("fromage"), which may have helped introduce the sandwich to poor urban Vietnamese. The author also takes a sensitive approach to explaining potentially sensationalistic dishes such as insects, dog, and cobra to a Western readership.

The author's explicit thesis is that "today's Vietnamese cuisine is a mixture of French and Vietnamese dishes" (7), and that "Chinese cuisine, though important in Vietnam, exists as a separate tradition . . . [for] weddings and other landmark occasions" (9). To support this assessment, she labels a number of dishes as distinctively Chinese and celebratory. Despite the problems this raises for her argument, she does mention the deep

influence of Chinese cuisine on ordinary Vietnamese food culture: new rice cultivation methods; popular snacks like won ton soup and steamed pork buns; and ingredients such as tofu, sesame seeds, soy sauce, and rice noodles. In discussing *phở*, Vu Hong Lien does not discuss the flat Chinese rice noodles (*fen*) which almost certainly gave the soup its name. She notes the French influence, via a colonial demand for beef leading to creative uses for beef scraps, but stumbles in speculating that *phở* took its name from its approximate homophone, *feu*, French for fire. Hewing too closely to her stated thesis, she misses the opportunity to observe that *phở* unites Chinese and French ingredients with innovative local techniques.

Overall, the book would be stronger if the author grappled more with the way multiple culinary narratives influence identity. As it is, the book stands as a concrete example for undergraduate and graduate students of how food studies can be mobilized to support a particular political perspective on a country's history and culture.

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