

Abstract

## **Precarious Eating: Negotiating Food Safety and Security in Ho Chi Minh City's Food Charities**

In this institute seminar I will present part of my PhD research on food safety in urban Vietnam which is embedded in the project "A Body-Political Approach to the Study of Food: Vietnam and the Global Transformations" at the Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna.

Food safety is a widespread concern in contemporary Vietnam and subject of governmental regulations, media reports, and people's everyday food practices. Concerns range from the short-term effects of unhygienic food to the long-term effects of (agro)chemicals. Yet how do people negotiate food safety in light of struggles around sufficient food? Based on extensive ethnographic research among food charities in HCMC, this presentation explores what it means for people in precarious socio-economic situations to handle their food security and food safety concerns. While the safety of food constitutes one aspect of food security, the relations and tensions between the two are scarcely addressed in dominant narratives on food safety in Vietnam.

My interviews with food charity diners show that in the context of socio-economic precarity, their overall food security concerns can overpower food safety concerns in everyday decisions. However, contrary to claims by Vietnamese government officials and food safety 'conscious' consumers, my research finds that this does not mean a lack of preoccupation for food safety on side of the food charity diners. Instead, the agency to act on their food safety concerns is limited by structural constraints. On a societal level, it is precarity, poverty, and socio-economic inequality that build the parameters within which diners of food charities navigate concerns over enough and 'safe' food; on a micro-level, it is the power imbalances within food charities. In light of this, the presentation sheds light on the exclusionary powers of dominant food safety discourses that focus on consumer 'choice' while overlooking food poverty. Moreover, it discusses how charities, while well-intended and contributing to short-term food security, exist in tension with a rights-based approach to food.