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Seung-joon Lee. *Gourmets in the Land of Famine: The Culture and Politics of Rice in Modern Canton.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. 320 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7226-6.

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More Than the Sum of Its Calories: Rice and Modernity in Canton

During China's Republican Era (1911-49), a popular slogan emerged: "eating must be done at Canton" (p. 119). This catchphrase alluded to the sophisticated food culture of the bustling southern metropolis. At a deeper level, however, the saying hinted at official disapproval of city residents' extravagant taste in imported food, especially foreign rice.

As Seung-joon Lee argues in *Gourmets in the Land of Famine*, Canton–now known as Guangzhou–had depended on elaborate transnational rice-trading networks long before the Qing Dynasty's collapse in 1911, but during the Republican Era, these networks and food consumption practices came under fire. The first half of Lee's two-part book deals with the history of Cantonese rice consumption, the development of the city's cosmopolitan cuisine, and the evolution of its complex commercial linkages, which spanned much of Southeast Asia during late imperial China. The second half focuses on the Guomindang Nationalists' attempts to "domesticate" rice consumption in the 1920s and 1930s through their aggressive promotion of Chinese rice and heavy taxation of imported grain.

In the style of food writer Michael Pollan, Lee begins his analysis by arguing that "the feeling of fullness after a meal" is as much a product of cultural factors as it is an effect of biological processes (p. 11). The residents of Canton unswervingly asserted their desire for high quality varieties of rice, even in times of dearth. According to Lee, when Guomindang technocrats, captivated by Western-style quantitative methods and statistical representations, tried to promote the consumption of Chinese rice, they failed to comprehend the centrality of dietary preferences in Cantonese consumer culture. Readers familiar with James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998) will be well acquainted with the foundations for Lee's indictment of high modernist ideology, or hubristic social engineering strategies that are doomed to fail because of their blindness to complex and contingent local factors. As Lee contends, the Nationalist government blamed frequent food shortages on decadent, premodern urban foodways and pursued policies of scientific planning to correct these perceived cultural flaws. In Lee's words, "quantitative methods, introduced as the most objective and most reliable ways to understand social phenomena, overwhelmed any other ways of representing China's social problems and ultimately blinded the Guomindang planners' eyes" (p. 115). Despite their forward-looking intentions, bureaucratic representatives of the modern Chinese state unwittingly facilitated a famine of unprecedented scope in 1936. Lee is at his best when discussing the contradictions of modern statecraft, as he does in the book's section "Patriotic Eating." Here, he demonstrates how discourses of food security, consumer preference, and revolutionary nationalism intersected, challenged, and reinforced each other in the 1930s.

One of the book's outstanding features is its synthesis of local detail with transnational range. Lee's portrayal of Cantonese urban culture operates at a high level of resolution, yet his spatial framework encompasses the distant places, such as San Francisco and Singapore, where mercantile fortunes both influenced and depended on the ebbs and flows of the Pearl River Delta's rice markets. This interplay of depth and breadth gives the book a distinctive quality and allows Lee to substantiate his assertion that dietary preferences were never simply a reflection of provincial tastes; instead, they were a product of widespread cultural and commercial exchanges with overseas communities. As Lee puts it, "To the

Cantonese, rice was overwhelmingly a maritime commodity" (p. 28).

Occasionally, the form and content of *Gourmets in the Land of Famine* undermine the author's ambitions. Lee's bold agenda includes recovering the views of "the anonymous rice-consuming public who lived underneath the conspicuous political celebrities and renowned entrepreneurs of the day," yet the author's chronic dependence on the passive voice hinders his attempts to locate agency among the general populace (p. 8). Also, few accounts from ordinary consumers emerge to support Lee's theses; instead, the book features a series of vignettes about the Cantonese mercantile elite and their bureaucratic counterparts in the Guomindang regime. Although these people were indeed rice consumers, they were not members of the anonymous public Lee hopes to portray.

These are minor critiques of an elegant and persuasive work of history. Taken as whole, *Gourmets in the Land of Famine* complicates our understanding of the "cultural politics of food" in China's Republican Era and adds much-needed layers of "thick description" to the history of Chinese consumer culture (p. 217). The book also contributes valuable analytical insights to the study of how trade develops in transnational contexts. As environmental historians become increasingly interested in exploring the ecological transformations that result from a commodity's journey through the complex circuits of global commerce, Lee's conclusions provide a timely reminder of how conventions of taste and notions of place profoundly influence patterns of production, distribution, and consumption.

Lee, who currently teaches at the National University of Singapore, was among the final cohort of Frederic Wakeman's graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley. With *Gourmets in the Land of Famine*, Lee has lived up to his mentor's legacy of sophisticated and innovative scholarly research on unexplored topics in Chinese history.

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