Japan’s diet has developed into its own unique culture with the acceptance and incorporation of aspects of the food cultures of China and other countries. Elements comprising food cultures are not limited to ingredients, but also include seasonings and cooking and eating utensils, the roles of which should not be underestimated. In this issue, we will explore Japan’s food culture by tracing the transition of o-zen (a low dining tray or table) from its origins to the present day.

The Legendary “Zen” Character
The word “o-zen” is the combination of the Japanese honorific “o” and the Chinese character “zen” meaning, in this case, a small dining tray or table. The Chinese character “zen” first appeared in Japan in the Nihon Shoki, or the Chronicles of Japan. According to the Chronicles, a vassal named Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto prepared a dish of bonito caught with a bowstring and clams gathered on the beach for the twelfth Emperor, Keiko, who visited Minato in Awa-no-kuni (present day southern Chiba Prefecture) in memory of his late son Yamato Takeru’s achievements in putting down a rebellion in eastern lands. The Emperor enjoyed the dish and praised the cook’s culinary skills, bestowing upon him the title Kashiwade no Otomobe (Imperial Chef), which, in its written form, includes the “zen” character. This incident was recorded in the historical records of the Takahashi clan, descendants of Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto. Due to his excellent service, Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto was appointed head of Wakasa and Awa Provinces and the title of Imperial Chef has been assumed by his descendents.

At the imperial office for fermented foods, which include fermented grains and beans, vegetables, and fish, Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto is deified as Takabe no Kami—the god of fermented seasoning production—and symbolized by a great earthenware pot. The fermented foods that fell under the auspices of the imperial office for fermented foods are known today as soy bean paste, soy sauce, pickles and fermented fish products, and they form the foundation of Japanese cuisine.

The Chinese character “zen” was read “kashiwade” in classical Japanese. This is because food was once served on kashiwa (oak) leaves. When the Chinese character for “zen” was introduced from China, the Japanese reading of “kashiwade” was given to the character. Later, people stopped reading the character as “kashiwade” until only the “zen” reading has survived to mean: 1. a collective term for a small table or tray on which food, drink, and eating utensils are placed; 2. an act of offering, serving, and eating food; 3. great variety and extravagance in a meal; 4. a counter for servings of rice and pairs of chopsticks; 5. actions related to daily life such as preparing and putting away o-zen; 6. the general term used to refer to common expressions that are integral to overall social life.

The Appearance of Takatsuki
Prior to the introduction of chopsticks to Japan, it is thought that people ate with their hands. Around the end of the third century, Chen Shou of China’s Western Jin Dynasty (256–316) described the lifestyle of late Yayoi period (mid tenth-century B.C. to mid third-century A.D.) Japanese people. Chen Shou wrote:

[Japan] has a mild climate and people eat raw vegetables in both winter and summer. Father, mother, and children sleep in separate rooms. Meals are served on takatsuki (elevated bowl or deep dish of earthenware) from which people eat with their hands.

It is assumed that people sat cross-legged on the floors of stilt houses and ate food served on a takatsuki with their hands.

The takatsuki described by Shou were primarily of earthenware until the Nara period (710–794) and were commonly used along with other dishes and bowls. The
introduction from China of takatsuki, with a single center leg, initiated Japan’s use of o-zen and tables at mealtimes. In addition to the hygienic benefit of raising food above the floor, the height of o-zen came to express varying degrees of authority, courtesy and respect.

During the Nara period, a simple square tray with no legs called ita-oshiki, on which dishes were placed, was introduced and used for everyday meals. Ita-oshiki were probably devised to increase hygiene and convenience. The square serving tray was depicted in Yamai Soshi, believed to have been the work of Kasuga Mitsunaga, and is similar to the trays used much later. Ita-oshiki were made of thinly shaved cypress with a short lip around the entire circumference to prevent dishes from falling off. “Ita” means “board” and “oshiki” is thought to mean either “leaf” or “mat”. There is a variety of oshiki, including those with hewed corners and those with legs, which were used to serve superiors. Oshiki trays were placed on earthenware takatsuki and called oshiki takatsuki. A version of The Tale of Genji author Murasaki Shikibu’s diary, traditionally thought to have been illustrated by Fujiwara no Nobuzane, depicts oshiki takatsuki with vermilion surfaces and black legs.

Two other oshiki takatsuki are white and all are loaded with various dishes.

Initially, oshiki were placed on top of takatsuki. Later, the two were integrated by adding a center leg to the oshiki tray. These new takatsuki, made of wood and often finished with lacquer, became the mainstream. Commonly, the top surfaces were finished with vermilion lacquer and the sides, bottoms and legs were finished with black lacquer. The thirteenth scroll of the major work, Kasuga Gongenki Emaki, by Katashina Takakane, illustrates food served on a square takatsuki in the kitchen of a priest’s house. Another well-known work from the same period, by Tokiwa Genji Mitsunaga, illustrates a lacquered maru-takatsuki (round takatsuki), indicating the existence of two types of takatsuki at the time. Other remaining works show tsuigasane tray tables—single units made of unfinished, white wood and consisting of a tray on a square base—holding various dishes; kakeban, similar to tsuigasane but slightly taller and more decorative; and daiban, a larger, rectangular table with four legs and broad lips with the top surface often finished with vermilion lacquer. There were three sizes of daiban for serving one person (120 cm in width), two people (240 cm in width) and a middle size (180 cm in width) for use as needed. All sizes of daiban were for ceremonial use. Oshiki, takatsuki, tsuigasane and kakeban were used more routinely.

The various types of tray tables identified the place where they were used. Those finished with lacquer were used by court nobles and unfinished, white wood tray tables were used by temples and shrines. Although one tray usually served one person, several trays may have been used to serve just one person. Though fine tables such as daiban were already in use in Buddhist rituals, the various common serving trays were all just made of thin wood. It is said that this was to imitate the oak leaves used as plates in earlier days. Often made of thin Japanese cypress boards that were then bent into shape, these tray tables were generally referred to as magemono (bent object) or himono (cypress object). The craftsmen who made them were known as himono-shi (masters of cypress objects) and the next generation saw the appearance of more advanced techniques of lathe turning and joining.

**The Appearance of Zen**

Simplicity and fortitude were the driving forces of the new Kamakura period (1185–1333). Samurai meals were frugal, and strict new schools of Buddhism, particularly Zen, became popular. Zen taught its followers to train their minds and bodies ascetically. The preparation and consuming of simple meals was regarded as one form of ascetic training. However, traditional Zen principles regarding meals did not apply to those served to guests. This led to the development of shojin ryori (vegetarian “devotion cuisine”) in which no animal products are used and protein is acquired through soy bean products, nuts and seeds. These meals were served on the same trays used in the previous period.

Shuhanron Emaki, said to be the work of Kamon-no-suke Hisakuni during the 18th century Edo period, is a well-known hand scroll painting. It depicts three men, one who enjoys eating, one who enjoys drinking, and one who enjoys both in moderation, explaining their individual the-
Reproduction of the food Oda Nobunaga served Tokugawa Ieyasu over a two-day period at Azuchi Castle in 1582. The five tray tables and serving bowls were all extremely ornate. Photo courtesy of The Asahi Shimbun Company.

The Ashikaga clan, which established the Muromachi shogunate (1336–1573), placed its capital in Kyoto and strived for cultural enhancement. As a result, culinary arts, table manners, and table setting styles progressed until there existed a great variety of bowls and plates. During the Nanboku-cho period (1336–1392), the banquet style known as honzen ryori was established. The aforementioned Shuhanron Emaki also includes a scene depicting the large reception room of a samurai family with unfinished, wood tsuigasane tray tables. As no meat or fish is visible, the meal may be a representation of shojin ryori.

Shich Nan Shichi Fuku Zumaki-Fukuju (Seven Happinesses and Seven Misfortunes–Happiness and Long Life), by Maruyama Okyo, illustrates Shichi Nan Shichi Fuku Zumaki-Fukuju

During this period, when honzen ryori was perfected, the meal itself, as well as the trays that held bowls and plates of food, began to be called “zen”. It was also around this time that tray tables began to be manufactured by a variety of craftsmen, including those who crafted eating utensils and furniture in addition to the dedicated himono-shi (masters of cypress objects). Originally crafted by bending thinly shaved wood to form trays, the various craftsmen introduced different methods for producing trays that were lacquered with vermilion on the inside and black on the outside and were 36 cm in diameter and 12 cm in height. Higher quality trays were made of sandalwood or black persimmon wood. Other trays, including those with two or four legs, or no legs at all, as well as tray tables with legs forming a closed base around the bottom of the tray also appeared. Japanese cedar, Japanese cypress and other materials were used together to form a square object that would later be lacquered.

There were a number of variations on the four-legged tray table, usually lacquered black but sometimes vermilion or a combination of the two colors, for use depending upon the importance of the event or the status of the person being served. The dimensions of these tray tables also varied: a 28.5–36 cm square for the tray, 1.5–3.6 cm for the height of the lip, and 6.6–10.5 cm for the height off the floor.

Two-legged tray tables had legs that spanned most of, or the entire, length of the side of the tray. The dimensions of these tray tables ranged from a 30–33 cm square for the tray, 1–3 cm for the height of the lip, and 3.6–28 cm for the height off the floor. Many of these trays were lacquered with clear vermilion, were popular in farming villages, and commonly used for guests or by the male members of the family.

The dimensions of legless trays varied from a 25–30 cm square for the tray, 6–15 mm for the height of the lip, and 1.5–2.1 cm for the height of the entire tray. Many were finished with vermilion and black or clear vermilion lacquer, and were commonly used by women and servants in farming villages.

Tray tables with legs forming a closed base around the bottom of the tray had a separate lid of 30 cm square and were 10–20 cm tall. Some had a built-in drawer and were used by samurai attendants and servants.

Clearly, a great variety of trays and tray tables for serving dishes had appeared by the beginning of the Edo period. It was during the Edo period (1603–1867) that distinct uses for the various types of trays and tray tables were defined by social standing. Generally, trays that sat higher off the floor or were more ornate were used by those of higher social ranking.
The use of tray tables increased with the formalizing of banquet cuisines over the periods in which the samurai were an active social class. As social hierarchies developed and were enforced, banquet styles and eating utensils followed a similar course. During the Edo period, however, common townspeople who had gained financial power came to use the eating utensils previously reserved for the samurai and nobles. The introduction of exotic foods during the latter half of the Edo period led to the development of new forms of Japanese cuisines, popular with the commoners of Edo. It was the introduction of these foreign cuisines that led to the appearance of the more communal dining style, where several people sit together at a large table, in Japan.

**Chabudai to Dining Table**

The practice of forming trays by bending wood lasted for as long as a thousand years in Japan, from the Heian period (794–1185) to the Meiji era (1868–1912). During this time, their shapes changed. With such a long tradition, new forms of tray tables began to take root during the Edo period and all of the various types came to be generally referred to as “o-zen”. It was during the Meiji era of “cultural enlightenment,” however, that the concept of sharing a table was introduced.

Dining customs around the world can generally be divided as follows:

1. **Diners sit on the floor/diners sit on chairs**
2. **Food is served to individual diners/food is shared among all diners**
3. **All dishes are served at once/dishes are served one at a time**

In Japan, traditional dining customs call for diners to sit on the floor, for food to be served to individual diners, and for all dishes to be served on an individual tray or tray table at once.

Many of the traditional Japanese dining customs remained even after the communal dining table was introduced. The same applies to use of the chabudai, a small and low table with collapsible legs, commonly used from the middle of the Meiji era (circa 1890) until around 1955. The chabudai is unique to Japan and thought to have been invented in the Yokohama area as it is made using a wood lathe in the western style of furniture making. Originally, chabudai—like their predecessors, the individual serving tray or tray table—were taken out at mealtime and stored after the meal was over. The folding legs made this convenient. As they were stored when not in use, people continued to refer to them as “o-zen”. However, as the Japanese people became more accustomed to the family dining table, they began to leave the tables out. As residential flooring materials shifted from tatami mats to wood floors, the general structure of homes also changed to include a dining area that held a dining table. It was during the postwar era of rapid economic growth that the traditional Japanese concept of sharing serving trays, tray tables, and chabudai when not in use was all but eliminated. The Japanese, however, can remain proud that they have maintained their original food culture and the majority of their traditional dining customs.

### Information provided by Royal Warrant, Hashikatsu Honten K.K.

**References**

- Kayuki; edited and annotated by Kenji Kurano, Iwanami Bunko
- Nihon Shoki (II); edited and annotated by Taro Sakamoto, Saburo Inoue, and Susumu Ono, Iwanami Bunko
- Shinki Gishi Wajinden, Gakansha Waden, Sasho Wakoköden, Zuisho Wakoköden, translated by Michihira Ishihara, Iwanami Bunko
- Mashi, miso, hashi, wan; Kaentō Miyamoto, Iwasaki Bijutsu-sha
- Nihon Shoku Seikatsu-shi; Minari Watanabe, Yoshikawa Kabunkan Inc.
- Daiyakukoro, shakki, shokutaku; supervised by Norobu Haga and Hirako Ishikawa, Yuzan-kaku, Inc.
- Jidai Shiso Seido wo Hanei-suru O-zen to Shokutaku, Nihon no Shokutaku
- Masaaki Hirano, Tanko Bessatsu
- Zusetsu-Nihon no Utsuwa; Noritake Kanzaki, Kawade Shobo Shinsha
- Wafu Tabekata Jiten; Shigekazu Ono, Rural Culture Association
- Sekai Daihyakakuta Jiten; Shigekazu Ono, Heibonsha Limited, Publishers
- Nihon Dayashikakuta Jiten; Shigekazu Ono, Shogakukan Inc.
- Shikinaisha Takabe Jinja; Takabe Jinja Haosan-kai

**Cover:** Kojiki; edited and annotated by Kenji Kurano, Iwanami Bunko

Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864) was born to a family of ferry-boat operators working at Itsutsume in Honjo, Edo. At around fifteen years of age, he was accepted as a student of Utagawa Toyokuni I, the great master of the Utagawa school of ukyo-e (woodblock printing). By his early twenties, Kunisada had already reached the forefront of the ukyo-e world. He left the world with more than 10,000 prints. In 1844, he declared himself Toyokuni II, after his master. However, Toyohisa, adopted son of Toyokuni, had already taken the name Toyokuni II, leaving Kunisada to be commonly known as Toyokuni III. Between 1804 and 1830, Kunisada used the name Gototei, after his birthplace. During this period, his work reflected the daily lives of common people. The print on the cover of this issue is from that time, and is signed “Gototei Kunisada.”