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 Odéon 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 owashi (abalone) and aya (sweatfish); and types of vegetables, including daikon (Japanese radish) and nappa (green leaf vegetable).

Then there are foreign food names used in Japan, 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 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.

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—incorporating 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. At present, most 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.