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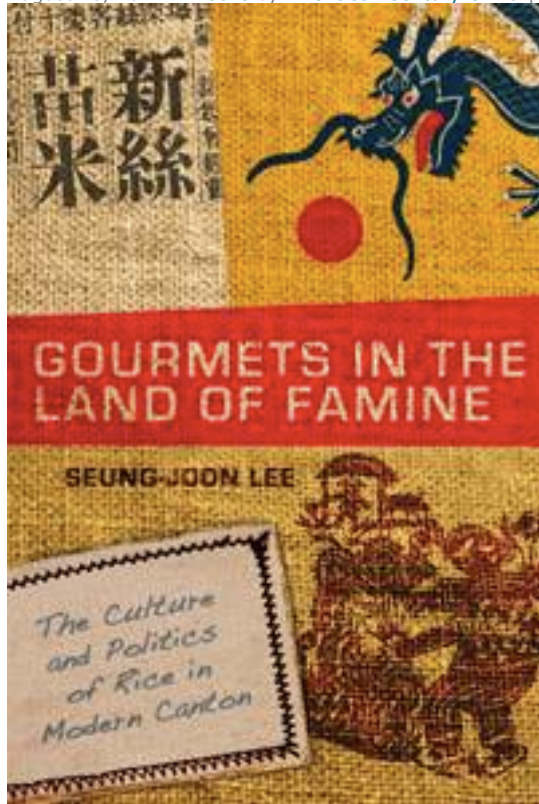
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Book Review: *Gourmets in the Land of Famine*

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Seung-joon Lee. *Gourmets in the Land of Famine: The Culture and Politics of Rice in Modern Canton*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. viii, 300 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

By Emily Hill

Why is “eating in Canton” (*shi zai Guangzhou*) known as the best in China? Seung-joon Lee’s lively and original study examines the peculiarities and politics of eating in Canton (Guangzhou) from Qing times to 1937. Using a delectable range of materials in Chinese, Japanese, and English, the book offers an illuminating entrée to the culture and political correctness of eating in modern Chinese history. As the author points out, few historical studies focus on food supplies. Many narrative histories of China, for instance, include sections on the Canton-based events of the 1920s when the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party joined in the common cause of Nationalist Revolution. But no one asks: “Who fed the revolutionaries?” (p. 87) Tackling this question, Lee explores a transnational network of Cantonese millers, shippers, buyers, and brokers who together purveyed grain grown in Burma, Siam, and French Indochina to Canton’s most ordinary households. Flowing in the opposite direction, smaller shipments of special “brands” of rice grown in Guangdong reached customers in San Francisco and other locations throughout the Cantonese diaspora. In economic terms, Guangdong’s Pearl River Delta area was an integral part of Southeast Asia, and Canton’s food-processing industries were the most technologically advanced in China. Culturally, the area belonged to an extended transnational world of appreciation for the distinctive flavours of Cantonese cuisine.

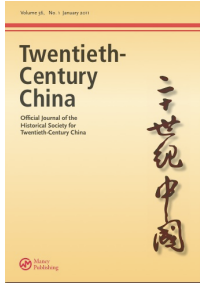
Lee shows how the case of Cantonese rice consumption contributed to the conceptualization of China as a national economy. By the 1920s, the rice import trade had become Canton’s most important business, and in a remarkable reversal of the usual rural-urban relationship, Canton supplied its hinterland with large quantities of Southeast Asian rice. By the 1930s, the global depression gave rise to alarm about imported foodstuffs. Deflation caused prices paid to

Chinese farmers to decline while the slump in world trade also led to lower prices for China's grain imports. Rice from Southeast Asia became China's most important import item during the mid-1930s. As the conviction that a national economy should be a self-contained unit was taking shape, Cantonese reliance on imported grain came to be viewed as a critical national problem. Because Guangdong's rice imports made up half the national total, admiration of Cantonese culinary sophistication turned to hostility. It seemed irrational that Hunan produced rice in abundance while Canton imported without restraint. Government officials and other observers in more northern cities considered this to be unpatriotic as well. Why was Chinese-grown rice not good enough?

Analysis of Cantonese otherness in the conceptual construction of the Chinese nation is an important contribution of the book. Lee's main argument, however, is a critique of the Guomindang-led government's technocratic approach to the goal of national self-sufficiency in food supplies. He effectively illustrates the would-be technocracy's approach by describing the major engineering project of the time, analogous to today's Three Gorges dam, in which Guangdong was connected to points north by means of the Canton-Hankow Railway. As Lee explains, planners predicted that the new railway line, completed in 1936, would be "a stepping stone to the complete reorganization of Chinese agriculture" (p. 194). Rice grown in Hunan would replace Guangdong's economically dangerous imports, halving China's consumption of foreign rice. At the same time, grain imports would be restricted by steep tariffs. However, the official plans to expand domestic output and restrict imports of grain were poorly implemented. In Canton, the plans backfired. Cut off from imported food supplies, the people of Guangdong began to experience famine during the winter of 1936-37.

Referring to "Canton's starving people" (p. 204) without providing either a death toll or details on the scale and duration of the grain scarcity of 1937, Lee leaves one wondering about the magnitude of the nutritional shortfall that resulted. Moreover, his causal analysis of the dearth of rice seems incomplete. Lee argues that the official incompetence in supplying grain to Guangdong was the result of an excessively technocratic focus on quantitative goals and planners' neglect of qualitative differences. Too confident in their rationality, the officials who assumed responsibility for grain supplies ignored merchants' knowledge of different types of rice. Given Lee's narrative of events, however, one could conclude instead that officials did not quantify enough. In plans for transporting grain along the new railway, for example, they failed to allocate investment to ensure that Hunan's rice reached Guangdong in a condition fit to eat. How many new warehouses and railcars were needed? It seems that such quantities were not included in the plan. Consequently, farmers' deliveries of rice were left to deteriorate in the open air near railroad stations in Hunan (p. 201). This episode suggests that bureaucrats aspiring to practice technocratic quantification actually quantified quite crudely.

A minor flaw may be detected in Lee's discussion of the allegedly sensitive Cantonese palate. To quote contemporary comments referring to the peculiarity of "Cantonese eating habits" (p. 198) is valuable for conveying the understanding of the time, but Lee's references to the distinctive characteristics of Cantonese preferences lack precision. He thus risks contributing to the mystification of Cantonese tastes. Lee explains that Cantonese consumers preferred to purchase rice that had been recently harvested, milled, and polished, and also states that Guangdong's southern climate caused consumers to fear and avoid dampness in their food supply. If it acquired moisture en route, their rice would soon spoil. His finding that the people of Canton were invariably fussy about the qualitative characteristics of their rice, even when compelled to turn to relief supplies while the import trade was disrupted during 1918-1919, could thus be explained by the difference between edible and inedible rice. When the poor suffered shortages, this difference could be a matter of life and death. Therefore the significant question of just how and why Cantonese tastes were distinctive calls for further analysis. Nevertheless, such questions arise because Seung-joon Lee's excursion into the politics of eating in China brings such tantalizing new fare to the table.



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