

Legal and Illegal Eating: Restaurants in 1940s Japan

Katarzyna J. Cwiertka

Department of Japanese Studies,
Leiden University, the Netherlands

Friday, April 24, 2009

From 17:00-

Room 301, 3F, Building number 10

By the 1930s dining out became part of a daily routine for most urbanites in Japan. Cafeterias at railway terminals offered commuters quick and convenient dining facilities, while an array of street stalls continued to cater to less affluent customers. Traditional restaurants, as well as modern cafés, lunchrooms, and dining halls of the department stores functioned as recreational spaces that celebrated a notion of leisure built around consumption.

Although successively affected by wartime food shortages, the restaurant business kept on functioning, gradually adjusting to changing conditions. However, when ingredients became increasingly difficult to acquire except at the black market where they were sold at higher prices, entering the undercover world of illegal dining seemed for many restaurateurs the only option for survival. Food shortage and hunger features prominently in the public memory of 1940s Japan, with dining out practically wiped out of the picture. A closer examination reveals, however, that the reality was far more complex. Along with meal-ticket restaurants, rice-gruel cafeterias and black market stalls, officers clubs (after 1945 replaced by US military mess-halls), and a variety of underground dining facilities continued to cater to their consumers. This paper explores the dining scene of 1940s Japan, identifying continuities and differences before and after 1945.

Katarzyna J. Cwiertka is Lecturer in Material Culture at the Department of Japanese Studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands. Her research to date has utilized food as a window into the modern history of Japan and Korea. Cwiertka is the author of *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (Reaktion Books 2006) and co-editor of *Asian Food: The Global and the Local* (University of Hawaii Press 2002). She is currently completing a monograph on Japanese colonialism in Korea, also using food as the research focus.

