

## Food and War in Mid-Twentieth-Century East Asia

**Review Number:** 1581

**Publish date:** Thursday, 24 April, 2014

**Editor:** Katarzyna Cwiertka

**ISBN:** 9781409446750

**Date of Publication:** 2013

**Price:** £70.00

**Pages:** 210pp.

**Publisher:** Ashgate

**Publisher url:** <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409446750>

**Place of Publication:** Farnham

**Reviewer:** Mark Swislocki

People must eat, even during wartime, preferably three times a day, civilians and soldiers, and of course children. How eating happens on and off the battlefield and amid wartime and post-war food storages is the focus of this compelling collection of essays, which also addresses the implications of wartime food practices for the outcome of wars, as well as post-war state building, culture, and society. The book exemplifies the promise of food studies, which the editor boldly states in the following terms: 'We hope to elevate the study of the everyday dimension of wartime from the fringes of scholarship to a position of considerable importance for the understanding of the human past'. In this regard, the book appears to succeed, even while drawing into relief some of the challenges inherent in presenting food, as an exemplar of the everyday, as history.

The editor, the most prolific publisher on food in East Asia of the past decade and the field's most visible pioneer, introduces the book with a light touch, and ultimately lets each contribution speak for itself. The exception is a division of the material into two parts, 'Supplying nutrition,' and 'The complexity of eating', which brings into view important 'thematic connections'. These include 'the tension between the state's effort to regulate and distribute the available food supplies and the market forces escaping this control' (p. 5) and 'the link between retaining political power and the ability to feed people with limited resources' (p. 5). Other connections and links among the essays include 'the theme of feeding troops' (p. 6) and the value of personal diaries for reconstructing food history, for food's most meaningful aspects often escape the public documentary record.

Among the key terms in play – food, war, mid 20th-century, and East Asia – only war acquires explicit definition within the study, through reference to the notion of 'total war'. Cwiertka rightly notes that the concept lacks 'a definition ... that commands general consensus' (p. 3) and yet also rightly insists on its relevance, given the case studies in question, each of which demonstrates the lack of any clear boundary between combatant and non-combatant. The book also points to, in ways left only implicit, a need to think creatively about the other key terms – food, mid 20th-century, and East Asia – which the chapters help us do.

East Asia is a productive focus, even if at times we need to break down the units into which scholarship and politics conventionally divide it. The governments of China, Korea, and Japan (and we add the United States

and the United Nations to cover the range of entities in play in the book) all confronted the problem of 'supplying nutrition' during and after the mid-century wars, and yet, as these studies nicely show, the boundaries variously dividing and unifying states could blur into near meaninglessness in terms of how people got food to market and on the table. The volume's opening chapter, by Toby Lincoln, shows that key figures within Chinese state and society not only actually chose to collaborate with Japanese occupation forces to forestall food shortages and food riots, but that they also appear not to have felt politically compromised for doing so. The politics of food thus trumped the politics of national identity, even in wartime, when one might have most expected the opposite. Kyoung-Hee Park's complementary chapter illustrates how artificially deflated prices and an 'ill-managed rationing mechanism' in wartime colonial Korea inspired opportunistic (or corrupt, according to the terms of their employment) rationing authorities and civilians to participate in an 'extensive black market' in foodstuffs, for not only food grains but also fruits and meats, sugar and wine. This was an intra-Korean affair, in which civilian participants surprisingly included peasants that previous scholarship has represented simply as having been deprived of their crops by government planners, suggesting a need to review conventional views of colonial political economy.

Victory inspires historical ignorance, as we learn next from Christopher Aldous' fascinating account of Crawford Sams, an American military doctor determined to turn post-war Japanese off grains and onto domesticated livestock. The twist is that Sams appears not to have realized that the turn for which he claims creative credit long antedated the war. Clues to why an American occupation figure like Sams might have overlooked such historical trends come only later in the book, most clearly in Samuel Hideo Yamashita's dramatic account of the challenges of feeding evacuated children in wartime Japan. Wartime provisioning for the Imperial Japanese Army disrupted the supply chains of the already evolving Japanese diet that Sams sought to change, obscuring the ongoing transition he sought to launch. As Yamashita notes, 'The populations of the biggest cities', those with which Sams was most familiar, 'suffered the most because they were almost completely dependent on the system of food rationing that the national government set up'. By the end of 1940, the government controlled the price of vegetables, seafood, sugar, and dairy products; by 1941, it rationed rice and 'daily necessities'; by 1942, it limited daily allowances of 'meat, fish, vegetables, miso, salt, soy sauce and cooking oil.' There was a reason why Japanese ate little livestock, and it wasn't cultural: the 'daily allowance for an adult was 1.3 to 1.8 ounces of meat' (pp. 131–2). One wonders what Sams might have concluded if he had studied Japanese units in China, where 'well-supplied units' (p. 112) enjoyed pickled vegetables, miso paste for soup, sake and meat.

The delay that the reader experiences in finding answers to such questions raises a question about the challenges of organizing insights about food history more generally. Is the volume's organization driven by a potentially necessary but misleading gastronomic materialism, which places the question of 'supplying nutrition' before the question of 'the complexity of eating'? To be sure, people can only eat what is supplied. But the 'insatiable parasite' about which Aaron William Moore writes sounds and looks like a supply problem, and likewise Yamasita's young evacuees.

Each of these chapters really seems to speak to the volume's most provocative observation, which comes from Moore: 'The emergence of a new kind of logistical system, spearheaded by the United States, marked a major transformation in the relationship shared by armies and the producers of food. ... The relationship soldiers shared with the producers of food ... was a determinative factor both for the outcome of the war, and an individual's experience of it' (p. 110). Better fed soldiers win, and only a state that understands this logic will have soldiers who feel like the American in Korea who reported: 'I bet there's no country that goes to the trouble to see that the ordinary guy gets fresh food all the way up here. It's a good feeling to know that you're not forgotten in this hell-hole' (pp. 103–4). Better fed civilians, however, clearly matter too. Total war requires total nutrition, if perhaps not total gastronomy.

The length of the mid 20th-century wartime is another question the book effectively raises. Again, the editor's introduction starts us off on this question by foregrounding the converging and diverging wartime chronologies in question: the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), the Second World War (1941–45), and the Korean War (1950–3). To this we might add the context addressed by Julia C. Strauss, the civil war in China

between the Communist and Nationalist parties, which arguably could be dated to well before 1937 and to well after 1953. The outstanding question is how to make the argument though food, and Strauss' essay in fact illustrates the difficulty of the dating, while offering new interpretations of the converging and diverging food grains policies of the Nationalist and Communist Parties.

As Strauss observes, some policies commonly associated with the Communist Party after 1949 have roots in wartime Nationalist measures, such as *tongguo tongxiao* (unified purchase and sale): 'If we normally think of *tonggou tongxiao* as characteristic of a Chinese Communist Party that was implemented out of a desire to emulate the Soviet Union from a position of relative strength in 1953, it is startling to see that the first government to attempt to institute *tonggou tongxiao* was in fact the Nationalist Government, which did so from a position of relative weakness amid economic crisis during wartime' (p. 77). Indeed, Strauss points to 'shared repertoires for grain extraction and supply' (p. 78) and 'shared tactics' (p. 79) for regime consolidation after 1949, with 'diverging tactics' (p. 82) emerging in only 1952–3.

Yet one hesitates at Strauss' observation, on the other end of the time spectrum, that 'the Nationalist Government of the Guomindang did not reach crisis point in rice supply until roughly 1940'. How one defines a 'crisis point' makes all the difference, perhaps, but one could read Strauss' chapter and not know that famine and rice price politics were among the most pressing social and political problems in China during the first half of the 20th century, and that food politics framed, to a great degree, the presentation of Nationalist and Communist political platforms. One thus wonders if the Guomindang wartime efforts register any lessons learned from before the outbreak of the war with Japan, or if both Nationalist and Communists were simply harkening back to the imperial policies Strauss cites as Nationalist precedents.

The question of when the war ends resonates across the region, far into and even across the Pacific. One of the most notable legacies, which Lori Watt eloquently examines, includes the desire of Japanese residents of Seoul for a 'Great East Asian Banquet'. This banquet might not call for examination except for its poignant timing and 'problematic' underpinnings. The invitation came on 15 September 1945, and spoke of a 30-year history during which Koreans and Japanese 'ate rice out of the same pot and are [thus] "of the same belly"' (p. 150). 'Problematic' because, as Watt notes, 'Japanese and Koreans rarely ate together and Koreans often had a hard time finding enough to eat during the colonial years' (p. 150). Watt's study of the desire for this autumn meal in 1945 reveals how food can promise to hold together worlds that have already fallen apart.

The war's longest gastronomic legacy, to stretch the meaning of gastronomy beyond recognition, may involve some of the mostly marginal 'participants' (again, stretching a word) in the mid 20th-century East Asian wars: the Rongelap people of the Rongelap Atoll. Their history illustrates what can happen (since the mid 20th century at least) when military planners subordinate food supplies to military strategy. As Nancy J. Pollack's contribution observes: 'We know that the radioactive ash that contaminated the whole area, including foods in Japan and the northern Marshall Islands, led to radiation sickness. But that outcome of testing those bombs was a secondary consideration to the US military strategy of increasing preparedness for a Cold War, and the arms race with Russia' (p. 169). The challenge for historians, as for researchers sidelined during the post-war occupation, was that 'Japanese doctors ... were not allowed to publish any of their findings', and as one doctor notes: 'So many patients died without our understanding the cause of death that we were all in despair' (p. 169). Proving contamination is complicated not only by the obscurity of radiation science, but also by the obscuring of available evidence. Bodies, however, have presented their own evidence, such as an 'increasing number of goiter problems, miscarriages and slow growth of children' (p. 182).

Pollack notes that only in 2009 did the Rongelap Atoll (and only the major islet, 'not the other 56 islets') receive the 'remedial action needed to block or remove ... radioactive isotopes ... contaminating to food' (p. 183). The history of food and the mid 20th-century East Asian wars are thus poised to drag well into the 21st century. In this regard the book has more than succeeded in 'underscoring the potential that a focus on food can add to the historiography of war in the Pacific and the political, economic and social developments that directly preceded and followed it' (p. 6). The wonder is that people who work on food have even had to seek

to prove this. And one longs for the day that food studies need not provide such justifications.

The editor is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1581>

**Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/45061>