

## Introduction

Shortly after the Nationalist government was established in Nanjing in 1928, the Guomindang launched a nationwide statistical survey of food supply and consumption. Zhang Xinyi, a Cornell-trained agricultural economist and professor at Nanjing University, was hired as director of the Bureau of Statistics in the Legislative Yuan (*Lifayuan*) to conduct this grand-scale survey project.<sup>1</sup> With the full support of the bureau, Zhang immediately started his research, and three years later he published his results in a report titled *China's Food Problem*. Zhang concluded that six of the fourteen provinces he had examined were “definitely deficient in their food production.” Among the food-deficient provinces, he noted, “Guangdong stood at the top. [Guangdong’s] production can support only two-thirds of her population; the other one-third must be fed with imported food-stuffs.”<sup>2</sup> This was the main conclusion of China’s first statistical study of national food production and consumption.

Zhang’s research project claimed significance in modern Chinese history for several reasons. First, his research was conducted exclusively by Chinese experts who had mostly been trained in foreign universities, but without Westerners’ direct involvement. Second, it was the first thoroughgoing research to use modern methodology to address China’s worst social problem, which the country had confronted but could not yet remedy. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the food problem (*liangshi wenti*; *shiliang wenti*) had become more urgent than anything else. No other words more compellingly described China’s food problem than the “land of famine.” Many foreign observers long identified famine and malnutrition as the most remarkable characteristic of China and attributed them to China’s lack of scientific mind. It was widely lamented that scientific famine prevention was hindered by the incompetence of the Chinese state, because

it could not provide complete and accurate data on food production and consumption nationwide. Until Zhang's work was published, a survey made by a foreign philanthropic organization, the China International Famine Relief Commission, was regarded as the most reliable work about China's food problem.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Zhang's research was also viewed by the Chinese elite as a step toward redrawing the stereotypical images of China cast by Western observers.

Food scarcity was nothing new to the local populace in Guangdong, however. Nor was it an urgent problem. The imported rice from foreign countries, rather, was a key component of the local rice supply that was taken for granted. Three decades before Zhang's study, the last Guangzhou prefect of the Qing dynasty, Gong Xinzhan, had noted: "Guangdong has extensive land and various products, so we can call Guangdong a wealthy area. However, in recent years it has become too populous; the production of this area cannot meet the food requirement. [Getting] the required rice relies exclusively upon imports from other provinces and overseas (*wai sheng wai yang*)."<sup>4</sup>

As Prefect Gong noted, food shortages were especially prevalent in the Guangzhou prefecture, which consisted of Canton (Guangzhou) and the surrounding districts of the Pearl River Delta. Providing adequate rice supplies for the local population meant relying largely on the importation of rice from Southeast Asia via Hong Kong and external provinces, as rice production in the districts was never sufficient to meet local demand. Nonetheless, Canton had met with no disastrous famines in the turbulent decades of the late Qing and early Republican transitions. On the contrary, observers were struck by its ability to manage external rice supplies, as well as the rice that fed not only Canton's urban population but also the people of the surrounding rural districts in the Pearl River Delta.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to conventional wisdom, the city of Canton was indispensable in provisioning the rural population, with Canton the gateway for the largest amount of China's foreign-rice imports to be shipped in and redistributed to the rural rice markets in the delta. As a matter of fact, the city of Canton was far from being in a famine-ridden situation. Rather, it never failed to uphold its reputation as China's most flourishing commercial city (*shang cheng*)—a city that linked commodity circulation among the major entrepôts not only to Chinese coastal port cities but also to cities around the world. Along with its flourishing maritime trade, Canton embodied entrepreneurialism and cosmopolitanism; the local mercantile leaders accumulated wealth and developed depth and richness in their own urban culture. In particular, Canton had an outstanding food culture, which was widely touted as the most sophisticated local cuisine in China.

What brought food scarcity and commercial prosperity together in

Canton? How could the province's rice scarcity coexist with the Canton's affluent food culture and commercial prosperity? And how did such a seemingly insignificant local particularity happen to turn into the nucleus of China's social problems in the late 1920s and early 1930s? In what ways did the Guomindang members who controlled China perceive this as the most serious problem facing China, and how did they deal with it? By taking a close look at food supply and consumption in early-twentieth century Canton, this book aims to not only shed a new light on the history of China's southernmost metropolis but also illuminate how China's food problem as a whole unfolded, how it was understood, and how it was treated in the early twentieth century with the rise of nationalism and fluctuations in global commerce.

### *Rice and the City*

Cities, whether Chinese or Western, have an inevitable vulnerability. Maintaining adequate amounts of foodstuffs for a city's population is the most critical question, simply because food is not an urban product. Like any other city, Canton had to depend upon the flow of commodities to obtain what the city itself could not produce. The city's population—both the haves and the have-nots—had to rely on grain imports from outside of the city for everyday food consumption. When the grain influx broke down, the urban population's lifeline was threatened and the stability of the social order became imperiled.<sup>6</sup> Canton was geographically isolated from the rest of China. Whereas ground transportation to northern China was severely restricted due to geographical conditions, Canton was only open to the South China Sea. Moreover, the city's own hinterlands—the Pearl River Delta—were not able to produce sufficient amounts of grain. Consequently, the city's major economies and industries were based on maritime trade, and substantial quantities of needed foodstuffs were shipped in from overseas rather than from the northern hinterlands. It is not surprising that Canton's commercial prosperity and the vulnerability of its food security, which commonly took root in the flow of commodities and overseas trade, coexisted like two different sides of one coin.

For that very reason, provisioning the city meant more than just administrative work to the Cantonese. It was rather a complicated political issue in which the different interests of people from all walks of life ceaselessly crisscrossed. Maintaining the flow of foodstuffs without rupture was the primary task for both municipal authorities and the city's societal leaders, who assumed a twofold responsibility—promoting the flow of commodities and thereby improving the city's commercial prosperity, on the one hand, and minimizing unpredictable food shortages and thereby

maintaining social order, on the other hand. Given the political landscape of twentieth-century Canton, however, the relationship between government authorities and the societal elite was not without tension, instead becoming more and more intricate. From the last decade of the Qing dynasty's imperial rule to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the residents of Canton experienced remarkable changes in every aspect of their daily lives. They witnessed unprecedented political upheavals, social transformations, and economic fluctuations. Imperial rule was violently overthrown in 1911. There then emerged new regimes, each one claiming to be the sole legitimate republican government, and new municipal authorities proposing a series of modernist projects. Newcomers of both Chinese and foreign origin poured into the city, escalating the stratification of urban society. The speedy circulation of currencies and commodities brought about economic fluctuations: economic ascents and booms, downturns and recessions, crises and panics.<sup>7</sup> Managing the food supply, though often concealed by explicit political and social events that past scholarship has much explored, lay at the center of politics, since food security was the most sensitive barometer for maintaining social order in the city.

This book studies the interplay between those who managed the city's provisioning system and those who attempted to transform it through their own logic of modernity in the time between 1900 and 1937.<sup>8</sup> What made the provisioning of Canton so extremely complicated was the fact that the city rested at the merger point of two historical processes: one global, the other internal to China. The time scope of this research coincides with the flourishing of world trade and the rise of nationalism in China. While the food supply for Canton relied on overseas trade crossing national boundaries, the city became the political power base for the Guomindang Nationalists, whose cardinal goal was to build a strong nation by fulfilling Sun Yat-sen's will at any cost. Yet the spatial scope of the party-state's endeavors drastically shifted in 1927. Before this time, the efforts to secure Canton's food supplies had never clashed with the party members' aspirations, namely nation-building, because Canton was the party's sole power base. After the launch of the Northern Expedition and the subsequent establishment of a new Nationalist government in Nanjing in 1927, however, Canton's local interests had to be subordinated to the national cause as defined by the Guomindang, since the party by then had come to rule the entire—albeit incomplete—national territory. In the eyes of the party leaders in Nanjing, increasingly larger foreign-rice imports to Canton at cheaper prices meant nothing but a trade deficit and the outflow of national wealth. Meanwhile, the domestic agricultural economy lost competitiveness with foreign grains, aggravating more and more inland provinces.

Canton's local food-supplying networks were far too intertwined with the circuitries of the rice trade, which cut across national borders. Therefore, the Nanjing authority argued that Canton and the delta had to be more tightly linked with the rest of the nation. However, the local residents in Canton had quite a different point of view. The local populace understood that the delta was part of a trade network that included Guangdong, Guangxi, Annam, and other parts of maritime Southeast Asia. Trading across the South China Sea was to them nothing more than an extension of local trade. What happened when these two different ways of looking at geography collided? This book begins by looking at local—yet globally interlinked—viewpoints from Canton.

### *Rice as a World Commodity*

To account for the political meaning of provisioning in Canton, this study seeks to explore a new dimension of rice consumption: the question of rice quality. The major staple food for the Cantonese was rice. A mid-1930s social survey indicated that almost every resident of Canton ate rice, whereas only a few ate other grains as everyday staple foods.<sup>9</sup> Many anthropologists have argued that rice is a unique staple food, distinguishable from other grains. Unlike such staple foods as wheat and corn that are first ground and then made into bread and tortillas, rice can be directly cooked and consumed without any processing. Thus, Canton's rice consumers—as did people in any rice-eating culture—insisted on rice quality: “a composite of appearance, fragrance, and most important, taste.”<sup>10</sup> According to one contemporary observation of the world rice trade in the 1930s, market values of rice varieties were determined largely by their qualities.<sup>11</sup> Canton was by no means isolated from that world trade, and market values of rice varieties traded in the Canton rice market were no different from those in the rest of the world. Insofar as rice was traded as a commodity, any variety of rice possessed characteristics that were ambiguous, subjective, and even arbitrary. Consumers asserted their own preferences for food grains with the appropriate qualities. As Steven Kaplan points out, even ordinary Parisians in the last days of the ancien régime demanded that food be of good quality and sufficient quantity, as they had to depend on it for their everyday subsistence.<sup>12</sup> Why would the Cantonese in the twentieth century not make similar demands?

By the turn of the twentieth century, rice was not simply a local product, but had become one of the most profitable commodities of world trade. As Peter Codanis contends, the integration of the world rice market affected every inhabited continent on the globe.<sup>13</sup> Canton was just one of the countless nodes in the spider-web of the world's rice trade networks, and

thus fully exposed the Cantonese urban public to the worldwide culture of rice consumption. As a gateway for the huge demands of the Pearl River Delta, Canton represented a lucrative market for the world rice trade. The transnational rice business contributed to the city's commercial prosperity and provided a foundation for the Cantonese food culture, in which there was a wide range of rice varieties consumed: from the coarsest quality to the highest quality; from the cheapest to the most expensive; from native rice to foreign rice. Canton's residents could in turn choose the best option depending upon their appetite, dietary preference, and income level. With the transnational rice trade, the Cantonese developed dietary preferences and sophisticated their local food culture in the urban milieu of the early twentieth century.

This is not to say, however, that the Cantonese food culture took shape only after the Cantonese made contact with the modern and commercialized world. The question of food quality is part of a long tradition in Chinese culinary history. Concerns for rice quality stood out in particular. Chinese rice merchants and consumers carefully developed a differential grading system for rice quality for wholesale and retail transactions. As far back as the early eighteenth century, when China experienced the commoditization of rice and integration of grain markets throughout the empire, consumer preferences became more and more important. Rice had been classified into three different grades according to the quality of the rice variety: upper-grade rice (*shangmi*), medium grade rice (*zhongmi*), and lower-grade rice (*xiami*). There was also another type of a tripartite classification: white rice (*baimi*), second-grade rice (*cumi*), and coarse rice (*caomi*). In addition to such systems of categorization, Han-sheng Chuan and Richard Kraus cite another popular system: upper-grade rice (*shangmi*), second yet fine rice (*ximi*), and coarse rice (*cumi*).<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, rice quality and consumer preferences varied from locality to locality. Any given local dietary preference took shape in a local context. By the turn of the twentieth century, Canton's residents had certainly elaborated their consumer preferences for rice quality. The more Canton needed external rice supplies to supplement insufficient local supply, the more the Cantonese rice-consuming public accustomed itself to the quality of different rice varieties and became able to select their favorites. Under such circumstances, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, foreign rice that was mainly shipped from Southeast Asia via Hong Kong not only provided a reliable quantity of supplies but was also attuned to Cantonese taste. In a number of surveys in the 1930s, Cantonese residents in the city generally stated that foreign rice (*yangmi*) tasted better than what was called national rice (*guomi*): Chinese rice varieties shipped from such northern ports as Wuhu, Zhenjiang, and Shanghai and from Hunan province. Moreover, the retail prices of most

foreign-rice varieties, despite seasonal fluctuations, were generally lower than their domestic counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

However, local dietary preferences did not occur overnight by any means. To quote a famous phrase, the Cantonese made their own history of food culture, but they “did not make it as they pleased; they did not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>16</sup> The Cantonese were lured into consumption of foreign-rice in part by the thriving maritime trade that coincided with the commercialization of agriculture in the Pearl River Delta. From the early nineteenth century onward, a burgeoning maritime trade in southern China that centered on Canton accelerated the urbanization of the delta; both the rural population and the grains they produced decreased remarkably, while sericulture and the silk industry came to dominate the local economy. The required rice was instead provided by the Southeast Asian rice trade coming through the port of Canton, which was facilitated by steamship cargo services linking Canton, via Hong Kong, to Southeast Asian entrepôts.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the prosperous maritime trade had been in part spurred by a decline in the domestic social order of southern China around the middle of the nineteenth century. Countless rebellions, from the Taiping rebels to the Heaven and Earth Societies, to a number of small-scale local feuds, had devastated arable land throughout southern China, particularly the hinterlands of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces—the major rice suppliers for the Cantonese population at the time. To supplement the insufficient local rice supplies, Canton became China’s leading entrepôt for foreign-rice imports. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Canton’s residents were the largest group of foreign-rice consumers in China.<sup>18</sup> In short, Cantonese food culture and the popularity of foreign-rice consumption thrived as an unintended consequence of the provincial rice insufficiency vis-à-vis a thriving world rice trade.

To grasp such a dynamic transformation of the Cantonese food supply networks and the subsequent development of their food culture, and at the same time, to delve deeply into the political complexity of rice consumption in the city of Canton, this book does not limit the scope of study to the boundaries of the city, nor to the province of Guangdong, nor to the nation. Rather, this book traces the trajectories of all those who cut across any type of conventional boundaries. In his study of Chinese migrant networks, Adam McKeown asserts a “global perspective,” because a territorially embedded perspective (such as national histories) is not suitable to the better understanding of the global circulation of people and commodity.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this book’s spatial scope can be overlapped with what Marie-Claire Bergère calls “coastal civilization,” in which the Cantonese played a significant role with remarkable vigor from the mid-nineteenth

century onward.<sup>20</sup> To the Cantonese, to be sure, the coastal civilization was much closer than the northern interior in their everyday lives. Around the South China Sea, Cantonese émigrés dominated the rice business in major entrepôts such as Saigon, Bangkok, and Rangoon, where many of them operated rice milling companies. The rice trade routes from there to Hong Kong and Canton were also largely dominated by the Cantonese merchants and traders. Perhaps the perimeter of this commercial network was too resilient to be measured. Sometimes it interlinked the quays of Bangkok, where the world's largest rice milling companies gathered, to the wharves of Rice Street (or *mibu dajie*) on the northern bank of the Pearl River in Canton. At other times it stretched from the smuggling spots somewhere in the middle of the Pearl River near the border between present-day Shenzhen and Hong Kong to Dupont Street in San Francisco, home of the largest overseas Cantonese community in North America. The entire urban population of the city of Canton was not a border crosser by any means. Yet the residents of Canton could hardly maintain their daily rice consumption unless it was supplied by the transnational trade.

#### THINGS COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE

Employing the viewpoints of the Cantonese public, this study seeks to eschew the myopic essentialism that tends to place more emphasis on the former rather than the latter in the dichotomy between center and locale and between state and society. Little attention has been paid to the Cantonese urban dwellers—the anonymous rice-consuming public who lived underneath the conspicuous political celebrities and renowned entrepreneurs of the day. The Cantonese urban population lived their daily lives as rice consumers while depending entirely upon the influx of rice from outside the city. However, they were by no means faceless, passive beings; rather, each was an individual, passing through daily life with independent reasoning and making a food choice with a dietary preference. The city's reliance upon external rice supplies did not necessarily mean that the urban population gave up their food choice. Rather, at each income level, they wanted a certain quality of rice to satisfy their appetite as much as they needed minimal quantities of rice for subsistence.

#### BEYOND COLLECTIVE ACTIONS

Past scholarship has much explored the history of food and has indeed paid much attention to food consumers. Yet food consumers have been unwittingly described as collective beings, mostly either as famine victims or as crowds who took part in a riot. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, famine-ridden refugees have eloquently represented an image of the miser-



able Chinese, who should be compassionately salvaged by external help.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, they were represented as simple participants in various types of collective action, such as hunger-driven crowds and food rioters. Unless the individual food consumers shaped “crowds” and evoked “disturbances”—such as grain seizures, rallies, or riots—they were not fully represented.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps few can rival the field of Chinese history in such a strong tendency to insist on the famine-driven “crowds” and their meaningful collective actions. Given the mainstream narrative of modern Chinese history in the People’s Republic of China, it is not surprising that the history of food riots has overwhelmed the history of Chinese food consumption. Many historians have dealt with food riots as a sort of potential popular movement that gradually developed and ultimately contributed to the legitimacy of the revolutionary movements led by the Chinese Communist Party, not to mention official narrative lines—the linear history of popular uprisings that eventually reach the final victory of the party in 1949.<sup>23</sup>

Outside China, where scholars were able to keep distance from such political and ideological biases, “collective actions” of food rioters attracted many students of Chinese history.<sup>24</sup> Strongly inspired by the “perspective from below,” many scholars enriched the field and explored a number of behavioral patterns of food rioters. First, food riots were “defensive.” Despite their seemingly violent aspect, the ultimate aim of food rioters did not go beyond reasserting previously established grain prices. Second, any given food riot was therefore a “spontaneous” and “impetuous” action that spearheaded violent protest only against a sudden break in the orderly delivery of grain. Last but not least, food riots were locally isolated and hardly developed into nationwide or empire-wide mass movements or political resistance. No matter how violent they may have been, food rioters neither shared a political consciousness nor displayed cohesive solidarity. The discovery of the “limitedness” of food rioters was not restricted to the field of Chinese history. Regardless of the geographical subdivision, such characteristics were widely witnessed in the study of food riots.<sup>25</sup> In hindsight, the revisionists criticize that the social history of food riots has tended to overly romanticize the crowd as a collective entity, while ignoring—intentionally or unintentionally—their individual voices as food consumers. In short, such a perspective, despite its tangible achievements and contributions, cannot fully explore the significance of the consumer dimension in the history of food.

#### TASTE IN NUMBERS

A no less significant tendency that past scholarship has—albeit unintentionally—left to the field in the history of food is quantification. In

spite of strong willingness to revive the subaltern voice, the aforementioned perspectives have tended to count the frequency of famines and food riots, the numbers of participating crowds and the localities, or the numbers of days or months of the collective events.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, statistical analysis has been the prerequisite for such economic approaches. As a matter of fact, grain trade has been one of the most popular topics for economic approaches, and quantification has been the most favored methodology; from secular trends in market price fluctuations to changes in grain productivity; from land and population ratio to an analysis of labor inputs and grain outputs; from average income to amount of rice consumption per capita in any given society. In short, economic calculus and statistical representation have long overwhelmed the study of the food history, and the cultural dimension of food consumption has been treated as an insignificant—if not ignorable—realm that scientific methodologies have no need for. In stark contrast to the attempts to revive subaltern aspects, only numbers are represented in the history of food, while the faces and voices of the food consumers have been marginalized.<sup>27</sup> To cite Nick Cullather's words, food lost its cultural and qualitative dimensions. Instead, it became simply objectified as a "material instrument of statecraft."<sup>28</sup>

In order to provide an alternative, some scholars have recently begun to shed new light on food consumption, including the question of food quality and consumers' individual food choices. However, this book tries to eschew another scholarly tendency found in this new scholarship, specifically the assumption of evolutionary process in food consumption patterns—namely, the historical transition from an age of "scarcity" to an age of "affluence."<sup>29</sup> For example, French historian Eugen Weber once noted, "[passing] from hunger to subsistence and from subsistence to a degree of sufficiency is to make the transition from the ancient to the modern world."<sup>30</sup> What is the yardstick dividing the age of affluence from that of scarcity? Insofar as modern China is concerned, which historical moment could be the point when the fear of food scarcity completely—or at least significantly—disappeared? When could the Chinese be said to embrace the time of plenty? Could it be the year 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party triumphantly declared the liberation of all Chinese people from imperialist suppression? Or could it be 1978, when the party officially proclaimed the beginning of the policy of Reform and Openness under Deng Xiaoping's leadership? Or has the age of modern affluence not come to China yet? Few claim that food provisioning is no longer a political matter. Even today, the first decade of the twenty-first century having just passed, global political tensions revolving around food consumption have not ended. Rather, food has become a new focal point of politics, not only for

its quantity, but also for its quality. Moreover, it is not simply the problem of a nation, but also the problem of the world.<sup>31</sup>

This book argues that Canton's thriving food culture was created only through the dual experience of both scarcity and abundance of food. The rice insufficiency in the province gave rise to unique features of the Cantonese food culture such as a diversity of foodstuffs, a wide range of rice varieties, and an abundance of culinary experiments. As an attempt to revisit the evolutionary presumption of human food consumption, this book contends that food affluence paradoxically coexisted with food scarcity, in spite of conceptual incompatibility. There is no doubt that there was a group of urban poor who stood on the brink of starvation in Canton while Cantonese food culture was gaining a worldwide reputation in the early decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, there were countless urbanites, within a wide income range, that were as concerned with getting certain minimal qualities of rice to please their palates as they were with getting certain quantities for daily consumption. Needless to say, wealthy Cantonese businessmen and high-ranking Guomindang officials lived quite differently from the starving urban poor. Yet none could live outside the need for daily rice consumption. Both groups were equally rice consumers.

It is not easy to obtain primary documents that tell the stories of rice consumers' daily lives. Yet archives and local libraries allow historians to trace the stories of local rice merchants who, next to the consumer public, judged and anticipated the particular consumer demands in the Canton rice market. Some of these rice merchants, although they have not drawn much scholarly attention, were well known within the Chinese mercantile community not only in Canton but also overseas. They developed the "on-site" expertise with which they thoroughly grasped market conditions and particular consumer expectations. Few could understand Cantonese culinary preferences for rice varieties better than these rice merchants. Decade after decade, perhaps generation after generation, they had acquired nuts-and-bolts knowledge about the marketability of rice varieties whose value was largely determined by their qualities. Careful consideration of consumer demands in return became the cornerstone for their business success. Nonetheless, any story of business success in the local documents could not have been told without a consideration of local rice consumers. As I will discuss in detail in the pages ahead, seeking better-quality rice was not simply for pleasure, nor was luxury for the wealth. Lower-income consumers were as concerned about rice quality as the upper class, largely because rice of poor quality could not provide them with a sufficient feeling of satisfaction. To be sure, the statistical data that the modern state compiled could hardly convey the feeling of fullness after a meal. Yet the Cantonese rice merchants painstakingly cared about quality, because their

business success was largely hinged on it. This book explores regions that the impulse to quantify cannot reach.

### *Rice and Nationalism*

The preoccupation with quantification was not merely a typical academic tendency, but rather a centerpiece of modern statecraft. Numerical precision was a prerequisite for the success of modern statecraft because the state required detailed social information for the territorial entity that it ruled, such as an exact number for the population, accurate data about arable land, and a correct amount for food supplies. Yet this sort of information had to be simplified and standardized for easier understanding, thereby enabling government bureaucrats to plan and pursue a series of social policies. In terms of simplification and ease, nothing better provided clear information than quantification. In particular, precise quantification was the *sine qua non* for the success of the food supply, largely because a failure to provide correct information about provisioning could result in a collapse of the social order.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, the government's concern for food supply was not necessarily a matter of the modern state. Perhaps it was a universal phenomenon. Efforts at quantification of foodstuffs have been commonly practiced in any given society in human history, whether it was the traditional Chinese empire, the early modern European kingdoms, or the steppe empire ruled by the Khan.

Why did quantification matter for food supply in modern China? What was completely new and "modern" was, as James C. Scott insists, the "magnitude" of the aspiration that the modern state had for the "wholesale transformation of society."<sup>33</sup> Such strong eagerness for the innovation of modern statecraft and vision for the building of a better society stemmed from the European Enlightenment, whose key ideas provided an unprecedented conviction in reason and science as well as progress. In the formation of modern Europe, quantification as a method of scientific understanding for a society became indispensable to political endeavors for a better society. Quantification provided scientific validation for new policies that the modern state devised, and the political authorities in turn justified the objectivity of the scientific truth. To be sure, the betterment of the food supply, at least preventing the worst kinds of famine, had to start with statistical research, by means of which the state could obtain precise understanding of the provisioning. Few deny the contributions that modern measurements have made to the remarkable decrease of famine. Nonetheless, quantification itself did not lead to a grasp of all aspects of food supply and consumption, nor did it guarantee the creation of a perfect food policy. Rather, the production of new knowledge in numerical form tended

to block a comprehensive understanding of a society, while the statistical representation of social phenomenon came to be called science.<sup>34</sup>

Such a reciprocal relationship between science and power, despite the intellectual origins of the European Enlightenment, left a unique imprint in the non-Western world, from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The indigenous elite perceived the lack of science or the lack of an accomplished scientific corps as an indication of the inferiority of the indigenous society.<sup>35</sup> In the early twentieth century, reform-minded Chinese elite and radical revolutionaries alike asserted that China's independent territorial sovereignty would be a stepping stone toward building a new China as a wealthy and powerful nation. Many republican revolutionaries devoted themselves to rectifying the problem of diplomatic inequality and economic unfairness that China was facing within the modern capitalist world order. They firmly believed that regaining territorial integrity and commanding an autonomous economy were the cardinal goals in their efforts to build a modern Chinese nation. This concern became the ideological backbone for the Guomindang Nationalists, who claimed themselves the sole legitimate bearers of such a revolutionary cause. The food problem was urgent for many Guomindang members, who believed that it threatened the economic integrity of the Chinese nation. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, increasing foreign-rice imports devalued and aggravated domestic agriculture, while expenditures for the purchase of foreign rice became the primary cause of China's trade deficit.<sup>36</sup> The results of statistical surveys widely practiced at the time unequivocally indicated that the Cantonese consumed more than half of China's net import of foreign rice.<sup>37</sup> To make matters worse, there were indications in the statistical data that inland provinces produced an excess of rice, yet they could not find proper markets to sell it. With cheaper prices and better quality, foreign rice dominated many urban rice markets in the coastal treaty ports, not just in Canton. Even competitive domestic rice varieties could not reach the urban rice markets, due to lack of transportation infrastructure. Meanwhile, the Chinese rural sectors collapsed. After the effects of the Great Depression hit China, the "dumping" (*qingxiao*) of foreign grain into Chinese markets was widely believed to be a main cause of the worsening of Chinese domestic agriculture. To the Guomindang leaders, therefore, the food problem was the centerpiece of what Ruth Rogaski terms "dual victimization." China, long victimized by untamable natural hindrances, was victimized once again by Western imperialism.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the tougher the adversaries were, the stronger was the revolutionary resolve. To Guomindang technocrats, both in Nanjing and in Canton, devising and pursuing scientific solutions to the food problem was a great step toward progress that they could and should make. Scientific

resolution of the Chinese food problem would be the very first step to repudiate the backwardness of the past, during which traditional China had long been harassed by natural disasters. It would also be a cornerstone for China's leap forward to a new era of scientific mastery, which would enable China to compete with technologically advanced Western countries. At the very least, it would be a chance to showcase the new regime's capacity for the scientific management of the nation. Under such circumstances, new scientific knowledge and technical expertise as the fundamental solutions to the food problem were enthusiastically introduced from abroad and promptly put into practice. With strong confidence in scientific knowledge, the Guomindang policymakers implemented a series of food control policies, from the imposition of a foreign-rice tax (*yangmi shui*) as a protective tariff, to the sale of Hunan rice in Canton via the Canton-Hankow Railway (*Yue Han tielu*), to an all-out promotion program for the consumption of national rice. Moreover, their strong conviction about scientific knowledge drove the Guomindang technocrats to envision a recasting of people's mindsets and behaviors, from revolutionizing peasants' planting methods in the countryside, to regulating merchants' manipulation of food prices, to moving the eating habits of the urban rice consumers in a more healthy and scientific direction. In effect, the Guomindang assumed the leading role of agent, or at least facilitator, of transplanting the modernity that would create a wholesale transformation of Chinese society, while eliminating the elements of backwardness stemming from the Chinese past. Perhaps the Russian Bolsheviks provide a plausible comparison, in that they fiercely struggled with the Russian backwardness, while eagerly pursuing a number of experimental social engineering programs to build a rational social order, with a fervent conviction in reason, science, and progress.<sup>39</sup>

This book therefore approaches the ways in which the Nationalists dealt with the food problem, with an emphasis on their enthrallment with Western science and technology. I place special emphasis on the Nationalists' forward-looking stance, rather than on the governmental incompetence that past scholarship has long maintained. The Nationalists in Nanjing, to use Lloyd Eastman's words, never lost sight of their self-ordained task of restoring "political unity, economic plenty, and national pride and security to the Chinese people."<sup>40</sup> However, for that very reason, their understanding of science and technology could hardly escape from a technocratic and instrumentalist view of modernity. Insofar as statistical reckoning and deductive quantification would provide accurate information, they had no reason to consider local particularities. In the scientifically proven food control program that the Republic's best scientists and engineers drafted, they had no need to take into account the Cantonese food culture, which

had developed from a long-standing provincial rice insufficiency. The question of rice quality was in their eyes not a matter of science. Rather, it was a matter of Cantonese proclivities. Meanwhile, the statistical fact that the Cantonese were the largest consumers of foreign rice in China overlapped with the stereotypical image of the Cantonese culture in general: the Cantonese were the most lavish consumer group because they were fond of extravagant yet unproductive lifestyles. Along with the popular consumption of foreign rice, their food culture was flamboyant and wasteful, while the rest of China suffered from a food problem. To equate the Cantonese culture with such luxurious aspects of lifestyle was hardly possible. However, “extravagance” was the most important element in the social imaginary of the Cantonese culture in modern China as a cultural construct, regardless of the Cantonese people’s actual life.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps because of this stereotype (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 5), the local Cantonese party members were more ardent than those in Nanjing in their efforts to reorganize fundamentally the structure of rice supply and consumption in Canton. Consequently, all aspects of Cantonese food culture had to be guided and reformed anew under the direction of the party, which genuinely believed in the validity of science and technology. Did all of the Guomindang’s scientific endeavors succeed in Canton? How did the Cantonese society respond to these attempts? The following chapters will discuss the dynamics of the interactions, clashes, and negotiations between the local Cantonese society and the modern Chinese state.

### *Chapter Overview*

The book has two parts. Part One, consisting of chapters 1 to 4, is made up of interwoven local stories of the Cantonese rice-consuming public and merchants, the people who helped form the local food culture. Part Two, consisting of chapters 5 to 9, is the story of the Guomindang’s efforts to promote the consumption of “national rice” in Canton during the Nanjing Decade (1927–37).

Chapter 1 provides an analysis of the social and economic conditions of Canton and the Pearl River Delta, giving attention to the area’s geographic conditions. Both the province’s rice insufficiency and the city’s commercial prosperity occurred because of the inhabitants’ efforts to adjust their lives to the ecological system of the region. Chapter 2 traces the formation in Cantonese food culture and the emergence of preferences for certain varieties of rice, mainly Southeast Asian varieties. This development occurred not only in the city of Canton but also in Cantonese communities abroad. Interestingly, the name of the place a variety of rice was imported from

was used like a brand name on the Canton market, since each variety bore a different quality and had a different market value.

In Chapter 3, I look at two cases of rice relief work (in 1907 and in 1919) conducted by the Cantonese mercantile elite, with strong cooperation from their Hong Kong counterparts. I argue that, counter to standard opinion, consumer concern for rice quality never weakened, even in a time of food scarcity, because people believed that satisfying their hunger was better guaranteed by eating rice of better quality. For that very reason, the Cantonese rice merchants carefully developed their skills at distinguishing between higher-quality rice and the poorer, coarser varieties. In short, the professionalization and specialization of the rice business assured the success of famine relief. Having experienced a relief campaign in turn provided the rice merchants with an opportunity to expand their business and to better understand consumer demands in Canton.

Chapter 4 traces food supply and consumption during the Nationalist Revolution (1923–27), when Guomintang revolutionaries seized municipal authorities under the banner of a United Front with the Chinese Communist Party. I suggest that food policy in this period was a mixture of rhetorical nationalism and practical adaptations to local particularities. In order to secure sufficient food supplies to meet their revolutionary goals in the city, the Nationalist authorities had little choice but to enhance the transnational aspect of the Cantonese rice trade. To the revolutionaries, Hong Kong was the epitome of British imperial aggression against China. At the same time, however, the commercial network between Canton and Hong Kong was the only one that could supply substantial amounts of rice to revolutionary Canton.

Part Two of the book explores how the Nationalists, after becoming the sole legitimate authority of China in Nanjing, dealt with the transnational rice trade and consumption in Canton under the complex international context of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Chapter 5 traces the Guomintang's blind trust in Western science and technology and how these interests led to the technocratic and instrumental misunderstanding of the nature of rice supply and consumption. Guomintang officials regarded statistically represented information and quantified forms of knowledge as the only reliable data on which they could base a series of innovative food control programs. They firmly believed that the Chinese food problem could not be solved without the reduction of the popular consumption of foreign rice in Canton. Despite factional tension with Nanjing-based party members, local Cantonese Guomintang members who seized both municipal and provincial authority equally understood the urgency of establishing scientifically proven food regulation programs. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the political wrangling between Nanjing and Canton caused by the imposition



of the Foreign-Rice Tax as a protective tariff, as well as the social repercussions of the tax scheme. Taxation, more than anything else, brought about fierce protests from the Cantonese rice merchants. Although the authorities soon suppressed the tax protests, these events marked the beginning of the move to exclude the practical expertise that local rice merchants had cultivated in their business from the state-led program for the promotion of national rice. I argue that the coercive means that the state used to suppress the concerns of Cantonese rice merchants were not the only reason for this exclusion. The growing National Goods Movement and increased public concern over the agrarian depression outweighed the concerns of the local Cantonese rice merchants. However, the expulsion of the merchants, and their local knowledge, from the new food control program were signs of a growing disregard for consumer demands in the government's food program planning, which turned out to be a critical mistake.

Chapters 8 and 9 illustrate how the completion of the Canton-Hankow Railway, Republican China's most ambitious engineering project, preoccupied the Nationalists, who saw it as the solution to the Chinese food problem. Indeed, the Canton-Hankow Railway project drew worldwide attention. For the first time, the line crossed the barrier of the Nanling Mountains to link Hunan, a province known for producing excesses of rice, with Guangdong, a province highly commercialized but in need of external rice supplies. The Nationalists believed the first task of this line was to replace foreign rice with Hunan rice in Canton; doing so was seen as alleviating the nation's food problem, which was perceived as a menace to China's progress. Guomindang members, who proclaimed themselves responsible solely for China's modern reconstruction, considered the construction of the line a manifold triumph. First, it demonstrated China's mastery of technology and competence in scientific state management. Second, it embodied China's technological triumph over natural obstacles. However, this attitude of scientific triumphalism blinded the technocratic elite and prevented them from paying attention to local particularities, worsening further their misconception of the issue of rice quality. Chapter 9 traces the overall consequences of the government's National Rice Promotion program. Unfortunately, despite their scientific validity, a series of scientific blueprints could not resolve the food problem, since the Guomindang's technocratic elite, intentionally or unintentionally, had neglected to consider the qualitative dimension of rice.