

# Acculturation and Rediscovery in Japanese Food Culture

Fumi Michihata

Foodbiz-net.com, Representative

Chieko Nakabasami

Toyo University, Japan

**Abstract** Since the Meiji era (from 1868), in Japan, the excess acculturation towards foreign cultures cannot be stopped. Japan is a surprising food acculturation country. Recently Japan recorded the worst self-sufficiency rate, and the diet has been placing disproportionate weight on meat. Japanese people see its diet as unhealthy and try to find a way to coexist for both their traditional food culture and international one. In Italy, many families still keep eating together at home, but in Japan, families are often eating out. Now Japanese people should rediscover the value of homemade dishes.

**Keywords** Acculturation. Food culture. Japan. Japanese diet. Post-pandemic.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. Acculturation in the Japanese Food Culture. – 2 Accelerating Acculturation in the Japanese Daily Diet. – 3 Womens' Cooking Throughout the Post-World War II Rapid Economic Growth, and the Heisei and Reiwa Periods. – 4 Value Change and the Reconsideration of Family and Region. – 5 Supply Chain and Food Sustainability. – 6 *Chisan Chishō* 地産地消 (Locally Produced and Locally Consumed), an Attempt in Kyoto. – 7 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction. Acculturation in the Japanese Food Culture

Japan is surrounded by sea, and two-thirds of the archipelago is covered with mountain forests. Thanks to such geographical advantages, there are rich sea products, salt, and soft water to produce a variety of food cultures. Rice is a Japanese staple and along with water, salt, and unique condiments such as *sake*, *soya sauce*, *miso*, and *mirin*, Japan has been creating its own food culture.

With the advent of Buddhism in the mid-seventh century, eating of meat was inhibited until approximately 150 years ago. Although a few types of meat - such as birds and rabbits in rural areas - were allowed, meat was never seen openly on the table. Sometimes, in the name of taking medicine, it was said that noble families ate meat.

“Petal of peony” and “maple leaf” are colloquialisms for boar meat and deer meat, respectively, which have been used until now. In neighbouring China and Korea meat in the diet was not as strictly prohibited as in Japan. Another factor that brought us uniqueness was ‘self-isolation’, from the Edo era Japan had been closed off from the world for over 200 years. Since the mid-seventeenth century no war occurred; popular culture flourished; and traditional arts, such as *Ukiyo-e*, *Jōruri*, and *Kabuki* were developed. In reference to food culture, bachelor *samurai* had to move to Edo on their duty, they were going out to eat *sushi* and *tempura*. Dining-out culture was born in the Edo era.

In the Edo era, Japan shut out foreign people, products, and information to develop its own culture; meanwhile, Japanese people began craving what happened overseas. After 250 years the Edo era ended and the Meiji era commenced in 1868. In the Meiji era, various economic policies were initiated. With the purpose of joining the Western international community, many westerners were hired to help make public policy decisions. Western culture was appreciated in popular culture; for example, westernised architecture was built, short hairstyles and western-style food were recommended. At the same time, the indigenous culture and religion of local communities were negated, and even the policy of abolishing Buddhism, was introduced.

These drastic bipolar cultural policies necessarily influenced contemporary Japanese culture and lifestyles. On the food cultural side, *sukiyaki*, beef braised and seasoned with soy sauce and sugar became very popular in urban societies, and Japanised Western recipes such as fried pork cutlets, curry and rice, and red *bean bread with sweet red bean paste* were invented. Among them, *curry and rice* was first introduced as a military training diet for increasing body strength, and then it spread to the public. Curry and rice is now one of the most popular recipes eaten on average once each week by the Japanese. From an aspect of nutrition, the Western diet was able to supplement the oil and fat content in the Japanese diet.

## 2 Accelerating Acculturation in the Japanese Daily Diet

It seems that Japanese people are particularly good at accepting other cultures, especially in relation to food. Many diverse international cuisines are served in Japanese homes. They are localised along with Japanese taste and manners, and pasta can often be seen on tables because it is easy to cook. Chinese and Asian cuisines are also cooked in Japanese home kitchens, using diverse ingredients with different cooking utensils. However, now, the cooking process and kitchen space are becoming simpler and simpler, as mentioned below. According to the household survey annually carried by the statics department of national government, Japanese spend half of their food expenses on restaurants and ready meals, because people can choose from so many casual-price restaurants and groceries. In addition, they also purchase many kinds of ethnic dishes, besides Japanese traditional ones. Very few countries are seen to have more diverse international food than Japan, in spite of relatively few immigrants to Japan.

Most of all, Italian dishes are a particular favourite of the Japanese people. Pasta and salad is called *pasta lunch* in Japan, and is often eaten by women. Italian pasta is now becoming immensely popular as frozen food made by big food companies and is a best-selling ready meal at convenience stores (about 56,000 locations across Japan) because it can be purchased at a good price and is easy to cook in a microwave. Japan has many Italian restaurant chains. Saizeriya, the biggest Italian restaurant chain in Asia, has 1,000 stores in Japan and 500 in China, Singapore, and other Asian countries. The founder of Saizeriya expected Italian dishes to become more popular at the onset, and he succeeded by serving low-price pasta for 3 Euros. Saizeriya is such a successful restaurant chain that even some famous Italian chefs are visiting.

As another example, *rāmen* is now spreading worldwide. *Rāmen* was originally a side dish from China, and since then, the Japanese people have been fostering *rāmen* culture by making it in its own cultural manner. *Rāmen* has been said to be the most well-known Japanese dish eaten around the world. Lately, at home in Japan, people have fewer opportunities to eat purely traditional Japanese dishes (*wa-shoku*), and they are eating hybrid dishes instead. In 2013, UNESCO declared *wa-shoku* to be part of Japan's intangible cultural heritage. However, this is truly ironic, in the sense that *wa-shoku* is no longer representative of current Japanese dishes but is, in fact, cultural heritage.

### **3 Womens' Cooking Throughout the Post-World War II Rapid Economic Growth, and the Heisei and Reiwa Periods**

Acceptance of foreign cultures in Japanese food culture is deeply linked to the domestic economic situation. Rapid economic growth was achieved after World War II. That supported the spirit and fidelity of Japanese salaried men to the company just as in the feudal society of the Edo era. During that period, the typical Japanese family unit consisted of a husband who worked for a company outside home and a wife as housekeeper who supported him in his work to become a powerful driving force toward them achieving a satisfying life. Within that lifestyle, women as housewives played an important role in producing a vigorous work force by serving homemade dishes; they used to make a big effort to provide breakfast, lunch carried outside by family members, and dinner.

In the 1970s, American restaurant chain enterprises entered Japan. Japanese families could afford a car to drive and to enjoy leisure. In this period, dining-out culture was starting to flourish in Japan. This growth maintained its pace until the 1990s, and the market grew to over 250 billion dollars. From post-World War II until the 1990s, families consumed products together. Meanwhile, using the advantage of economic power, Japan started seeking inexpensive food ingredients from around the world, and at this time, the self-sufficiency rate became increasingly lower.

After the economic bubble burst in the 1990s, Japan was intermittently caught in an economic crisis, with even women and the elderly forced to work. The increase in the rate of women working made even minor double-income households the majority after 30 years of the Heisei era. Such social change diminished the energy of women at home for housekeeping (short time and simplicity were key words in this period). Shortening cooking time was prioritised. Frozen pasta and ready meals were developed based on the advance of women into society.

### **4 Value Change and the Reconsideration of Family and Region**

In the Heisei era, the Internet and smartphones changed social life, and individuality was increasingly respected. Interpersonal relations were shaped in a different manner, and the concepts of family and community were increasingly underestimated. At the same time, the number of single households was increasing, and the average number of family members was 2.5, while in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, it was less than 2. In such a situation, individuality was also sought in the food culture. Ready meals for one person were welcomed and sold

at convenience stores. Even when family members sat at the same table, each member could eat different dishes depending on their favourite. At home, each family member was busy with their respective matters, and it was becoming rare for entire families to eat together except over the weekend.

Besides the appeal of this fast and simple way of cooking, individual ready meals had grown up. People did not cook at home and were eating ready meals by carrying dishes home in plastic boxes. Such a style of eating has been popularised, producing a ten billion dollar market. Food suppliers also proposed seasonings and how to prepare the dishes in combination with fresh food such as cut vegetables, making it possible to cook at home with extreme energy savings. Now due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people are obliged to stay home, which increases the time shared with family members. A by-product of the pandemic is that people have been rethinking the appeal of homemade dishes. Family members eat the same dishes surrounding big pots and barbecues. People shop more at the supermarket, purchasing more fresh products than before the pandemic. To-go options are promoted more at restaurants and fast food outlets. These shops are using delivery services such as Uber Eats, and they prepare frozen foods and meal kits for easy delivery with the aim of recovering their diminishing sales. Food mobility is being promoted, and food culture is changing because of the pandemic.

## 5 Supply Chain and Food Sustainability

As for the supply chain, supermarkets as mainstream have been revalued, and direct-from-the-farm and D2C (direct-to-consumer) products will no longer be considered conventional. The young generation, called Millennials, can engage in these unconventional food streams to have an opportunity to recognise the origin of the food they eat and the lifestyle of local agricultural producers. Due to the pandemic, more than a few young people are rethinking their urban, too-packed lifestyles, and are seeking a more minimal life. Millennials, as well as Generation Z, face social issues such as environmental changes, economic divide, and discrimination, and they expect companies to adopt their same attitudes as well as their own consumption patterns and preferences. The Italian Slow Food movement was propagated in Japan in the 2000s. In fact, Slow Food has been popularised only by the mass media and a small group of people highly interested in food. This word was also used for commercialism. On the other hand, Millennials have started thinking that they should enjoy Slow Food and local production by local people as much as they can.

At home, family relations will change. The traditional roles of husband and wife will continue to weaken, and independent person-to-

person relationships will be established. It is the same for local communities; the trends toward simple cooking and ready meals cannot be stopped. Fujiwara (2019), a researcher of the food culture under the Nazi government, called this *enshoku*: the uniting power of food to repair interpersonal relationships. Home, human bonds, the environment, and economic sustainability should be important for food culture.

## 6 **Chisan Chishō** 地産地消 (Locally Produced and Locally Consumed), an Attempt in Kyoto

Kyoto is the ancient capital of Japan that has 1,200 years of history and something in common with Venice. One author of this paper lives in Kyoto. It is surrounded by mountains and is rich in pure water. *Sake* is produced somewhere in Kyoto, among which Fushimi is one of the most famous brewery towns in Japan. *Sake* tourism is popular in Kyoto. Tourists travel around Kyoto, visiting several *sake* breweries. *Sake* is made mainly of rice, but most rice is not from Kyoto. However, *Shōtoku shuzō*, a *sake* brewery, uses heirloom rice of Kyoto, in collaboration with a producer in Kyoto to revive pure Kyoto *sake*.

As another example, Kameoka, located West of Kyoto, is a city famous for pickled vegetables, which is a representative souvenir of Kyoto. Kameoka is trying to revive *ai* 藍 (indigo) including through indigo dyeing and the development of edible indigo. Kameoka has historical sites and is also famous for river rafting on the Hozu River. Kameoka has been reborn as a more-appealing city by cooperation with the local people. Although the ageing problem has been evolving, such activities are expected to encourage young people to move into the city.

## 7 **Conclusions**

In this paper, we introduced the history of Japanese food culture from ancient times and explained the active acculturation of food by the Japanese people. It is interesting that the Japanese people have been incorporating non-native diverse food cultures and integrating them into their own food culture to invent 'Japanised' international food. Unfortunately, Japanese traditional dishes (*wa-shoku*) have been disappearing. It is ironic that UNESCO has recently named *wa-shoku* as an intangible cultural heritage. Since the 1970s, the Japanese food culture has been changing, and in the twenty-first century, Japanese traditional home-cooked dishes are on the verge of disappearing. Currently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are forced to stay home, but ready meals are evolving instead of home-cooked dishes. On the

other hand, in Italy, family members continue getting together around the table to eat homemade dishes prepared by mamma. Japanese people should accept diverse food cultures from overseas as they have been doing and, at the same time, rediscover their traditional food culture. *Chisan chishō* 地産地消 (locally produced and locally consumed) should be incorporated into future food businesses domestically and internationally. Although tradition and innovation seem diametrically opposed, it can be said that 'tradition is innovation'.

