Total War and the Techno-politics of Food in East Asia, 1930s–1950s

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CHAIRMAN
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Wednesday, 12 October 2016, 3 pm
History/Political Science Lounge, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences,
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Abstract
Nothing was more important than fuel energy in modern warfare. When the time came to face a total war with Japan on an unprecedented scale, however, food calories arguably remained as the prime source of energy in China’s national economy, predominantly agricultural. Nascent China’s industrial economy was concentrated only in a few coastal cities and still consisted of labor-intensive and light industries, rather than energy-intensive and heavy industries. To maximize industrial output for wartime economy, the Chinese working population should eat better and more food than at any other time. And yet industrialists and workers alike had to face wartime food scarcity. Against this backdrop, the wartime authorities made unsparing efforts to promote food technologies to optimize the working population’s food consumption, while improving nutritional intake for the potential workforce in various wartime institutions and organizations, ranging from military barracks and factories, to schools and hospitals, to refugee camps and other welfare institutes.

The Sino-Japanese War facilitated the innovations and experiments of food technologies. The wartime experience, in turn, shaped both the people’s understanding and government practice regarding what to eat and how to eat. The political urgency given for the first time to food as an object of wartime industrial mobilization, I argue, continued to legitimize the PRC’s food policies in the 1950s.

About the Speaker
Seung-joon Lee is currently teaching modern Chinese history at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of Gourmets in the Land of Famine: the Culture and Politics of Rice in Modern Canton (2011) and a number of articles including “The Patriot’s Scientific Diet: Nutrition Science and Dietary Reform Campaigns in China, 1910s–1950s,” Modern Asian Studies (2015).

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