

*Gourmets in the Land of Famine: The Culture and Politics of Rice in Modern Canton.* Seung-Joon Lee. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. ISBN: 9780804772266

Seung-Joon Lee's book is a fine offering in cultural history that expands from the central question of a Cantonese preference for gourmet rice imported from Southeast Asia. It chronicles the failure of the Chinese nationalists in the early twentieth century to lure the inhabitants of Canton away from foreign rice and to replace a transnational rice network with a territorially bounded national commerce.

In an engaging prose woven around stories of food, and of rice consumption specifically, the author enumerates the drive by Guomindang elites to construct a modern Chinese nation between 1900 and 1937. The truth was that Canton and the Pearl River Delta were topographically separated from China's mainland rice production zones. The Cantonese had obtained their rice from places afar for more than a century. But in the nationalist era, the cultivated taste for foreign rice seemed increasingly odd amidst recurrent famines and scarcity elsewhere. The Cantonese seemed less patriotic in their pursuit of a gourmet culture. The centrist elements at Nanking sponsored the Canton Project to sell national, Hunan rice in the south. But they were eventually unsuccessful in implanting a new consumption pattern in the southern city. If anything, the government-backed program jolted local networks of import and provision in Canton and caused a famine.

This contest over rice in the book mirrors the complexity of nationalist politics in twentieth century China. The author puts additional effort into showing

how this politics was implicated with modern science. In telling the story of rice, Seung-Joon Lee argues that the Chinese nationalists were using the instrumentalist logic of “western” science. The deployment of science of numbers to delegitimize Canton’s fascination with foreign rice and of Canton-Hankow Railway to break Canton’s isolation were but instances wherein the nationalists were guided by “the inner logic of modern science and technical expertise.” (p, 217)

This was the paradox then: the use of “western” science to aid the birth of an autonomous nation in China. That the nation was emerging on account of a process of contest is evident enough. The Guomindang view of the nation clashed with the “taste” of the consuming public in Canton, which shows that the emergence of the nation was anything but a seamless process. Could the science that the nationalists deployed have been any less hybrid? Here perhaps the author could have engaged in another level of complication rather than portraying the application of science, knowledge, and rationality as an unmediated process of import from the west and its implementation. Science appears to be a monolith in this telling. But that does not compromise the fundamental argument that the book makes. The book is still valuable for showing the stakes that the nationalists saw in modern science.

There is much else of value in the book. An important section describes the complex process of constitution of a bourgeois culture of rice eating. The political and cultural construction of taste for high-quality rice in Canton is insightful. The rice merchants and discriminating consumers were together purveyors of a system of consumption. The same merchants who participated in the profit-making

enterprise of long-distance trade and distribution of rice also organized relief when rice became scarce, thus becoming the pivot of a moral order of supply. Thus when the nationalists tried to change the gourmet culture of Canton, they had to go against a local assemblage of merchants, municipal authorities, and the consuming publics that together formed the bedrock of culture of rice eating. The Cantonese – merchants and publics - pushed back when asked to consume Hunan rice. The deft handling of politics, culture, and commerce at the intersection of political tensions between the center and the province in the book has to be applauded.

This is overall an important contribution to the cultural studies of Chinese nationalism. Through tales of rice consumption, of regional trade, and of nationalist politics the author provides a valuable history of the subject.

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