

The Globalization of Japanese Food Culture

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Professor Isao Kumakura was born in Tokyo in 1943 and graduated from the Tokyo University of Education. He is professor at the National Museum of Ethnology and director of the museum's Ethnic Culture Research Department. In addition to the histories of the tea ceremony and the *Kan-ei* culture (that of upper-class townspeople in the mid-16th century), Prof. Kumakura is involved in various research activities including the food culture history of Japan and the folkcraft movement. Among his many published works are *Tea Ceremony* and *Tea Ceremony for the Cultivated Modern Man*. Prof. Kumakura supervised the production of all five parts of the motion picture *Food Culture in Japan*.

Entrenchment of a Foreign Culture

In recent years, Japanese food culture has gained global attention. The growing popularity of Japanese food stems from greater health awareness, and an increased appreciation of healthy Japanese cuisine.

Japanese restaurants are opening in large cities throughout the world. When I was in Paris in May 1998 I was surprised to find five such establishments on a short road of only about 500 meters leading from Bd. Saint Germain to the Odeon Theater. The clientele was mostly French, and there were three restaurants where hardly any Japanese were to be found.

Japanese cuisine, food ingredients and seasonings are definitely becoming entrenched abroad. In addition to such Japanese terms as sushi and tempura that are used without translation, numerous Japanese words are entering the world's dictionaries. For example, the *Shogakukan Random House English-Japanese Dictionary* has a 950-word list of borrowed Japanese words. When this list is examined by genre, words related to cuisine and food predominate. There are some 70 of these terms, including those denoting seafood and fish such as *awabi* (abalone) and *ayu* (sweetfish); and types of vegetables, including *daikon* (Japanese radish) and *nappa* (green leaf vegetable).

Then there are foreign food names used in Japanese, such as *gyoza* (Chinese dumplings) and *ramen* (Chinese noodles); and tableware terms such as *hashi* (chopsticks) and *bento* (box lunch). Terms related to soy sauce and soybeans are particularly

numerous, with 29 words such as soya burger, soya milk and soya meal testifying to the extent of the impact of soy sauce and tofu in Europe and the U.S. While there probably are words on this list that will eventually fall into disuse, there is no question that, in the spread of Japanese culture, the concept of food overwhelms.

It is clear to any observer that Japanese food culture is becoming entrenched within other cultures; concurrent with this trend is a move abroad to obtain more information and conduct research on Japanese food. The need to rethink Japanese food culture from an international perspective is emerging.

In February 1998, an international symposium on the food of Asia was convened at the University of Leiden, and Japanese food culture was adopted as an important theme. Particularly informative was a study of the absorption of the food of foreign cultures in Europe; e.g. an analysis of the diet of immigrants from India to England. Another example given was that found in Dutch cuisine, which reflects the strongly rooted influences of the food of Indonesia, a former colony. Dr. Katarzyna Cwiertka, the organizer of the symposium, explained how a cross between Indonesian and Dutch cuisine has been born. Japan is not the only country that has absorbed food from foreign cultures in such a daring manner: this is a globally common issue that should be viewed from the perspective of comparative cultures.

Recently there have been numerous overseas

presentations on Japanese food culture. Two of these were held in 1998 at the Japan Society in New York. At the first, in April, five speakers reported from a variety of perspectives, discussing such themes as the history of tableware used in Japanese cuisine, and European language and food in Japan. In November a demonstration and lecture on Japanese confectionery was held by the New York branch of [Japanese confectioner] Toraya.

In 1999 traveling seminars of the Japan Foundation convened in Cologne, Rome and Paris with samplings and lectures. In Cologne, food ingredients were brought from Japan and five recipes were prepared using rice as the main ingredient: *chirashizushi* (scattered sushi), *mazegohan* (mixed rice), *takikomigohan* (rice cooked with various other ingredients), and *nigirimeshi* (rice balls). After a lecture on the history of food culture, the 200 attendees sampled the food. The lecture on current Japanese dietary habits and the sampling were both conducted by culinary researcher Minae Hideyama. In all three venues attendance was so large that local staff feared confusion would ensue; two sessions were conducted in Paris where numerous questions were posed, testifying to the interest of those audiences.

International Exchange of Food Culture

Japan has only really just begun to form a coherent response to address the rising overseas interest in Japanese food culture. Academic societies on food culture are numerous not only in Europe and the U.S., but also in other Asian countries such as China and Korea. These academic societies frequently request international conferences in Japan, but there are few organizations in Japan that can respond to such requests. What had been needed is an organization to support an academic society on Japanese foods.

Such support would be insufficient were it to be purely economic. A firm vision is required as to what type of food culture research should be conducted, and in what manner. A base must be created that will provide a broad international perspective, as well as serve as a locus for the accumulation of information, upon which joint research and related meetings may be organized.

I personally focus particularly on the word "international" in Kikkoman Corporation's newly established Kikkoman Institute for International Food Culture. In the face of the internationalization of Japanese food culture, this is truly the research base that is required.

This is not to say that there are no attendant problems. First, the study of food culture itself is a new field with an insufficient track record. Critiques on food by dilettantes have been around for years. The history of culinary research—particularly in the context of home economics—dates back about 100 years.

However, food culture research that views the world of food comprehensively—including cultural backgrounds—has a history of only some 30 years since Naomichi Ishige first proposed such an endeavor. Twenty years have passed since the Food Culture Center was established by Ajinomoto Co. Inc., a pioneer in food culture research. At long last, discussion has begun to grow among experts from a variety of genres, without limitation to preconceived academic boundaries. Previous efforts have at last borne fruit, and a significant volume of data and research has been amassed concerning Japanese food culture. A level has been reached at which we Japanese are finally aware of our food culture.

To what extent do we have accurate information about the food of foreign cultures? Recently a researcher specializing in the food culture of France visited Japan and proposed joint research with Japanese experts. Apparently, in his eyes an understanding of French food culture in Japan is skewed. Such joint research would not be easy with the language barrier, yet high level international exchange among experts is something that I would like to see realized.

On the other hand, issues of food at the ordinary level are also of interest. Today's tendency for children to eat alone is increasing; in fact, it may be more correct to state that parents who believe such a situation to be normal are on the increase. In Europe and the U.S. the relationship between man and food has long been a personal domain and for this reason "eating alone" is not perceptible as a phenomenon. It is therefore necessary to achieve a broader understanding of food culture within the context of the characteristic theories of various societies, rather than analysis based on a single criterion.

I have high expectations of Kikkoman's institute: only a company such as Kikkoman, with its strong overseas network, is capable of establishing a research center to promote international exchange with culture playing a central role—replacing, in effect, the international exchange of the past wherein economics was the focus.