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This 62-Year-Old Vietnamese Entrepreneur Is Using Foodtech To Eat Safer



Iris Leung, CONTRIBUTOR

I write about startups in Asia and the cities they live in [FULL BIO](#) ✓

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62-year-old Nguyen Thi Hong Minh is perhaps one of the most interesting and qualified foodtech entrepreneurs you'll meet in Vietnam.

A seafood processing engineer by trade, she was among an international class made up of students from 30 countries to study at the Astrakhan Institute of Fish Industry and Economy in Russia, while her country was at war.

"I studied in Russia from 1969 to 1975, it was a long time ago but during this time Vietnam was in war. When we came to Russia, it was a new life for me — the culture and language, everything was new," she remembered.

After the war, she returned to Southeast [Asia](#), got her PhD in political economy and was eventually appointed as the Deputy

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Due to her background, Dr. Nguyen naturally grew passionate on the topics of food safety, transparency and traceability. For those unfamiliar, traceability is an internationally-recognized methodology to collect and offer transparent information about the food that is eaten or sold to determine whether it is safe or of high quality.

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Vietnamese farmer on the field. Credit: Hoang Dinh Nam/AFP/Getty Images

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Her startup [TraceVerified](#), an electronic traceability system for food products in Vietnam, started off as a Danish government-backed project that appointed the semi-retired Dr. Nguyen as director. An electronic system was sorely needed in Vietnam as most food producers



Electronic traceability is based on the principle of global code. It lets people have access to real-time information, helps manage records properly and retrieves information easily — and I think that is the advantage of using technology for food traceability,” she said.

An electronic traceability system for Vietnam’s farmers and consumers

How it works is farmers and the processors, the middle men who buy from producers, log information such as product origins and how it was processed into TraceVerified’s software. The data, which is compiled into TraceVerified’s first product “TraceReport,” is accessible via QR codes on product packaging — which consumers scan using a mobile app.

Not just for consumers, TraceReport can also be used by quality managers and warehouse workers to check on incoming goods and also vet the caliber of their food sources.

The system may seem primitive for those living in developed countries where food safety and transparency is often taken for granted, but in a place like Vietnam where information generally does not flow freely — a tool like TraceVerified becomes that much more essential.

Vietnam’s water pollution crisis showed how little transparency exists

Dr. Nguyen used the water pollution crisis that happened earlier this year, where mass fish deaths destroyed the livelihoods

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explanation for the cause of the marine life disaster, until the government finally announced that Taiwan's **Formosa Plastics** and its steel plants were behind the toxic waste being poured into central Vietnam waters.



Boy looks at a dead fish in Quang Trach district. Photo credit: STR/AFP/Getty Images)

“If in the beginning the government was more transparent during the building of the big plants in central Vietnam and if their processes were transparent, it might have been enough for people. But because there was no transparent information available for months, people began making demands for it and the government will have to give transparent information to people from now on,” said Dr. Nguyen.

She acknowledged though that change is underway in Vietnam and that the Ministry of Agriculture has been providing technical assistance to farmers in terms of proper certification and improving hygienic food processing standards. Beyond tech support, Dr. Nguyen said that there's a lot of re-education that needs to be done until producers understand the importance of food safety and



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TraceReport will help farmers build product credibility over time

“Farmers need to understand how to give information to customers. If farmers cannot bring their product to market, they won’t have the market power and motivation to develop their products,” she said.

The main challenge, according to Dr. Nguyen, has a lot to do with building credibility through proper product marketing and packaging. That’s where TraceReport comes in, as when more information becomes readily available to consumers via clear packaging and labeling — farmers will be able to build their credibility over time.

“I think that individually, farmers and small companies cannot build themselves the credibility and do their own marketing and PR for their products. On social media, there’s been a lot of information about dirty products which makes it difficult for farmers to sell their products. What needs to be done is a common effort from everyone to build credibility and prove to consumers that our products are of good quality,” she said.

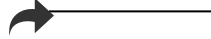
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