

NAOTO MINAMI

PROTECTING AND PROMOTING TRADITIONAL FOOD CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

REGISTRATION OF FOOD CULTURE AS A CULTURAL PROPERTY WITH THE AGENCY FOR CULTURAL AFFAIRS

ABSTRACT

This paper explains the general trend of the reevaluation of traditional eating habits in Japan in recent years and the development of the cultural policy of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the government agency which officially recognises the cultural value of traditional food culture and examines the examples submitted for the registration process as intangible cultural property.

HISTORICAL CHANGES IN FOOD CULTURE IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

To examine efforts made to protect and promote food culture in Japan, one must understand the historical transition of food habits in the country since modern times.¹ Japan's acceptance of Western civilisation in the modernisation processes after the Meiji period (1868–1912) led to the Westernisation of Japanese food culture, and existing traditional foodways had already undergone gradual transformation during the earlier Edo period (1603–1868). Furthermore, the time after World War II, especially following high economic growth in the 1960s, saw improvement in the Japanese standard of living, and a resulting rapid expansion in

1 Reference to this study: Naoto Minami: Protecting and Promoting Traditional Food Culture in Contemporary Japan: Registration of Food Culture as a Cultural Property with the Agency for Cultural Affairs. In Anikó Báti 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. 207–216.

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the trend towards new eating habits, such as mass consumption, the spread of instant foods, and the diversification of foodways.²

One indicator symbolising this trend was the substantial decline in rice consumption. Rice had been a staple of the Japanese diet since ancient times, but the annual per capita consumption of this foodstuff peaked at about 120 kg around 1960 and it has undergone a sustained decline since then to about 60 kg per person nowadays.³ Meat consumption, in contrast, increased during this period.

The avoidance of meat, because of the influence of Buddhism, was a widespread aspect of Japanese food culture, and fish and beans were eaten instead as sources of protein. After the Meiji period, although the taboo on eating meat had disappeared, meat dishes were still not widely consumed, especially in the home situation. After the period of high economic growth in the 1960s, however, meat consumption increased amid the major trend towards Westernised dietary habits, which saw the rapid popularity of meat dishes, especially among the younger generation, not only when eating out but also in home cooking. A symbolic event was the opening of Japan's first McDonald's in Shibuya, Tokyo, in 1971. Now, many people seem to have completely forgotten that eating meat had once been taboo in Japan. In addition, people gradually consumed more dairy products such as milk and butter, which had been but rarely consumed before the modern era.⁴

REEVALUATION OF THE JAPANESE-STYLE DIET

Changes in the Japanese food situation occurring over about half a century, including the decline of traditional eating habits and the Westernisation of foodways, led to various problems, such as the decline in food self-sufficiency or an increase in lifestyle-related diseases. By way of response, a trend towards the reevaluation of Japanese traditional eating habits began around the 1980s.

2 Ishikawa, Hiroko and Ehara, Ayako eds.: *Modern and Contemporary Food Culture* (in Japanese) (IK Corporation: Kawasaki, 2002); Ishige, Naomichi: *History of Food Culture in Japan: From the Paleolithic to the Present* (in Japanese) (Iwanami Publ.: Tokyo, 2015), 174–208; Harada, Nobuo: *History of Japanese Food* (in Japanese) (Shibunkaku Publ.: Kyoto, 2016), 75–91ff.

3 Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries: 'Trends in Rice Consumption' (in Japanese). <<https://www.maff.go.jp/j/seisan/kikaku/pdf/data01.pdf>> accessed 7 September 2024.

4 Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries: 'Food Supply and Demand Table' 2022 edition (in Japanese). <<https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/fbs/>> accessed 7 September 2024.

Outside of Japan, in other developed countries, the harmful effects of overeating, especially health risks, were very much in focus. The first warning of this came in the McGovern Report, published in 1977. It pointed out the adverse health effects (such as obesity and lifestyle-related diseases) arising from the excessive intake of, for example, fats, sugars, and cholesterol, and proposed the avoidance of meat, animal fats, and sugar, among others food substances, while recommending an increased intake of legumes, grains, vegetables, and so on. This had a major impact on the promotion of the 'Japanese-style diet' that was subsequently developed in the country.⁵

Meanwhile, some new situations involving food in Japan itself had emerged since the 1980s. In regard to agriculture, several problems were caused by major changes in dietary habits, as outlined above. As the spread of Westernised diets increased in Japan, the consumption of bread, flour, meat, and dairy products surged, as did imports of food and feed crops in general, causing a significant decline in food self-sufficiency. Because Japan enjoyed economic prosperity, supported by export industries, during this period, it was hardly aware of the problem of food costs. However, as domestic agriculture production gradually shrank, a sense of crisis grew among agricultural policymakers. Serious problems – such as the rapid decline and ageing of the agricultural population, the expansion of instances of abandoned farmland due to acreage-reduction policies in response to the rice surplus, and food security concerns caused by the decline in food self-sufficiency – gradually came to the fore. Against this background, the movement to revive agriculture by reviewing traditional dietary habits expanded greatly.⁶

In addition, with a focus on medical care and health, nutritionists assessed Japan's traditional eating habits. Originally, Japanese people did not have a very high average life expectancy (65 years for men and 70 years for women in 1960) because of the low level of medical care and the general nutritional intake in the country; since then, however, the average life expectancy has increased, and Japan now has the longest-living population in the world (81 years for men and 87 years for women in

5 Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries: 'The Washoku Way; Japan's Nuanced Approach to Food', (in English). <<https://www.maff.go.jp/j/shokusan/gaisyoku/pamphlet/>> accessed 7 September 2024; Toyokawa, Hiroyuki, *Comparative Study of "Dietary Guidelines"* (in Japanese) (Toda, Japan: Nobunkyo, 1987), 88–99.

6 Nakashima, Yasuhiro: 'The Current State of Food from an Economic Perspective', in Naoto Minami ed.: *Perspectives of Food: Toward Sustainability* (in Japanese) (Nobunkyo, Toda: 2023), 315–323.

2022).⁷ The reasons for this change in life-expectancy include advances in medical care and the development of the health insurance system, but dietary habits have also had a significant impact in this regard. The co-existence, in a well-balanced manner, of a Western-style diet focused on meat and animal products, on the one hand, and a traditional dietary style consisting of high amounts of plant foods and a low intake of fat, on the other, had the result that healthy eating habits were generally realised in Japan around the 1970s.⁸

However, since the 1980s, as the preference for Western-style eating habits has steadily increased, especially among the younger generation, harmful effects, such as lifestyle-related diseases, have gradually increased. In response, higher emphasis has been placed on the benefits of the traditional Japanese diet, in recent years.

Another factor to consider in this context is the general tendency, since the 1980s, to highlight the value of the ‘traditional’ in the field of education and in the press. An examination of the overall directional change in postwar politics in Japan points to an intensified trend towards conservatism since the 1980s, and spontaneous nationalism has expanded at the general public level. In the context of these overall social trends, school education, for example, has emphasised the ‘tradition’ and ‘love of the hometown’. In addition, the importance of food culture has become widely acknowledged in society in general since the turn of the century, and in this trend, the recognition of the value of ‘traditional food’ and ‘local food’ deepened, and, thus, traditional food culture became more highly valued.⁹

Against this social, economic, and political background, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) have been actively promoting traditional food culture. The MAFF addresses the interests of primary industries such as agriculture, the MHLW pursues medical and health objectives, and the MEXT represents educational policy agendas.

7 ‘The abridged life table of the year 2002’ by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (in Japanese). <<https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/life/life22/dl/life22-15.pdf>> accessed 7 September 2024.

8 ‘Changes in Nutrition and Health of the Japanese People’: Nutrition Guidance Office, Health Division, Health Bureau, The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (in Japanese; published in February 2022). <<https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/000894080>> accessed 1 September 2024.

9 Nakamura, Mari: ‘Lost “Food Education”: From Consumers to the Public’, Motoki Akitsu et al. eds.: *New Ethics of Agriculture and Food* (in Japanese) (Showado: Kyoto, 2018), 171–198; Kawakami, Mutsuko: *Why Food Thoughts Now, Social Critics* (Shakaihyoronsha: Tokyo, 2015), Chapter 1: ‘Thinking about Japan’s Food Culture’, (in Japanese), 15–53.

Another governmental agency, the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA), which has jurisdiction over cultural administration, also began moving towards the protection of traditional food culture, albeit a little belatedly.

REGISTRATION OF TRADITIONAL FOOD CULTURE AS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL PROPERTY

The ACA's policies in this context are characterised by their emphasis on the value of food culture, and its protection, by registering it as a cultural property. However, challenges emerged before food culture gained official recognition as a cultural asset.

Cultural properties had been limited to buildings, crafts, sculptures, and other 'tangible cultural properties', while theatre, music, the traditional performing arts, and the like, had been labelled as 'intangible cultural properties'. To protect these cultural properties, the 'Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties' was enacted in 1950, and assets designated as cultural properties were subject to protection. In this context, little emphasis was placed on subjects linked to the culture of everyday life, and only a few were incorporated into tangible cultural properties as 'folklore materials'.

The 'Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties' was revised in 1954, but in its second revision, which took place in 1975, the existing term 'folk materials' was changed to 'folk cultural properties' and a new designation system for 'important intangible folk cultural properties', was established. In this way, by means of the institutionalisation of folk cultural properties linked closely to everyday life, the recognition of the value of lifestyle culture, as a cultural property, deepened. Nevertheless, it took a long time for food culture to be recognised as a cultural asset.¹⁰

In 2013, the registration of 'washoku' ('food of Japan') as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Property, presented an opportunity for making food culture widely recognised as a cultural property. In 2017, the 'Basic Law for Promotion of Culture and Arts', was amended, and the phrase 'food culture' was added to existing examples

10 Agency for Cultural Affairs, 'Fifty Years History of the Cultural Property Protection Law' (in Japanese). <https://www.bunka.go.jp/tokei_hakusho_shuppan/hakusho_nenjihokokusho/archive/pdf/93711601_01.pdf> accessed 7 September 2024.

of the culture of everyday life. This was the first step, and in 2021, part of the ‘Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties’ was amended, creating a new policy to protect food culture as a cultural property. Specifically, a ‘registration system’ of cultural properties was established ‘to actively protect a variety of intangible cultural properties, including lifestyle cultures such as calligraphy and food culture’. With the introduction of this registration system, which is less strict than the conventional designation system for cultural properties, the institutional protection of traditional food culture was officially established as a system.¹¹

The legal difference between ‘designation’ and ‘registration’ is that the former is subject to strict conditions in exchange for greater protection, while the latter involves easier conditions in exchange for less protection. In any case, these complex changes in the legal system established the legal basis for food culture to be recognised as a cultural asset. Thus, food culture was finally recognised as an intangible cultural heritage.

EXAMPLES OF THE REGISTRATION OF FOOD CULTURES AS AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN JAPAN

The process of the registration of intangible cultural properties associated with lifestyle culture involves establishing that the cultural assets are ‘items with high artistic value or historical significance related to living culture’; that is, that the items in question have recognised ‘artistic value’ or ‘historical value’ in everyday culture.¹² Registration is thus possible if either criterion is satisfied, but conventionally, formal recognition of both criteria is desirable. Therefore, registering a certain food culture as an intangible cultural property is not easy.

In circumstances where these criteria are met, the work of registering food culture as a cultural property, has begun. The person at the centre of the actual registration process is Mr. O, an investigator with the ACA. In addition, the ‘Expert Investigation Committee (Food Culture Committee)’ was founded as an organisation of experts

11 Agency for Cultural Affairs, ‘Laws to Partially Amend the Act on the Protection of Cultural Properties’ (Reiwa 3) (in Japanese). <<https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkazai/93084801.html>> accessed 7 September 2024.

12 ‘Criteria for Registration of Registered Intangible Cultural Properties and Accreditation of Holders and Holding Organisations’ (in Japanese) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Notification No. 90 of Reiwa 3). <https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkazai/pdf/93352501_01.pdf> accessed 7 September 2024.

who deliberate on the pros and cons of registering specific cases related to food culture as cultural properties. The committee has seven members including the author, who was elected as a chairperson during the actual deliberations.

In 2021, the ‘Traditional Knowledge and Skills of *sake*-making’ was the first item of Japanese food culture to be registered as an intangible cultural property.¹³ The reasons for its registration were summarised as follows:

Traditional *sake*, an important part of the Japanese food culture, has been rooted in Japan since ancient times, and its production was based on the manual techniques experientially acquired by *sake* brewers even before modern science. Despite the mechanisation and expansion of mass production since the modern era, traditional manual techniques have been passed down to the present day and are often used in *sake* brewing even now.¹⁴

It is evident from the foregoing summary that although an artistic aspect of *sake*-making is not mentioned, its historical significance is strongly emphasised.

In 2022, two subjects linked to food culture were registered as intangible cultural properties. One is ‘*namagashi* with a special confectionery name’ and the other is ‘Kyoto cuisine.’¹⁵ The registration for ‘*namagashi* with a special confectionery name’ was explained as follows:

There are various types of fresh Japanese sweets, which is one of the traditional confectioneries, and among them, *namagashi* – raw Japanese sweets made of *nerikiri* or *konashi*, both of which are a special bean paste – takes advantage of highly elaborate presentation to create a variety of traditional seasonal expressions. The design of *namagashi* is also reflected in the artistically-rich confectionery inscriptions taken from classical literature. *Namagashi* has its roots in the ‘high-class confectionery’ (confectionery made from expensive imported white sugar) produced in Kyoto during the ‘Genroku period’ (1688–1704), and it was during this period that the special confectionery name was established. As described above, ‘*namagashi* with special confectionery inscriptions’ has historical significance related to food culture and is also of high artistic value.

13 Press release by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, dated 15 October 2021 (in Japanese). <https://www.bunka.go.jp/koho_hodo_oshirase/hodohappyo/pdf/93480101_01.pdf> accessed 7 September 2024. (For more information, see <https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/shokubunka/pdf/93868901_03.pdf> accessed 7 September 2024.)

14 As for the detailed explanation, see an English brochure ‘Traditional knowledge and skills of sake-making’ <https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/shokubunka/pdf/93868901_03.pdf> accessed 7 September 2024.

15 Press release dated 12 October 2022 by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (in Japanese). <https://www.bunka.go.jp/koho_hodo_oshirase/hodohappyo/pdf/93776401_01.pdf> accessed 7 September 2024.

'Kyoto cuisine' is registered as a cultural property for the following reasons:

Kyoto, as a political and cultural centre from the 'Heian period' (from the late 8th century to the late 12th century), has greatly contributed to the development of Japanese food culture. In this city, the practice of Kyoto cuisine was formed, which expresses 'Kyoto-ness' – characteristics of Kyoto – through food which integrates cooking, facilities, and hospitality. It reflects Kyoto's traditional events, customs, and climate, and preserves the value of moderation and elegance in line with Kyoto's traditional aesthetics. The sense of the seasons and traditional events is reflected in the selection of ingredients and menus, and such aesthetic sense is expressed by means of the tableware and the room where dishes are served, as well as in the service and behaviour of the host who entertains guests. As mentioned above, Kyoto cuisine has historical significance related to food culture and is also of high artistic value.

These descriptions show that both *namagashi* and 'Kyoto cuisine' satisfy the criteria of both artistic and historical value and could thus be registered as intangible cultural properties.

In October 2024, two years after the abovementioned three registrations, a fourth item linked to Japanese food culture achieved registration as an intangible cultural property – the 'hand-knead tea-production technique'.¹⁶ In this case, the historical value is emphasised significantly, although an artistic aspect is not mentioned.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

Considering the history of Japanese food culture, which significantly developed during the Edo period, and thereafter transformed and matured during the modernisation era, many candidates can be recognised as cultural properties. The only problem is that although it is relatively easy to assess the historical value of these food cultures, it is somewhat challenging to prove their artistic value because, unlike painting, music, and the performing arts, cuisine and food culture have for long been regarded as being unrelated to art. Recent years, however, have seen the creation of new forms of artistic cuisine, such as Nordic cuisine, and a food culture that is fully valuable in terms of art is expected to be discovered in the future. Therefore, food culture researchers will be required to consciously explore food's artistic value.

16 An article of Asahi-newspaper on 20 October 2024 (in Japanese). <<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASSBM4GY2SBMUTPB00DM.html>> accessed 21 November 2024.

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