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Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Governing food and families in Japan

Researcher

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Summary

The Japanese family is in a period of transition, and this is reflected in the organization of meals at home. This project aims to elucidate the ongoing changes in Japanese families through tracing and analyzing how meals at home have been organized in Japan since 1945. In particular, it sheds light on the commercialization of housework, or more specifically, the outsourcing

of meal cooking, resulting from the recent transformation of the demographic and economic structure. Also, it will examine how the normative discourse of food consumption produced by educators, social critics and food experts is functioning in a society with families that are rapidly changing.

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Research questions

- In what ways have the organization of family meals at home changed since 1945 in Japan?
- To what extent has the outsourcing of family meals permeated the everyday life of Japanese people? How has outsourcing changed the popular pattern of meal organization at home?
- How did the expansion of women's participation in paid work impact this process?
- What kind of discourse has been produced by educators, social critics and food experts on the changes of the organization of family meals? How and in what ways do Japanese people perceive, interpret and react to such discourse? How is the normative discourse of food consumption functioning in a society with families that are rapidly changing?



Research design

The project was divided into the three stages:

- The first stage focused on the initial literature, documentary research and collection of statistical data in order to build a foundation of discursive samples. At the end of this stage, a two/three week research trip to Japan was undertaken to collect discursive samples.
- The second stage involved the examination of these data and their organization for each journal article. Missing data were identified and a supplementary research trip was conducted to fill gaps in the data.
- The third stage involved the writing of articles.

Key findings

- The overall popular pattern of organization and consumption of family meals are certainly changing. Japanese people tend to eat out more, purchase ready-made or packaged food more, while the proportion of individuals eating meals on their own is increasing. Dietary and culinary practices are becoming more hybrid, departing from the rice-centred 'Japanese-styled' meals. These changes are ongoing in the structural transition of global food production and trade. The Japanese state is in particular sensitive to the global dynamics of food production and trade due to its extremely low food sufficiency level. With these structural conditions, the issues of food safety and a healthy diet are making a come-back to the national political agenda.
- In dealing with the issue of food safety and diet, the Japanese government has introduced some institutional changes in its food governance system including the setting up of the government body to conduct scientific research on food risks and disseminate food risk information to the public. A nation-wide healthy eating campaign has also been initiated with the legal, administrative and financial support of the national government. The campaign engages in disseminating a wide range of knowledge about food, diet and cooking. Schools are primary venues for such activities, targeting children, but families are also receiving attention as a site of organizing and consuming family meals. In so doing, the official food discourse, which often has strong normative and nationalistic connotations, is conveyed to Japanese people.
- The examination of the ways in which food risks are governed and the healthy eating campaign is evolving illuminates how Japanese people's everyday lives are intersected through the 'governing of the national population' (Foucault 2007) in contemporary Japan.

Publications

Takeda H (2008) Delicious food in a beautiful country: nationhood and nationalism in discourses on food in contemporary Japan. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 8: 5-29.

Takeda H (2008) The governing of family meals, in P Jackson ed. *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.