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# EFFECTS OF THE DESIGNATION OF YAKIMOCHI AS AN INTANGIBLE FOLK CULTURAL PROPERTY IN JAPAN

## ABSTRACT

Since 1983, Nagano Prefecture has designated five local dishes as intangible folk cultural properties. This study examines the effects of designating *yakimochi* ('stuffed dumplings') as cultural heritage. The results indicate that this designation has contributed to the preservation and dissemination of *yakimochi* culture for future generations.

## INTRODUCTION

Nagano Prefecture, located in the centre of Honshu, the main island of Japan, is the fourth largest prefecture in Japan (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Its territory encompasses mountain ranges with elevations of approximately 3,000m (9,800ft). Mountains occupy 84% of Nagano's land, making the Prefecture landlocked. Nagano's geographic features vary. The variation in climate and terrain results in a diverse food culture across the regions. The Prefecture benefits from bounteous harvests due to its mountains and rivers, its high-altitude vegetables such as lettuce, and fruits such as apples and grapes.<sup>2</sup>

Nagano Prefecture has preserved and passed on its diverse food culture as a valuable asset. Since 1983, it has designated five local dishes as Nagano's selected intangible

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1 Reference to this study: Hiroko Nakazawa: Effects of the Designation of Yakimochi as an Intangible Folk Cultural Property in Japan. In Anikó Bádi and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 147–159.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-084-0-7>

2 Naganoken no Nogyo ('Agriculture of Nagano Prefecture') (Nagano Prefecture) <<https://www.pref.nagano.lg.jp/koho/kids/menu02/nougyo.html>> accessed 22 August 2024.

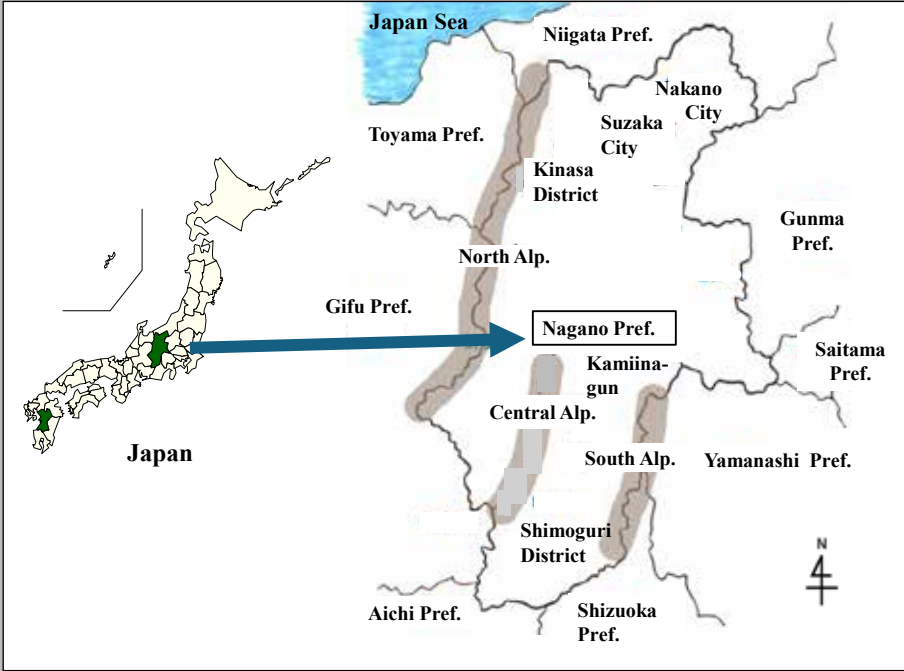


Fig. 1. Map of Japan and Nagano Prefecture

folk cultural properties ('cultural assets of taste').<sup>3</sup> These dishes are: *Yakimochi* ('stuffed dumplings'), *Teuchi soba* ('handmade soba noodles'), *Gohei-mochi* ('skewered rice cake, coated with sauce, and grilled'), *Nozawana-zuke* ('quintessential pickled green, *Nozawana* pickles'), and *Sunki-zuke* ('stems of the red turnips fermented without salt using natural lactic acid bacilli'). The designation of these cultural assets of taste has been widely covered in the media and communicated to the people of Nagano Prefecture. These dishes, as cultural assets, were selected before any other prefecture in the country had designated food as cultural property. In 2013, the Japanese government designated 'food-related customs' (*WASHOKU*; Traditional Dietary Cultures of the Japanese) – based on the Japanese ethos of 'respecting nature' – as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Nagano Prefecture has been concerned with the decline in traditional food culture for 30 years – actually longer than the Japanese government itself. To date, the Prefecture has designated 13 local dishes as cultural heritage.

This study clarifies the effects of designating *yakimochi* as a cultural taste asset and assesses the current status and results of efforts to protect and transmit *yakimochi* food culture more widely in Nagano Prefecture.

## Materials and Methods

The literature survey was based on a survey report designating 'cultural assets of taste',<sup>4</sup> and literature specific to *yakimochi*. Between 2021 and 2024, interviews were conducted with six *yakimochi* specialty shops in Nagano City in order to gather information on the history and current status of *yakimochi* sales. To promote *yakimochi* food culture, interviews were also conducted with food education volunteers and participants involved in food-culture activities across Suzaka, Nakano, the Shimoguri District of Iida City, and Kinasa District of Nagano City, for the period 2018–2024. Additionally, questionnaire surveys were administered to students from the University of Nagano who participated in *yakimochi*-making activities in Suzaka City and Kinasa District of Nagano City from 2018 to 2023. *Verbal informed consent was obtained from all of the participants at the start of the survey.*

3 Nagano Prefectural Education Committee, eds., *Naganoken Sentakumukei Minzoku Bunkazai Cyosa Houkoku* ('An Investigation and Report on the Nagano Prefecture Selected Intangible Folk Cultural Properties') (Nagano: Nagano Prefecture, 1984), 1.

4 Nagano Prefectural Education Committee, eds., *Naganoken Sentakumukei Minzoku Bunkazai Cyosa Houkoku*, 21–35.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## Literature survey

According to the report<sup>5</sup> on 'cultural assets of taste', there were many mountain villages with steeply-sloping fields and a few rice paddies, in Nagano Prefecture. In these areas, the preparation of *yakimochi*, which was traditionally heated in the ashes of a hearth, was widely distributed. *Yakimochi* is primarily prepared from wheat or buckwheat flour. The term *oyaki* (instead of *yakimochi*) has been used for 20 years in Nagano Prefecture, having become common there around 1963. In parts of Kamiina-gun, *yakimochi* prepared from rice-flour is referred to as *yakimochi* in the *Ebisu Kou* ('Ebisu Festival'). Ebisu is a member of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune, and is a deity of good fortune who offers blessings for good harvests, prosperous business, and family safety. As *irori* ('hearths') and, therefore, heating ashes, have almost completely disappeared from ordinary households, *yakimochi* is now baked or steamed. *Yakimochi* food culture comprises local dishes that have been adapted to each region's environment; thus, in terms of these dishes, there are no restrictions on the kinds of dough, ingredients, seasoning, or heating methods used.

Cookbooks related to local home cooking have been published in Nagano Prefecture, many of which mention *yakimochi* and *oyaki*. Several specialised books on *yakimochi* have appeared since 1984. Books specialising in *yakimochi* food culture describe various kinds of *yakimochi* dishes from different parts of Nagano Prefecture, mentioning also their ingredients, roots, events, *the yakimochi festival*, shops selling *yakimochi*, and *yakimochi* recipes. They also contain many memories and thoughts of the Nagano people about *yakimochi* and its appeal (Table 1).

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5 Nagano Prefectural Education Committee, eds., *Naganoken Sentakumukei Minzoku Bunkazai Cyosa Houkoku*, 21–35.

Title: English translation	Author(s)/ editor(s)	Year	Publisher	Brief overview of the book
The Story of <i>Oyaki</i> and <i>Yakimochi</i>	Ura, Masashi	1984	Ginga Shobo	The designation as a cultural asset of taste by the Prefecture has started to attract interest from this perspective
Talking <i>Oyaki</i> and Living <i>Oyaki</i>	Kashiwa Planning eds.	2000	Kashiwa Planning	Twenty five people share their memories and experiences of <i>Yakimochi</i> . Three shops started selling them in the 1960s
Masters of Making <i>Oyaki</i>	Ishizaka, Satoko eds.	2001	Kashiwa Planning	Eleven <i>yakimochi</i> masters shared their tips on cooking <i>yakimochi</i> , including the dough, ingredients and heating methods
Fifty-six Questions about <i>Oyaki</i>	Kashiwa Planning eds.	2006	Kashiwa Planning	To summarise Nagano's speciality <i>yakimochi</i> in the form of questions and answers
Shinshu <i>Oyaki Tours</i>	Koide, Yoko	2013	Kawabeshorin	The stories of 12 places with <i>yakimochi</i> masters. Information on 125 Hokushin, 26 Toshin, 48 Chushin and 21 Nanshin shops of <i>yakimochi</i>
The Textbook of <i>Oyaki</i>	Koide, Yoko	2019	Shinano Mainichi Newspaper Co.	Instructions for more than 20 different types of dough and 80 different filling recipes using seasonal vegetables

Table 1. *Titles, authors or editors, years of publication, publishers, and a brief overview of the yakimochi speciality book*

In Japan, rice was a symbol of affluence until around 1950. Rice was used as a substitute for wages, especially in the Edo period (1603–1868). On the other hand, *yakimochi*, mostly made from ingredients other than rice, was a symbol of poverty, as people who prepared *yakimochi* were unable to have enough rice to eat. However, the literature also described a change in the way the people of Nagano Prefecture now think of *yakimochi* because of its designation as a cultural asset.<sup>6</sup>

Flour millers in the Prefecture sell local and special flour-mixes for the production of *yakimochi*. According to statistics comparing prefectural capitals, Nagano City, among other prefectures, purchases the largest amount of flour in Japan (3,774 grams per year in Nagano City, while the national average is 2,256 grams per year).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ura, Masashi, *Oyaki Yakimochi no Hanashi* ("The story of *Oyaki* and *Yakimochi*") (Nagano: Ginga Shobo, 1984), 146–151.

<sup>7</sup> Futari Ijyo no Setai: 2021–2023 Nen Heikin 1 Setai Atari Nenkan no Sisyutu Kingaku Oyobi Kounyu Suryo ('Households of two or more persons: Average annual expenditure and quantity purchased per household in 2021–2023'), *Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications*, <<https://www.stat.go.jp/data/kakei/5.html>> accessed 22 August 2024.

It can be inferred from this data, that the making of *yakimochi* by households is the reason for the high consumption of flour in Nagano Prefecture. However, the literature and statistics also indicate that households, in general, no longer consume *yakimochi* as a daily meal, and that some households continue to make *yakimochi* only for special events and for pleasure,

### Interviews with *yakimochi* stores and manufacturers

We were told that a long-established shop in Nagano Prefecture had been selling *yakimochi* since 1973. A specialised book on *yakimochi* mentioned several specialty shops that had started to sell *yakimochi* around the 1960s (Table 1).<sup>8</sup> It was inferred from interviews and literature that the sale of *yakimochi* actually started in the 1960s. As home preparation decreased, the *yakimochi* designation led to many confectionery shops selling it. Designation as an intangible folk cultural property in Nagano Prefecture ranked lowest in terms of cultural property protection administration. However, the people in Nagano are more familiar with *yakimochi* than other cultural properties. Some *yakimochi* shops advertised it as an important cultural property of the Prefecture owing to its high advertising value.

Currently, *yakimochi* is sold in supermarkets and convenience stores in Nagano Prefecture, and there has been a shift towards its sale throughout the Prefecture for tourists to eat and to buy as a souvenir. The interviews revealed that commercially-available *yakimochi* uses different individual heating methods, as well as a combination of them, such as frying, steaming, and baking, to produce *yakimochi* with a characteristic texture. Photographs of *yakimochi* from six specialty shops are shown in Fig. 2. They differ in appearance and taste because of the different cooking methods and ingredients used. Multiple innovations have been made in the fillings of commercial *yakimochi*, with new products being developed to suit seasonal and consumer preferences.

A long-established *yakimochi* shop, with six outlets across the Prefecture, opened a factory in July 2022. The factory, capable of producing 10,000 units of *yakimochi* per day, featured a café, sales shop, factory tour, and a *yakimochi*-making experience corner. Approximately 1,700 people experienced the *yakimochi*-making process in just over one year. Due to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, mail-order sales have more than doubled over the last three years. Media coverage also led to more young customers being attracted to this particular shop compared to others.

8 Kashiwa Planning, eds., *Kataru Oyaki, Ikiru Oyaki* ('Talking Oyaki and Living Oyaki') (Nagano: Kashiwa Planning, 2000), 97–122.



Fig. 2. Commercially available yakimochi from six shops using different heating methods. (Photo by Hiroko Nakazawa)

Additionally, a frozen *yakimochi* vending machine on the shop premises provided a 24-hour opportunity for customers to enjoy *yakimochi*.

The increase in *yakimochi* sales for *yakimochi* shops and manufacturers clearly demonstrates that the designation of *yakimochi* as a culinary cultural asset has significantly contributed to the promotion of the industry.

Interviews and questionnaires on activities to pass on *yakimochi* food culture

Efforts to transmit *yakimochi* culture to food education volunteers in Nagano Prefecture have been undertaken since 1983. Furthermore, food education volunteers in Suzaka City have been teaching local students how to make steamed *yakimochi* since 2018. A total of 111 students participated in the project during the 4 years of its operation, excluding 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the questionnaire survey showed a valid response-rate of 88%: 76 students (72%) answered that the experience was 'very good', and 22 students (28%) responded that it was 'good'. In the free-text sections of the questionnaires, comments included: 'It was really fun, and the handmade *yakimochi* was very tasty'; 'It was difficult to do, but it was fun to do it together'; and, 'It was good to learn how to make *yakimochi* from local people who have been making it for a long time, and to learn about tips and local food culture.'

The results of the survey showed that the cooking experience led to increased interest in *yakimochi* among the participants, as they experienced both fun and delicious food while making local dishes.

Next, we report on activities in Nakano City about the making of *yakimochi*, highlighting that the Nakano City Dietary Improvement Promotion Council held a training session on the steaming of *yakimochi* at the Nakano City Health Centre, on 19 July 2024. Participants enjoyed making the dough, preparing and wrapping the ingredients, and steaming them. Clear instructions on ingredient care ensured that the participants could make delicious *yakimochi* correctly, thereby gaining valuable wisdom and skills from the experts during the training session.

Since 1983, the Nakano Council members have conducted '*yakimochi*-making classes' for primary-school children in order to pass on the local food cultures. *Yakimochi* is considered a dish that embraces the seasons, as its ingredients are

seasonal, thus, conveying seasonal change and nostalgia. Although these activities were temporarily suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they have now resumed, with practical sessions being conducted at primary schools upon request.

By making *yakimochi*, the children were taught wisdom and skills based on local food production – for consumption, the transmission of local dishes and food culture, the ability to choose, taste, and cook food, to have a healthy body, and to feel the life of food.

The survey revealed that by making *yakimochi*, the children developed an increased interest in local food and health. They said that they would think of their hometowns and become confident and proud of them.

Next, we report on our activities in the Shimoguri District of Iida City, which we visited on 8 May 2022. At a guest house with a sunken hearth, we asked a farmer's wife, who was familiar with the local cuisine, to teach us how to make *yakimochi* using buckwheat dough with salted *sanma* ('Pacific saury') as the filling. The Shimoguri District is a highland settlement at an altitude between 800 and 1100m. As it was difficult to harvest wheat, dough was made from buckwheat flour. In this area, *yakimochi* are called *soba-dango* ('buckwheat dumplings'). *Soba-dango* was made using salted saury cut into 2–3cm pieces as the filling.

The students' comments included:

I had no idea what *Soba-dango* with salted saury would look or taste like. However, it was the first time I had ever used this combination, and I found it to be delicious. I was also surprised that the ingredients were simpler and easier to use than expected. However, because it was simple, I felt that many years of experience were required in terms of getting to understand the amount of water and cooking-time involved.

The buckwheat dough with *shio-sanma* ('salted Pacific saury') filling was a rare combination of *yakimochi*. The practical activity associated with making this version of *yakimochi* enabled the students to recognise the wisdom and skills of their ancestors, to taste simple deliciousness, and to think about the local food culture and lifestyle. Salted *sanma* buckwheat dumplings are seldom produced today because houses with sunken hearths are rare. However, owing to *yakimochi*'s designation as a cultural asset, the citizens of Iida and Nagano Prefectures became aware that it was a local food source in the Shimoguri District.

Finally, we report on our activities in the Kinasa District of Nagano City. The Kinasa District is representative of an area where *yakimochi* is frequently consumed as an everyday food. Since 2019, we have been working to transmit the traditional way of making *yakimochi* – traditionally cooked with the heat of ashes – at a house where the sunken hearth remained, by asking local agricultural wives who were familiar with the conventional *yakimochi*-making process, for advice (Fig. 3). Traditional *yakimochi* was baked on a *hōroku* ('flat iron pan'), dried, and then placed in ashes in the hearth to cook.<sup>9</sup>

Although this was not possible in 2022 due to Covid-19, three *yakimochi*-making sessions were held in 2019, three in 2020, three in 2021, six in 2023, and five in August 2024. Participants in the 2023 sessions were surveyed, and 30 student responses (91% valid response rate) were received. All students (100%) answered that their experiences were 'very good'.

Student feedback included:

I realised that although the ingredients and seasoning of ash-baked *yakimochi* were very simple, cooking them in ashes brought out the natural flavour and made them very tasty. Also, the detailed instructions on how to make the ingredients, and how to wrap the *yakimochi*, helped me to get the hang of it, which was a very good experience...

The outside was crispy and the best way to enjoy it was to eat it while it was warm. The burnt bits were delicious.

The survey results revealed that designation as a culinary asset was useful for *yakimochi* propagation. As a part of transmission activities, local people shared stories about old life in the region, the joy of growing local crops, cooking local dishes, food processing and preservation techniques, the role of agriculture in nurturing life, and their gratitude to nature and people. The appeal of *yakimochi* lies in its flexible ingredients, seasonings, and heating methods, which allows for various flavours, appearances, and textures. Future problems likely to arise regarding *yakimochi* transmission activities were associated with the age of the inheritors, the need to secure ingredients, and the maintenance of cooking facilities such as hearths, and utensils such as *hōroku*, and the difficulties in obtaining hygienic authorisation from the Health Authorities to sell *yakimochi* baked in ashes. In the future, the *yakimochi* designation should be utilised to ensure that the *yakimochi* culture is

<sup>9</sup> Nagano Prefectural Education Committee, eds., *Naganoken Sentakumukei Minzoku Bunkazai Cyosa Houkoku*, 21–35.



Fig. 3. The ash-baked Yakimochi-making activity in the Kinasa district on 8 July 2023.  
(Photo by Hiroko Nakazawa)

transferred to the younger generation, and to strive to practice sustainable activities for the transmission of tradition.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of literature, interviews, and questionnaire surveys reveals several key features resulting from the designating of *yakimochi* as a cultural heritage site: (1) the recognition of *yakimochi* as an important cultural asset has gained traction among the people of Nagano Prefecture; (2) different variants of *yakimochi* have been sold at stores throughout the Prefecture, catering to tourists and serving as souvenirs, which has contributed to the promotion of the industry; (3) the appeal of *yakimochi* is attributed to its adaptable ingredients and diverse cooking methods which vary by locality, household, and store; and (4) efforts that have been made by Nagano Prefecture, local shops, manufacturers, and food education volunteers since 1983, for the preservation and intergenerational transfer of the unique qualities and cultural significance of *yakimochi*

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