

Erica J. Peters, Independent Scholar, Mountain View, CA

Culinary Controversies in Colonial Cochinchina

I propose to use discourses about food as a way to study views of cultural change and encroaching/enticing modernities in Cochinchina during the early decades of the twentieth century. French, Vietnamese, Chinese, and South Asian foodways crisscrossed in the cities of Saigon and Cholon, but opinions varied greatly about how much cross-cultural consumption should take place, and what it meant. In the cities, journalists also described modernity and modern culinary delights as specifically urban phenomena, in contrast to the image of the unchanging village. This dichotomy, however, demanded the obscuring of extensive movements of people back and forth between countryside and city, whether for commerce, employment, or entertainment. New snacks and dining customs might be acceptable for urbanites, but an undercurrent of concern ran through the discourse, reflecting uncertainty about changes which were taking place all over the colony, in the villages as well as in the cities. These doubts about the future emerged in a rhetoric of poisoning, magic, and other fantastic stories about food. Culinary discourses provide a way to access anxieties about change, as colonial food reflected both long-term structural shifts (what was grown, what was shipped) and also immediate, daily decisions by people of all backgrounds.

This paper will explore the workshop's themes of regionalism and modernity and the structures and discourses undergirding the colony's symbolic order. My work investigates culinary practices without assuming that the diners' social identity determined the meaning of their practices: negotiations over power and modernity took place just as often among people of the same race and class as between races and classes.