

The Conception of Rice among Japanese Expatriates in Kentucky

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ABSTRACT Recent scholarship has recognized the relationship between food and ethnic identity and rice has been associated with Japanese identity in Japan. In this paper, we looked at how rice is conceived among Japanese expatriates in Kentucky. Japanese expatriates experience three stages of finding out the best rice in Kentucky. The stages are: (1) try substitutes and feel dissatisfied, (2) find a better variety, and finally (3) feel satisfied with rice made in California. Although they appreciate the availability of Japanese rice variety in Kentucky, the symbolic meaning of rice has been somewhat disrupted among Japanese expatriates. In Japan, close spatial/social distance between consumers and producers on rice was a source of imagination for paddy field as Japanese landscape and for farmer's hard work. Yet, in Kentucky, they have difficulty to provoke such images.

INTRODUCTION

With the opening of Toyota plant, many Japanese have moved into Kentucky as the state's economic ties with Japan grow. As of 2000, 3,683 Japanese reside in Kentucky (U.S. Bureau of Census 2000). This influx of Japanese people contributed to the opening of new businesses (Japanese grocery stores and restaurants) targeting for Japanese, which made it possible for them to purchase short grain rice of Japanese varieties, unavailable before the 1990s.

As a staple food, rice has special meanings for Japanese. Some scholars view it as the symbol of Japanese soul; rice is deeply connected to the Japanese identity and the way of life (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Murakami et al. 2002). The symbolic meaning of rice as Japanese soul was formed in Japan in its long historical process. What about the symbolic meaning of rice among Japanese who live in a different society? Does it remain the same even when they moved to a different cultural and social context or is it altered as their environment changes? We explored the meaning of rice among Japanese expatriates¹ in Kentucky. In this paper, we argue that spatial and socio-cultural distance between producers and

Japanese consumers is likely to have some impacts on the meaning of rice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Expatriates and Food: Anthropological investigations of Japanese expatriates in the United States have not been conducted widely. An exception is Kurotani (2005)'s work on Japanese middle-class housewives who accompanied with their husbands assigned to work in the U.S. She explores domestic space of these expatriates by using an *uchi* (inner) and *soto* (outer) dichotomy that surround their daily life. In America, they maintain a traditional gender specific housewife role. In discussing *uchiness*, she contrasts American food with Japanese food and concludes that these housewives' preference for cooking Japanese food is a way to protect their husbands from ingesting risky (fatty and high calorie) American food. Her ethnographic study reveals the domestic life of Japanese expatriate wives in general; however, the association between Japanese food and their identity was not a scope of her study.

Food and Social Identity: In social sciences, two major traditions emerged in theorizing food, they are, idealist and materialist approaches (Wood 1995). The first approach tries to understand food as cultural phenomena that can be explained by systems of signs and symbols. For example, Levi-Strauss (1965)'s culinary triangle is a theory that describes universal

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structure in food, where raw, cooked and rotted foods are placed in two dimensions of culture-nature and of normal-transformed state of material. Also, Douglas (1982) sees food as a symbolic system of communication to distinguish acceptable taste from non-acceptable one, and thus to differentiate social groups. Along this line of research, sophisticated discussion of taste was made by Bourdieu (1984) who used stratification as a differentiating factor for taste. The second approach views food practices and preferences as a result of historical development. Against idealist approach, Harris (1987) tried to eschew the origin of food customs to unknown beginning, to avoid arbitrary portrayal of taste, and to go beyond the conception of food practices as expressions of given systems of values and beliefs (Harris 1987: 57). Ohnuki (1993), integrating both approaches, examines how symbolic meanings of rice contribute to the construction of self-identity among Japanese in Japan. Her study is significant for students studying Japanese identity in relation to food because she identifies the connection between rice as Japanese identity and the ancient imperial system, and the process of divergence of rice from the imperial system.

Critical Assessment of Previous Research and Significance of Our Study: As far as we know, our study is the first exploration to see self-identity through food among Japanese expatriates in the United States. As Kurotani's ethnography shows the difference between the life space of Japanese expatriates in the U.S. and the life space of Japanese in Japan, we may expect that Japanese expatriates' conception of rice is likely to present different representation than Japanese conception of rice in Japan.

In terms of theoretical discussion, both idealist and materialist approaches have strengths and weaknesses. Idealists both in deductive (e.g., Levi-Strauss) and inductive (e.g., Douglas) approaches tend to see symbolic representation of food as somewhat removed from historical development, thus weakening the explanatory power of how specific symbolic representation of food emerged. Levi-Strauss's universalism does not allow a particular symbolic nature of food. Also, Douglas' focus on micro-level and short-term approach is not a method that captures a large scale transformation of food and its meaning. In a nutshell, idealist approach sees symbolic meaning of food as if it is given.

Materialist approaches grew out against ahistorical and abstract nature of idealist approach which conception of food is a symbol that is static and not changing. However, materialists' placement of food practices in nutritional and economic contexts does not fully explain a situation in which a food is chosen as a symbolic meal even though it is less nutritional or economical compared to other foods available.

Ohnuki's study tries to integrate both idealist and materialist approaches. Basically, she is an idealist who emphasizes symbolic meaning of rice among Japanese in Japan. What departs her from the traditional idealist approach is that she locates symbolic meaning of rice in the development of the imperial court system instead of unknown past. However, as with other idealists, her study seems to describe rice and rice paddy as if they are symbols that do not change once they were developed as the Japanese soul. Also, her study mostly focuses on the temporal development of the symbolic meaning of rice in Japan. Only a couple of pages is allocated to discuss spatial representation in her book and it is discussed in the context of spatial boundary between settled population and the nonsettled who were excluded from agrarian Japan.

As Ohnuki has already shown how rice and rice paddy were developed as the symbols of Japanese identity temporally with about 1500 years of span, our task is not to repeat such study. Rather, we focus on a relatively short-term description of how individual Japanese forms the symbolic meanings of rice and rice paddy and uneasiness of the meanings confronted by American environment especially focusing on its spatial dimension.

RESEARCH METHODS AND RESEARCH SUBJECTS

This research is based on semi-structured interviews, informal dialogues and observations at grocery stores in Kentucky. We used a snowball sampling. The intensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Japanese² living in Kentucky in 2002 and with two Japanese who lived in Kentucky in 2004. Table 1 is a profile of the research subjects. Among the 13 interviewees, four are males and 9 are females. The participants consisted of three university students, two full-time workers and 8 housewives. The age ranged from 25 years old to 40s. Their length of stay in the

Table 1: A profile of research subjects who participated in intensive semi-structured interviews

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Years in Ky</i>	<i>Years in the U.S.</i>	<i>Family in Ky</i>
Interviewee 1	Female	25	Graduate Student	2 y	2 y	None
Interviewee 2	Female	37	Housewife	1 y 6 m	2 y	Husband
Interviewee 3	Female	31	Housewife	2 y 6 m	5 y 6 m	Husband
Interviewee 4	Male	30	Paramedic	9 y	9 y	Wife
Interviewee 5	Female	40s	Housewife	1 y	1 y	Husband & 2 Daughters
Interviewee 6	Female	37	Housewife	3 y	3 y	Husband
Interviewee 7	Female	39	Housewife	2 y	4 y	Husband & 2 Children
Interviewee 8	Male	39	System Engineer	8 y	9 y	Wife
Interviewee 9	Female	37	Housewife	9 m	9 m	Husband & A Son
Interviewee 10	Male	26	Graduate Student	10 m	4 y 10 m	None
Interviewee 11	Female	42	Housewife	4 y	4 y	Husband & 2 Sons
Interviewee 12	Female	40s	Housewife	4 y 6 m	4 y 6 m	Husband & A Daughter
Interviewee 13	Male	31	Student	2 y	4 y	None

U.S. ranged from nine months to nine years. We also obtained information from five other Japanese living in Kentucky. We made informal dialogues with them related to the research. In addition, we observed Japanese grocery stores in Kentucky and asked questions to the salesclerks.

RICE PRODUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES

In this section, we present readers an overview of rice farming in the U.S. that presents difficulties to Japanese expatriates for maintaining unchanging notion of rice as Japanese identity.

The United States planted rice on 3.33 million acres of land and produced 215.27 million hundredweight (cwt) of rice for 2001-02 Season (United States Department of Agriculture 2003). Rice accounts for only 1 percent of harvested cropland in the U.S. Rice production is concentrated on six regions. They are:

- (1) The Arkansas Grand Prairie,
- (2) Northeastern Arkansas and southeast of Missouri,
- (3) The Mississippi River Delta in Arkansas, Mississippi and northeast of Louisiana,
- (4) Southwest Louisiana,
- (5) The Coastal Prairie of Texas, and
- (6) Sacramento Valley in California.

Arkansas is the largest rice producing state, accounting for 45 percent of the national total acreage, followed by California, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Missouri. In the U.S., mainly three types of rice are produced including: long grain, medium grain and short grain rice. Long grain type which accounts for almost 75 percent of the total production in the U.S. is grown in the south where temperature is warm. Medium

grain rice (Japonica rice) is produced mostly in California and Arkansas. In California, it is a dominant type accounting for 96 percent of rice production. Japanese prefer short grain rice to medium and long grain rice, and short grain rice (Japonica rice) in California is grown exclusively for Japanese consumers.

Sacramento valley in California, where rice is produced, is flat lowland and hilly terrain surrounds it. In summer, rainfall is low and hot days continue. In winter, it expects little rains and it is warm. The soil is suited for a variety of crops and has high productivity (Mizushima 1992: 9). Although the rainfall is not abundant, Sacramento River has a large volume of water coming from Sierra Nevada Mountains and the state's irrigation project provides ample water for agriculture. Historically, Japanese-Americans have contributed to area's agriculture by introducing intensive agriculture (Mizushima 1994: 15). Given the natural, infrastructural and historical background, Sacramento valley provides a preferable condition to cultivate rice for Japanese consumers.

The characteristics of rice production in the U.S. indicate that rice production is minor, especially the production of Japanese rice variety in the nation's agriculture and the production sites are far away from Kentucky.

Taste is Learned

Taste is learned through experiences and interactions with other people. The basic patterns of eating habits are formed by the time an individual becomes adult; the early teen years are a critical period for this formation (Tahiro 2003: 148). What is delicious is defined especially through interacting with one's parents whose purchasing patterns are the important factor to form taste.

Taste is also developed by learning about what is widely deemed as delicious in public. A growing influence to define taste is observed in primary and secondary schools in Japan³. To preserve the basic Japanese eating habit and to control the declining rice consumption, Japanese Ministry of Education decided to introduce rice gradually in school lunch in 1975 (Miyahara et al.). This trend has been intensified recently. For example, some public schools began to implement school lunch services that use locally produced rice and vegetables (Norin Tokei Kyokai 2004: 11; Kyoto City School Board 2004). This is similar to Slow Food Movement⁴ and viewed as a reaction to adverse effects of mass production and consumption of foods, in which people try to recapture the control of food production, environment, culture, and their lives (Nakamura 2002: 236-237). The movement purports to protect local farmers, consumers and community (Norberg-Hodge 1998: 208-215). In addition to protect local groups, the close proximity between consumption and production strengthens an attachment to rice.

The media also influences people's eating habit. In the 1990s, Koshihikari rice variety became a boom in Japan as it was advertised and introduced in travel programs on TV as lustrous rice. With beautiful scenery and actors/actresses eating rice deliciously, the name became a synonym of delicious rice. Since then, the rice variety especially produced in Uonuma of Niigata Prefecture came to be regarded as the most delicious rice variety in Japan and became a benchmark to compare with other rice varieties.

Many of our interviewees use Koshihikari produced in Japan as a benchmark to judge the deliciousness of Japanese rice varieties made in America. For example, interviewee 1 responded to our questions:

Interviewer: Have you compare the taste of rice in America?

Interviewee 1: Yes, I have. After all, Tamaki Gold (a rice brand of Japanese variety) is most delicious.

Interviewer: What taste do you like?

Interviewee 1: Ideally speaking, I think the taste closer to Koshihikari in Niigata is the best. All rice is not so white and flavor is not so good compared to Niigata's Koshihikari.

This interview indicates the importance of Koshihikari especially produced in Niigata Prefecture for the pursuit of taste.

In Japanese grocery stores in Kentucky, the name, Koshihikari, is printed on rice packages with a large Japanese font to appeal its taste. These Koshihikari brands are produced in California and marketed almost exclusively through Japanese food trade companies (distributors) such as Japan Food Company (JFC) and Nishimoto Trading Company. Short grain rice made in California is packaged and marketed by them. Due to the small size of Japanese retailers, wholesalers have a significant power to shape its market. Except in large cities, Japanese retailers remain relatively small because Japanese population in each community is small. For example, the turnover of a Japanese grocery store in Kentucky is around 800,000 dollars a year.⁵ Therefore, although retailers have become dominant actors globally to create the social definition of foods and images, and identities of food (Marsden 1997: 183-184), rice market for Japanese in America is shaped by these specialized wholesalers who present Japanese image on Californian rice to appeal its deliciousness.

Conception of Rice among Japanese in Kentucky

Many of the interviewees remember the rice shortage in 1994 which confirmed Japanese conception that Japanese rice is the best. In 1993, Japan was hit by unusually cold weather that damaged crops by 26 %, resulting in a shortfall of rice next year. The government took an emergency measure to import 2,590,000 tons of rice (Shizuoka Agricultural Administration Office). Many stores mixed Thai rice (long-grain and dry texture) with Japanese rice and sold it as "blend rice." The taste was very different from Japanese rice; it was very unpopular for Japanese consumers (Asahi Shimbun; March 15, 1994). This experience confirmed the status of Japanese rice, that is, people thought Japanese rice has the best taste and quality. Japanese thought they should eat Japanese rice grown on Japanese land. This sentiment is reflected in many of our interviewees and in informal dialogues. For example, interviewee 7 recollects the event:

Once, we had a year of rice shortage while living in Japan. At that time, we couldn't get delicious rice. Almost all rice we could get was imported rice. They were not delicious. I think they were imported from Thailand and the United States. At that time, we could get only "blend

rice.” Japanese rice, pure Japanese rice was too expensive to buy or not carried in stores. During that time, I ate “blend rice.” I felt very inconvenient even though I lived in Japan. The rice was not delicious.

Japanese expatriates conceived that Japanese rice is the best and foreign rice is not delicious while they were in Japan. In Kentucky, they continue to search for delicious rice similar to Japanese one.

In general, Japanese people in Kentucky go through a progression of experiences when they pursue the taste. The progression to experience is; (1) try substitutes and feel dissatisfied, (2) find a better variety, and finally (3) feel satisfied with rice made in California. Japanese expatriates experience the lack of availability of Japanese rice variety differently. Some new Japanese expatriates with no information about Japanese grocery stores may temporarily experience “try substitutes and feel dissatisfied” period. Since they do not know the existence of Japanese grocery stores, they buy rice in American retail stores and they are not satisfied with the rice. However, it is a brief period because they one way or another get to know other Japanese and obtain the information. If they have friends who lived or are living in Kentucky before moving to the state, they can get information about where to buy Japanese rice variety. Therefore, they skip the period of “try substitutes and feel dissatisfied.” In the second stage, Japanese select their preferred brand from seven or eight different kinds of Japanese rice varieties that are available at Japanese grocery stores. They try to eat different brands until they find a brand that resembles to the rice they used to eat in Japan. Except for some Japanese who visit Japan often or who receive a package of rice from Japan, usually Japanese expatriates do not have opportunities to compare rice made in Japan and Japanese varieties of rice made in California. Thus, for them, the taste of Californian rice is not far from Koshihikari produced in Japan and package designs using Japanese characters are attractive. They feel that the rice made in California is like Japanese rice made in Japan and it is delicious. This is the stage three of the process. After finding their preferred Japanese variety of rice, they “satisfy with rice made in California.” They satisfy with Californian rice because the taste is very subtle and the price is one third of the rice made in Japan.

Rice and Japanese Identity

Throughout history, foods have been used as metaphors to develop collective self that distinguish it from the other people (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Food is viewed as an organizing principle of cultures (Friedlander 1999), that is, it is one of the bases to create one’s self identity as well as collective identity [family identity (Gill 1999, Douglas 1982) and ethnic identity etc]. Anthropological studies have illuminated that food and its relation to society constitute societal processes of political-economic value creation, symbolic value creation and social construction of memories (Mintz et al. 2002).

Japanese adopted rice and rice paddies as a representation of self identity to distinguish themselves from Westerners whose identities are often associated with bread and meat. Furthermore, as Japanese cultivates and eats Japonica rice, they distinguish themselves from many Asians who eat Indica rice. Koreans eat Japonica rice and the landscape of rice paddies resembles to Japanese one. Yet, Japanese distinguish themselves from Koreans by the inseparability between Japanese rice and Japanese mythology developed through politico-religious activities of Japanese emperors (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Rice from Japanese soil becomes sacred entity and by eating it, people become Japanese; only Japanese rice is the soul of Japanese. Interviewee 4 says the significance of rice harvested in Japan:

I’d like to eat rice harvested on Japanese land. Spiritually, I feel good about eating rice produced in Japan. Rice is the soul of Japanese people. As Japanese, rice should be always with us.

Similar sentiments were expressed in other informants. The image of Japanese land and rice harvested there are inseparable and it provokes the spiritual aspect of Japanese.

When Japanese expatriates in Kentucky were in Japan, eating rice was mundane behavior and it was taken for granted. This implies that eating rice in daily life did not recall their identity as Japanese. Only when daily activities are suspended, their needs for identification emerge. The rice shortage in 1994 and a quest for Japonica rice when they moved to Kentucky are such occasions.

Spatial/Social Distance that Attenuates Japanese Imagination for Paddy Field and Farmers’ Hard Work

So far, we described Japanese expatriates’

conception of rice that confirmed their Japanese identity. Here, we describe their uneasy feeling about the constructed meaning of rice which is associated with nostalgia and morality.

While Japanese expatriates were living in Japan, they thought that in America it would be difficult to buy Japanese variety of rice. However, after coming to Kentucky, they discovered that they could purchase Japanese variety of rice easily. They appreciate Japanese rice variety and its availability in Kentucky. Appreciation for Japanese rice, however, declines as they are accustomed to it. The declining appreciation of rice occurs in parallel to the difficulty to imagine for the landscape of paddy field with hard working farmers in America. We see this decline when we look at how rice is treated by some interviewees. In their American houses, rice is discarded when it gets older or there are other dishes. In Japan, their mothers often taught them not to waste foods especially rice. In America, rice is not expensive compared to Japan and there are plenty of foods. They started to acquire a habit of wasting foods and rice is no exception. When they throw away rice, sometimes, they remember mothers scolding them, yet they are now in the habit of wasting foods. Interviewee 5 describes the habit in relation to farmers' hard work:

In Japan, rice was very expensive. But here it's very cheap. I was very attentive not to waste rice while in Japan. But here I throw away left over rice feeling that's OK. Then I instantly feel that my mother is scolding at me. I think it very often. I remember what my mother said to me at the very moment when I throw them away.

My mother told me that we should feel sorry for farmers or your eyes will be crushed if you waste rice. In Japan, in a suburb, I saw paddy fields and I closely felt farmers' hard work. But here we don't see that kind of scenery.

When they eat rice in Japan, they were able to imagine paddy fields which provoked sympathetic feelings toward hard-working farmers. Japanese in Japan are spatially and socially close to paddy fields and molded nostalgic and moral image. They can imagine how rice is produced by farmers in the field. A grain of rice becomes a source of imagination for its production and labor, and wasting rice creates guilty feelings among them. How to treat a grain of rice becomes a moral issue; rice is the soul of Japanese and respecting farmer's hard work constitutes what Japanese should do. In contrast,

in Kentucky, rice's association with farmer's hard work gradually becomes tenuous.

Imagination for paddy fields that associated with nostalgia also becomes weak. Their image of paddy fields that provokes nostalgia was formed in Japan by their experiences through seeing paddy fields and in media. Rice is planted everywhere in Japan and even urbanites can see paddy fields easily by school field trips or other travels.

In contrast, for Japanese expatriates in Kentucky, it is difficult to see paddy fields in the U.S. even in media. Sacramento Valley where Japanese variety of rice is produced is more than 2,000 miles away. Since it is not a site for tourism, it is unlikely that Japanese expatriates will ever see the paddy field in their stay in the U.S. Therefore, they are somewhat puzzled with rice made in California. Interviewee 6 comments:

It's strange to me to encounter new rice, more delicious rice, and improved rice for the last three years here in the United States. Recently, I heard that the rice is not made in paddy field. It is made in field with no water. How can it be possible to produce fluffy rice in such a dry place? I was very surprised.

Apparently, she confuses rice production in California with rice production in southern states. Nevertheless, her account indicates a difficulty to imagine rice field in America. Differences in climate, topography, scale of production and planting methods shape different landscapes. For Japanese, a terraced rice field is a beauty and a small plot of flooded rice field with a ridge stirs nostalgia. However, it is difficult for them to conjure up the image of rice field in the U.S. that is vast flooded field or dried field with an airplane flying over.

Japanese expatriates are spatially and socially separated from the paddy fields and rice farmers in the U.S. and have difficulty to feel nostalgia and mold moral image. Because of the disconnection, rice becomes one of the consumer goods which do not carry much cultural meanings. Consumers are alienated⁶ from producers and products, resulting in the decrease of appreciation toward them. This is probably happening to Japanese expatriates in Kentucky. They are puzzled with the disassociation between rice and its carrying baggage of nostalgia for Japan and of morality.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we used both idealist and

materialist approaches to understand the conception of rice among Japanese expatriates in Kentucky. They have learned what good taste of rice is through experiences in Japan and appreciate its taste and cultural baggage. In Kentucky, they appreciate Japanese rice variety for its availability because they misconceived that it is hard to obtain in the United States. In this study, the issue of distance between production and consumption emerged. As the average pound of food in America is transported for 1,200 miles before reaching to consumers (Norberg-Hodge 1998: 209), it is understandable that consumers' imagination for farmers' hard work fades away. We also identified the declining connection between rice and nostalgia for Japan.

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NOTES

- 1 In the late 1980s, Japanese firms started to invest in Kentucky. The direct investment to Kentucky grew dramatically during the 1990s and as of 2004, 137 Japanese companies operate in the state (Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development 2004). As a consequence, many Japanese families have moved to Kentucky. This inflow also includes students who study at colleges in Kentucky.
- 2 We exclude three interviews here because one is insufficient data and the other two interviewees have the U.S. citizenship that does not apply to the concept of Japanese expatriates.
- 3 In this paper, we discuss Japanese expatriates' conception of rice and social conditions both in Japan and Kentucky. It is confusing for some readers but it is necessary to discuss Japanese contexts as our informants' memories about rice were formed in Japan.
- 4 The Slow Food Movement started in Italy during the late 1980s. The name, "slow food" was invented to contrast to the "first food" restaurants. The objectives are: to preserve a world of unique flavors, local food customs, and quality food and wine (Pietrykowski 2004: 310).
- 5 A personal communication with a salesclerk at a Japanese grocery store in Kentucky in 2003.

- 6 Marx explains alienation from the production side; in the capitalist society where workers work for bourgeois, workers are alienated from the act of production, products they produce, their fellow workers, and their own human potential. Social relations of capitalism dehumanize workers manifested as alienation. What Marx did not analyze was the consumption side of analysis on alienation. Although this is beyond the scope of this paper, we think Marx's concept of alienation can be a good source of imagination to study alienation experienced by consumers of agricultural products.

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