



Series Soy Sauces of Asia

『Asian Soy Sauces in Japan』

Food coordinator and cooking culture researcher, **Nami Fukutome**

Throughout Asia, there are countless varieties of soy sauce made from soybeans and other grains. Previously in this “Soy Sauces of Asia” series, I have reported on my research into local soy sauce manufacturing and usage in South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. For this article, I have switched my viewpoint to focus on the usage of Asian soy sauces in Japan.

As the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games approaches, we are witnessing a rise in overseas visitors to Japan, not only to urban areas, but to rural areas too. A record number of 24 million people visited Japan in 2016, of which more than 80% came from Asian countries (Fig. 1).

There were over 2.3 million foreign national residents in Japan in 2016 (Fig. 2), with close to 30% of those from China, nearly 20% from South Korea, and large numbers from the Philippines, Brazil and Vietnam. Trends since 1991 (Fig. 3) show the overall numbers have nearly doubled, with notable increases in foreign residents from China/Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, among others.

In July 2008, the relevant Japanese government ministries, including the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, established a goal to welcome 300,000 international students to Japan by 2020. In 2015, the number of foreign students enrolled in Japanese educational institutions exceeded 200,000 for the first time. Clearly there has been a steady increase in foreign nationals living in Japan.

Tourists typically try to enjoy a variety of local Japanese foods during their short stays. In contrast, foreign nationals living in Japan tend to miss the tastes of home and want to make dishes using seasonings they are accustomed to. How do these residents, some who have lived in Japan for years or even decades, as well as Japan-born second and third generation residents, reproduce the flavors of their homeland?

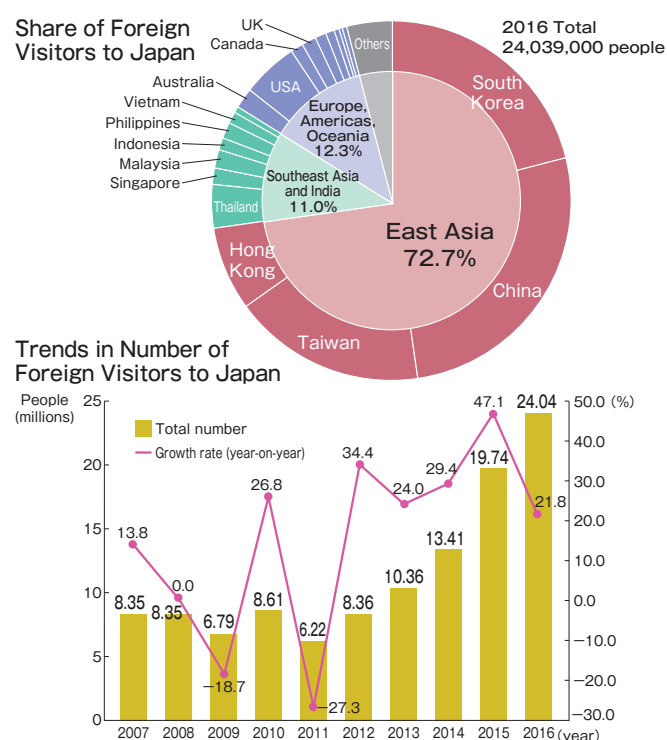
When I spent a year in France in my early twenties, I missed soy sauce-flavored broths and Japanese pickles. I loved the delicious French bread sandwiches at first, but I grew tired of them and yearned for the taste of home. With Japanese soy sauce and *soumen* noodles from an Asian food shop, I made soup noodles with a small amount of kombu tea and a sprinkling of

bonito flakes I had brought from Kochi. These simple yet nostalgic flavors were incredibly comforting. I remember feeling so grateful that I could buy Japanese soy sauce even in a small town in a foreign country.

I spoke to foreign nationals living in Japan, who have strong connections to Asia, to find out which seasonings are indispensable to reproducing the flavors of home. Focusing on soy sauce, I wanted to know if there are viable substitutes among Japanese soy sauces, and how these foreign nationals satisfy their desire for authentic flavors in their homes and when eating out at restaurants. In addition to individuals from the four countries covered in my previous studies – South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines – I also interviewed people from China, Taiwan and Indonesia, which each have their own distinctive soy sauce varieties. I asked Japanese and foreign national chefs and food researchers, who have introduced dishes from Asian countries, how they recreated the taste of home in Japan, or if they established a new version of their country’s cuisine relying solely on ingredients available in Japan. While my findings in this report are limited to the Tokyo area, I hope they may serve as a base for future research in this field.

Figure 1. Foreign Visitors to Japan by Country/Region (2016) and Annual Trends (2007-2016)

[Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO)]



Nami Fukutome

Born in Kochi Prefecture, Japan. Ph.D. Food coordinator and part-time lecturer at academic institutions including Ochanomizu University and Jissen Women's University. Work includes: comparative studies on ingredients, usage in cooking, and recipe expressions in Japan and overseas; food culture studies; and tasting workshops introducing Japanese food culture.

Figure 2. Number of Foreign National Residents in Japan (medium to long-term residents and special permanent residents) by Nationality/Region, and Proportion by Prefecture

[Statistics by Ministry of Justice: Statistics on foreign national residents in Japan, June 2016]

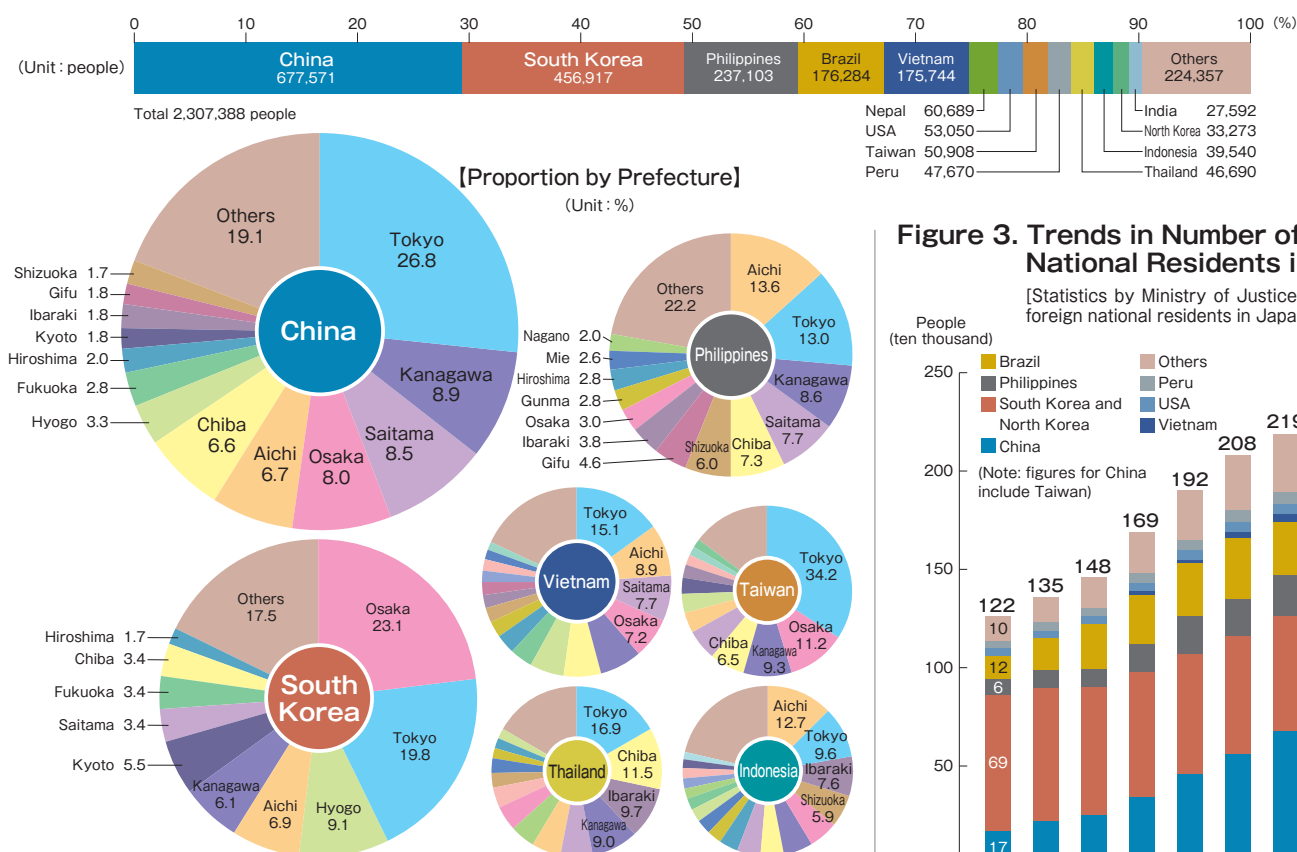
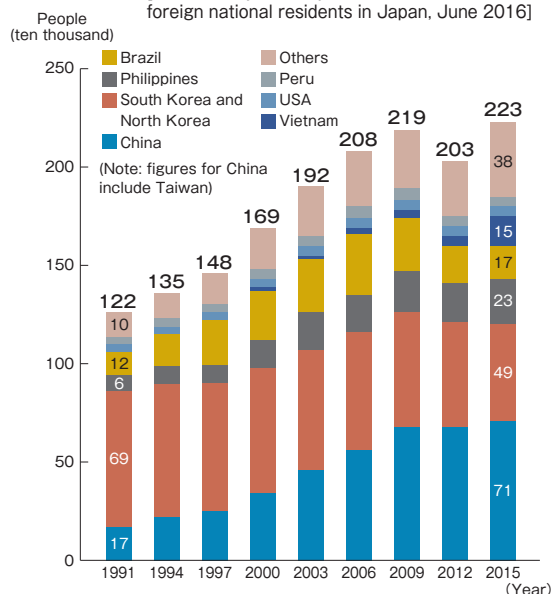


Figure 3. Trends in Number of Foreign National Residents in Japan

[Statistics by Ministry of Justice, Statistics on foreign national residents in Japan, June 2016]



China and Taiwan

Soy Sauces in China and Taiwan

Japan has long been influenced by China, with the transmission of rice cultivation methods in the late Jomon period (approximately 1,500 BCE), by Japanese envoys to the Sui and Tang dynasties, by early trade with the Song and Ming dynasties, and later by trade with the Qing dynasty through Nagasaki. Pastes made with food preserved and naturally fermented in salt, known as *hishio*, were imported from continental Asia and already in production in Japan during the 700s. The cereal-based version of this fermented product was called *koku-sho* and is considered the prototype for soy sauce and miso. Japan went on to develop its own koji mold-based fermentation and brewing techniques, resulting in well-established soy sauce businesses in both the Kansai and Kanto regions in the late 1700s, and a uniquely Japanese style of soy sauce with different aromas and flavors to the soy sauces available in China.

The two main varieties of Chinese soy sauce are *laochuo*, referred to in Japan as Chinese tamari soy sauce, and *shunchuo*, or Chinese *koikuchi* soy sauce. *Laochuo* is thick, black in color, and has salty flavors with a touch of sweetness and a bitterness like caramel. *Shunchuo* is light in color but has prominent salty flavors, making it most suitable for salting. In

Japan, the major brands of both varieties are available online and in Asian grocery stores.

In Taiwan, the Chinese characters for soy sauce are the same as in Japan (酱油). The top brand, Kimlan Soy Sauce, has a distinctive yellow label, and is similar to Kanto-style *koikuchi* soy sauce in taste and appearance. Japanese soy sauce is an obvious substitute for this variety, however, the nostalgic flavor of home the Taiwanese call *jiang yo gao* (soy paste) has no such alternative in Japan. Used as a sweet dipping sauce for dim sum, its starchy consistency has prompted importers to label it in Japanese as “Taiwanese thickened soy sauce”.

In Tokyo and surrounds, Yokohama Chinatown with its many Chinese grocery stores is a great hub for shopping and information exchange. The basement of Ameyoko Center in Ueno also offers a wide variety of Chinese and Taiwanese ingredients and seasonings, and I was told there is a whole building specializing in Chinese goods in Ikebukuro, Tokyo. On my visit to the latter, I found one floor dedicated to Chinese books, a floor of Chinese restaurants, and a supermarket at the top selling a large variety of food items. Much of the seasonings section was taken up by the main soy sauce brands, but also included oyster sauces and fish sauces. A neighboring shelf displayed sesame

paste (*zhima jiang*), sweet soybean-based sauce (*tian mian jiang*), spicy bean paste (*douban jiang*), and XO sauces, showing that China has a much more diverse selection of fermented seasonings than Japan. They are formulated into complex yet coherent flavors that stand up well to rich fats and oils in the foods.

At the supermarket, I talked to a woman from Taiwan who was examining a bottle of soy sauce, holding it up to the light and looking at the label. She said she was checking the ingredients for unnecessary additives and looking for sediment. She typically uses Japanese soy sauce at home, but specifically came in search of Chinese soy sauce for some Chinese recipes she found online. She made the special trip by train as she felt the seasonings from home would help achieve more authentic flavor. Likewise, in a Chinese restaurant on the third floor of the building, the native Chinese chef cooks up authentic cuisine pleasing customers with flavors based on seasonings which are all imported from China. It seems that the authentic taste of home is not possible without the right seasonings.

In contrast, many restaurants with native Chinese chefs only use Japan-made seasonings. At a restaurant in Jimbocho in central Tokyo, Chinese language

dominates in a kitchen led by a chef from Shandong Province with an all-Chinese service team. The menu is written in Chinese (with Japanese translation) but the food does not contain a single Chinese seasoning: the soy and oyster sauces are all produced in Japan. The chef comments that “Chinese soy sauces have all sorts of flavors; Japanese soy sauces have great aromas and are really tasty”. It may be about adjusting to Japanese taste preferences, but it seems that even Chinese diners are satisfied by the tastes created with Japanese seasonings.

Chinese Cuisine in Japan

In the 1960s, star chefs of Chinese cuisine began to appear in Japan, using various media to introduce authentic Chinese cuisine throughout the country. Best known are Cantonese chef Tomitoku Zhou, and Kenmin Chen of Szechwan Restaurant (opened in 1958), who popularized authentic Sichuan style *mabo-dofu* in Japan. Chen, who incidentally is the father of Iron Chef Kenichi Chen, created a recipe for *mabo-dofu*, which is archived at the NHK TV program “Today’s Cooking” (*Kyo no ryori*). In the recipe, he specifies *douban jiang* and *tian mian jiang* from China, but includes no details on the sake and soy sauce. Thus we can probably assume that Chen intended his Japanese audience to use Japanese products as valid substitutes for these seasonings.

In the 1990s, a new generation of chefs started gaining attention, including Hikoaki Tan of Canton Meisai Akasaka Rikyu, who was born in Yokohama Chinatown in 1943, and Turandot Yusenkyo chef, Yuji Wakiya. It is interesting to note that Japanese soy sauce is used in most of the recipes shared publicly by these chefs, who understand well both Japanese taste preferences and authentic Chinese flavors.

In cookbooks, too, such as the 1997 *Shin Chugoku Ryori Taizen*, a kind of encyclopedia of Chinese cuisine, most of the recipes use the generic terms for sake



Chinese grocery store (Ikebukuro, Tokyo)



Taiwanese woman examining an item



Chinese soy sauces available in Japan

VEGAN Washoku in Japan

In different places around the world, people ascribe to plant-based diets such as vegetarianism, veganism and the Buddhist cuisine known in Japan as *shojin ryori*. Apparently, it is difficult for such individuals to find appropriate alternatives for Japanese-style dishes. Two popular categories of Japanese cuisine are sushi and yakitori, which center on fish and chicken, respectively. And miso soup and noodle soup stocks are often based on dried bonito and sardines, making it hard to avoid fish-based dishes. In addition, while *shojin ryori* is available at Zen temples or kaiseki restaurants, these are not generally accessible or affordable options for many.

At Loving Hut, a vegan restaurant in Jimbocho, Tokyo, over 90% of visitors are resident foreign nationals or tourists from abroad. With the owner, Rie Yoshii, from Taiwan, and the chef from China, the menu contains mostly Chinese-style dishes, but a number of signature dishes were created in response to customer requests for vegan Japanese food. Vegan *Kabayaki*, an imitation grilled eel dish, is made from crushed soybeans, lotus root purée and rice flour, with nori added to look like eel skin. Yoshii invented the recipe after hearing that some Zen temples serve plant-based versions of grilled eel dishes. I was especially amazed at the *norimaki* seaweed rolls containing fried tofu colored with turmeric to look like omelet, and the realistic appearance of the ‘squid’ on *nigiri* sushi.

The restaurant uses *koikuchi* soy sauce made with organic soybeans by a major Japanese manufacturer, but leaves soy sauce out for customers concerned about gluten. There is a theory that fermentation breaks down the gluten in wheat protein thus removing the risk of gluten allergy, however, the restaurant puts the customers’ feelings first and avoids using it altogether. One option would be to use Japanese tamari soy sauce made only with soybeans.



Vegan kabayaki (*modoki* imitation grilled eel) sushi



Loving Hut owner, Ms. Rie Yoshii



Chinese *laochuo* (left) and Singaporean *shunchuo* and *laochuo* (middle and right)



JASMINE's braised pork belly



Azabu Choko's Sichuan mabo-dofu



Clay pot rice with braised shark's fin

and soy sauce. In the practical component of university instruction on Chinese cuisine, teachers tend to specify Chinese varieties of *douban jiang*, *tian mian jiang* and *zhima jiang*, but assume the use of Japanese soy sauce. Many food researchers have released cookbooks on the theme of Asian cooking in recent years offering recipes for dishes that can be made at home with common ingredients and condiments. One suggestion is to use Japanese *hatcho miso* instead of *tian mian jiang* when making *mabo-dofu*, which seems a reasonable substitute in terms of flavor. There are many variations in seasonings and spices used in Japanese *mabo-dofu* recipes, but most surprising to many Chinese nationals in Japan is the almost total lack of the tongue-numbing Sichuan pepper called *hua jiao*.

While the second and third generations carry on the flavors of the original star chefs, younger chefs in their 30s and 40s are now driving the industry. To learn their preferences regarding soy sauce, I spoke to two such chefs: Yusuke Yamaguchi of Chuka Kosai JASMINE (Shanghai and Hangzhou cuisine) and Ryosuke Tamura of Azabu Choko Kofukuen, known for Sichuan cuisine. Like Wakiya, these two chefs are in a class of their own, adhering to the framework of Chinese cuisine but creating new forms of it with Japanese sensibility and Japanese produce.

Chef Yamaguchi is known for cuisine from Hangzhou, south of Shanghai. He said he cannot make his signature *dongpo rou* (braised pork belly) dish without *laochuo* (Chinese tamari soy sauce), with its distinctive reddish tinge. For the Chinese, the deep color is what makes it look delicious. Yamaguchi's exquisite dish is not as salty as you imagine from the deep color,



Yusuke Yamaguchi, JASMINE

and achieving the balance of flavor as well as the brilliant deep color is only possible with a tamari soy sauce. The *laochuo* he uses is one of the major brands in China, but because of its noticeable bitter aftertaste, the chef prefers a combination of Singapore-made *laochuo* and *shunchuo* for stir-fries and other dishes. While a wide variety of *laochuo* exists in mainland China, the limited selection of imported varieties in Japan presented a challenge. Ingenuity in the search for the right flavors means this Japanese chef now uses Singapore-made Chinese-style soy sauce at his restaurant of authentic Chinese cuisine in Japan.

Chef Ryosuke Tamura takes a world view as he creates "authentic Sichuan cuisine to be enjoyed in Japan". Japanese soy sauce is used if it results in the appropriate delicious flavors, but others such as the signature 'Sichuan mabo-dofu' require Chinese *laochuo* to produce the dark color to contrast with bright red Chinese hot pepper oil. Meanwhile, in his Sichuan-style shark's fin soup, Tamura uses just a dash of Japanese *koikuchi* soy sauce. The flavor of soy sauce is almost unnoticeable in the light beige sauce that tops the clay pot-cooked shark's fin steamed rice, but the taste is rich and robust, with its combination of flavors and deep *umami*.

The recipe for braised whole shark's fin differs across the four major Chinese cuisines: Beijing, Guangdong, Shanghai, and Sichuan. In Shanghai, the soy sauce flavor is dominant; in Sichuan, it is subtle. Regional cooking shows quite broad differences in when and how soy sauce is used, thus it would be interesting to look in more detail at the use of soy sauce as a seasoning in simmered Chinese dishes.



Ryosuke Tamura, Azabu Choko

Korea

In Issue 24 of this magazine, I wrote in detail on the use of Korean soy sauce, or *ganjang*, in South Korea and Japan. This time I sought to understand what value is placed on Korean-made Korean-style soy sauce among people strongly connected to South Korea but living in Japan. To state the conclusion first, it seems that *ganjang* can be replaced by Japanese soy sauce in many cases. A survey of several Japanese-language cookbooks on Korean cuisine found no recipes specifying *ganjang*. In addition, even in

South Korea, *yangjo ganjang*, or Japanese-style soy sauce brewed with koji, is common and used in many recipes from dipping sauces to pickling.

I interviewed three international students from South Korea about their personal preferences. Two of the students use Japanese soy sauce, but the third student visits Shin-Okubo, the hub for all things Korean in Tokyo, and buys the same Korean variety her mother uses at home. When I asked them what signifies the taste of home, all three said *doenjang jjigae* (Korean

stew) and *guk* (Korean soup), both made with homemade *doenjang* (fermented soybean paste), as well as their mother's handmade *kimchi*. This is because these dishes capture the essence of each family and mother's flavors. In contrast, most Korean families use industrially produced varieties such as *yangjo ganjang*, which is made uniformly in large quantities and tastes very similar to Japanese manufactured soy sauces. There is no longer the idea that soy sauce should be handmade. When soy sauce is handmade according to traditional Korean methods and rested in clay pots, known as *Chosun ganjang*, the resulting flavors are totally different, complex and variable.

Korean grocery stores in Shin-Okubo are frequented by Korean residents and students, and Japanese fans



Seasonings at a Korean grocery store in Shin-Okubo, Tokyo

of Korean drama and pop music alike. In one store, I found three soy sauce varieties from one large manufacturer and I asked a Korean clerk which one I should use to season the Korean soul food *miyeok guk* (seaweed wakame soup). She told me that the soup stock is extracted from meat and seasoned with salt alone, and would be overwhelmed by regular soy sauce. Thus, in South Korea,

just a touch of pale soup soy sauce called *guk ganjang* is added to balance the flavor. Blended dark-colored soy sauce (*jin ganjang*) adds too much color, and Japanese *usukuchi shoyu* (light-colored soy sauce) changes the taste entirely. *Guk ganjang* clearly has a

special role in this seaweed soup, but is probably not enough of a reason to buy this specific variety.

Ganjang gejang (soy sauce-pickled crab) is a popular dish at a Korean restaurant in Shin-Okubo that opened more than 30 years ago. I had eaten this dish in Seoul previously and found the color of the liquid in this version pale, only to discover it was made with Japanese soy sauce. In the absence of *ganjang*, using the Korean dish name is not entirely accurate, but suggests that *ganjang* and Japanese soy sauce are in fact regarded as valid substitutes.



Soy sauce-pickled crab made with Japanese soy sauce (Shin-Okubo, Tokyo)

Meanwhile, I visited a Korean restaurant in Aoyama, Tokyo. It is run by a Korean woman who came to Japan at age twenty, and her son. She proudly makes her original marinade for the *bulgogi* grilled meat dish



Bulgogi meat in homemade blended marinade (Aoyama, Tokyo)

using a combination of Japanese soy sauce, Korean *ganjang*, and grated fruits. For her, this combination produces the perfect balance of flavors. This shows a keen awareness of the differences between the two sauces, and very particular preferences which can perhaps be attributed to the fact that she is the first generation of her family to live in Japan.

Thailand

Si-iw-khao: an Essential Ingredient in Thai Cuisine

The year 1979 marked the opening of the first Thai restaurant in Japan (*Chiang Mai* in Yurakucho, Tokyo; now closed), but it was not until the 1990s that Japanese people started to show a real interest in Thai cuisine. One of the best-known restaurants serving authentic Thai food, *Keawjai*, opened in 1989 in Kotobashi to Tokyo's east. In 1987, food researcher, Akiko Ujiie began the import and sales of Thai ingredients, and subsequently contributed to the popularization of Thai cuisine with her 1992 publication entitled *My Thai Cookery* (Shibata Shoten). Thus, it is still less than 30 years that restaurants of authentic Thai cuisine, and the ingredients and seasonings to make Thai food at home have been generally accessible in Japan.

I visited *Keawjai* for the first time as a university student and was shocked by the sweet, sour and spicy taste of *tom yum goong* (hot and sour soup). I was led to believe that Thai uses fish sauce instead of soy sauce, and while it is true that many Thai dishes are salted and flavored with fish sauce, as I reported in Issue 25 of this magazine, soy sauce also features regularly in

home cooking and is indispensable for Chinese-style Thai dishes. Just as Japanese cuisine is not only sushi, soba and *gyudon* beef bowls, Thai food is not limited to *tom yum goong*, green curry and *pad thai* stir-fried rice noodles. The cuisine is much more diverse, as is the use of seasonings. I set out to discover how and where Thai nationals living in Japan satisfy their taste buds.

My first stop was the Thai Education and Culture Center in Kinshicho (Sumida Ward), Tokyo's so-called racial melting pot. Japanese people gather at the center to learn Thai language, cooking, massage, and carving, among other skills. I went to interview my kind, cheerful and beautiful cooking class teacher, Chonsita Damrongtitarat. I asked her about her use of seasonings in the Thai cooking classes. She said she uses only imported Thai products to convey the authentic taste of Thailand, and never suggests Japanese soy sauce as an alternative. She finds that the students and their Thai friends and acquaintances have no trouble acquiring Thai ingredients and seasonings through Asian supermarkets and online shopping.

Fundamental to Thai cuisine is the balance of five taste elements: sour (*príaw*), sweet (*wǎan*), salty (*khem*),



Seasonings on sale at Keawjai: one brand each of *si-iw-khao* and seasoning sauce



Pad si-iw (stir-fried rice noodles)

oily/creamy (*man*), and spicy (*phèt*), with the addition of aromas that tie it all together (*hõom*). The element that I describe as oily/creamy brings richness to cooking through the addition of oils or fats. In Japan, we have five elements related specifically to taste: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami. Thai cuisine does not recognize umami, nor is bitterness regarded a necessary flavor component. Instead, Thai cuisine seeks to add rich taste, such as that from coconut oil, and the heat from spice. The overall evaluation of flavor is in whether the disparate components come together for rounded balance, called *klomklom*.

When I asked my teacher about must-have seasonings in Thai cuisine, she named fish sauce, salt, sugar, and *si-iw-khao*, in that order. *Si-iw-khao* means 'white soy sauce', and is a non-viscous, pale-colored variety with strong salty flavor. Some Thai dishes require shrimp paste or fermented soybean seasoning, but Damrongtitarat's placement of *si-iw-khao* soy sauce in the top four essential items for Thai home cooking shows us the fundamental nature of soy sauce flavor in Thai cuisine. When formulating dishes, she first establishes the salty taste with fish sauce and salt; next she adds sweet and sour elements with sugar and lime juice, for example; and finally, she adds *si-iw-khao* to round out the aroma, color, and saltiness. In Japan, we talk about adding soy sauce for aroma and umami, but this is simply referred to as aroma in Thailand, where the concept of umami does not exist. The framework of flavor comes from fish

Thailand Education and Culture Center cooking classes - typical soy sauce-based dishes



Tao huu song krueng (tofu dressed in starchy sauce)



Plaa nueng si-iw (steamed fish)



Lecturer: Chonsita Damrongtitarat

sauce and salt, with *si-iw* soy sauce in a supporting role. In only a few cases *si-iw* serves as the key seasoning, such as *Plaa nueng si-iw* (steamed fish in *si-iw*), and *Tao huu song krueng* (tofu dressed in starchy sauce).

I visited several Thai restaurants, including one approved by the Thai Ministry of Commerce's certification system, looking for *si-iw* cuisine on the menu. *Pad si-iw* (stir-fried rice noodles in soy sauce) is typically available, especially for children and people who cannot handle spice.

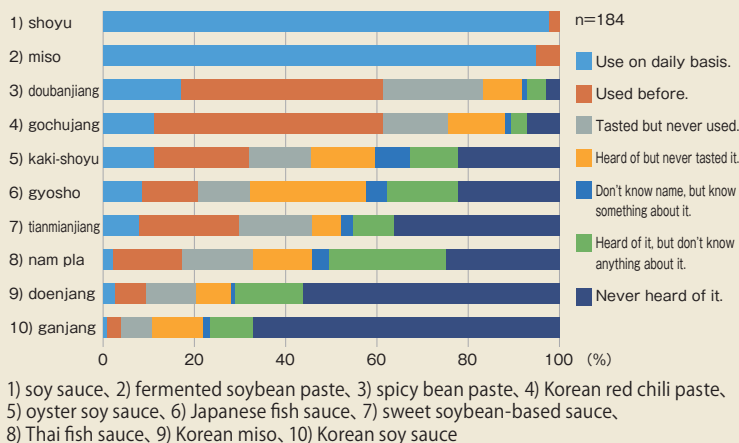


Thai Ministry of Commerce restaurant certification system sign

Rich *si-iw* sauce coats the chewy, sticky noodles in this well-seasoned and delicious dish. However, after learning about the concept in Thai cuisine of finding the perfect balance from complex flavors (*klomklom*), I found the *si-iw* flavor somewhat one-note.

Familiarity with and Usage Frequency of Asian Fermented Seasonings Survey of female college students in Tokyo (January 2017)

I conducted a questionnaire survey with Japanese female college students to ascertain their familiarity with and usage of the Asian soy sauces and other fermented seasonings covered in this paper. For each seasoning, students were asked to choose from a scale of 1~7, where 1 indicated 'Never heard of it' and 7 equated to 'Use on daily basis', with options in between for whether they have tasted it or used it in cooking. I found that the students are familiar with ten of the seasonings named, but 80~100% of students have never heard of the remaining items. [Note: the students were asked according to the commonly used Japanese terms for the items; English translation below.] Students were also asked to assign points from seven to one, to rank which of the seven relevant countries/regions' food cultures (including Japan) they most wanted to learn more about. The averages showed most people interested in Japan (5.2) and Korea (5.0), followed by China/Taiwan (4.4), Thailand (3.7), Vietnam (3.2), and ended in a tie between Indonesia and the Philippines (2.3 points).



Other fermented seasonings with low recognition or frequency of use: kecap ikan, xi dau, nuoc tuong, kapi, tauco, tahure, tausi, bagoong, si-iw, petis, mam, toyo, dau hao, chao, tuong, patis, tao chiau, nam mun hoi, nuoc mam, kecap asin, kecap manis, aekjeot, yulu, jeotgal, haoyou, laochuo/shunchuo

I also asked my teacher about the tabletop condiments usually served with *pad thai*. She told me that Thai people use the seasonings anytime they feel the flavor is insufficient, even on a soy sauce–based dish like *pad si-iw*. The choices include a bottle of plain fish sauce and a jar of fish sauce with condiments mixed through, as well as vinegar-pickled red chili peppers, granulated sugar, and chopped red chili peppers. In Japan, it is not common to blend different kinds of fermented seasonings like miso and soy sauce or fish sauce and soy sauce, but in Thailand, fish sauce is often combined with *si-iw* soy sauce to achieve balanced flavor. Seasoning sauce is a Thai ingredient we are not so familiar with in Japan. It is a soy sauce–flavored liquid with added amino acid liquid, and is commonly found on the dining table in homes and restaurants. A dash in cooking is said to enhance the unique fragrance of the sauce and bring balance to a dish. In a Thai chef's cookbook I referenced, most recipes called for a combination of fish sauce, *si-iw* and oyster sauce, but the stir-fry recipes typically suggested the addition of a small amount of seasoning sauce. I spoke to one Thai woman working at *Keawjai*. Having



Tabletop condiments for *pad thai*

married a Japanese man and taking up residence in Japan, she went to the Thai Education and Cultural Center to learn authentic Thai cuisine. At home, she uses Japanese *kombu shoyu* (kelp-flavored soy sauce), which she finds resembles the green cap seasoning sauce made by Golden Mountain that is sold at her restaurant. She said either sauce works well to finish off fried rice.

At a store in Kinshicho, Tokyo, which doubles as a Thai ramen restaurant and grocery store, I found *si-iw-khao*, *si-iw-dam* (black soy sauce), and seasoning sauces, and was struck by the Thai oyster sauces, which were much brighter in color than typical Chinese ones. A female Thai clerk at the store told me that even though she eats Thai food at the restaurant, at home she makes Japanese-style food, and can therefore make do with just Japanese soy sauce.

Thai national residents in Japan, it appears, use authentic Thai seasonings when making Thai food, but switch easily to Japanese seasonings for other dishes. This flexibility and choice is available to them thanks to a well-established distribution system for Thai produce and seasonings in Japan.



Thai ramen restaurant and grocery store

Vietnam

For many Japanese people who hear the phrase ‘ethnic cuisine’, the first cuisines that come to mind are Thai and Vietnamese. Slightly greater distance to these countries seems to heighten the sense of ethnic differences, compared to neighboring Chinese or Korean cuisine. Despite being in the same region and having rice as the staple in common, differences emerge, according to Naomichi Ishige^{*1)}, because Thailand and Vietnam primarily belong to the fish sauce cultural sphere, where fish sauces such as *nam pla* or *nuoc mam* are used more frequently than grain-based sauces. However, we do know that grain-based soy sauce is consumed daily in both countries and that food cultures around soy sauce and fish sauce vary even within a country, as with South versus North/Central Vietnam (see Issue 25).

*1) Ishige, N. (1993) Cultural Aspects of Fermented Fish Products in Asia. In: Lee, C., Steinkraus, K.H., and Reilly, P.J.A. eds., *Fish Fermentation Technology*, pp 13-32.

I interviewed two international students from Vietnam. Our discussions revealed two distinct patterns in terms of familiarity and satisfaction with the Japanese diet, which seem to be typical of international students.

One student works part-time at a Vietnamese restaurant, regularly enjoys Vietnamese staff meals, and buys seasonings and ingredients at specialty Vietnamese stores so she can cook Vietnamese at home. She has a strong need for and satisfies her

desire for the taste of home. The other student brings back seasonings and ingredients such as *nuoc tuong* from her visits home to Ho Chi Minh once or twice a year. She uses them sparingly until they run out, and then makes do with Japanese soy sauce until her next trip. In the process of making do, it seems you can get used to something and your attitudes to certain flavors change. While she hated the flavors of Japanese seasonings at first, she does not mind them anymore, even seasoning her fried rice with Japanese soy sauce. It seems that adapting to life in Japan goes hand in hand with adjusting to the tastes of Japan.

An internet search revealed many Vietnamese grocery stores spread across Tokyo. I visited the first one on the list and found a lot of rice flour noodles and wrappers for fresh spring rolls at the front, and *nuoc tuong* Vietnamese soy sauce, also sold under the alternative name of *xi dau*, at the back.

Asked about which *nuoc tuong* he uses the most, the shop owner responded *hao vi* (thick soy sauce). Non-viscous, with strong soy sauce flavor and intense umami, it is suitable for cooking and in dipping sauces too. The store also stocks large bottles of *Chin Su*, a seasoning



Vietnamese grocery store in a station-front shopping street (Otaku, Tokyo). Chinese and Thai ingredients are also available

sauce with high market share in Vietnam. I felt that both sauces had balanced, savory flavor that could create the right flavor profile in fried rice or soup without the help of any other seasoning.

In a Vietnamese restaurant in Takadanobaba, Tokyo, all but one of the nearly 30 lunch items are seasoned with *nuoc mam*. The only one made with *nuoc tuong* is fried rice, cooked with Maggie brand *thanh vi* (light soy sauce). A generous amount is poured into the rice, which contains chicken fried with sesame oil, ginger, onion, and a small amount of soup. The flavor differs from Japanese soy sauce, but the rice and soy sauce combination is certainly familiar. The international students I spoke to said they sometimes make fried rice with *nuoc tuong*, looking for that nostalgic flavor,

just like when Japanese living overseas seek the comforting flavor of *tori-kamameshi* (pot-cooked chicken rice). The three most important components of any cuisine are clearly ingredients, cooking method, and seasoning.

At the Vietnamese restaurant in Kinshicho, the chef from Ho Chi Minh does not cook any dishes with *nuoc tuong*. Simmered pork, typical of Chinese-style cuisine



Com · ga · tay · cam (clay pot chicken and rice with ginger)



Boiled pork with eggs

in Vietnam and usually made with *nuoc tuong*, is flavored at this restaurant with *nuoc mam*. It results in a transparent but salty broth, to which sugar is added for sweetness, flavoring the pork throughout. With a broth delicious enough to drink, this dish is perfect with rice. *Nuoc mam* does not have a fishy smell, rather just a subtle aroma in the aftertaste, which may lead you to believe the pork had been simmered in Japanese *usukuchi shoyu* (light-colored soy sauce).

Vietnamese *nuoc mam* tastes milder than Thai *nam pla*, and the two cannot be substituted for each other. However, some Thai sauces can substitute for Vietnamese *nuoc tuong*. In fact, when I asked the restaurant which *nuoc tuong* they use in the dipping sauce, they showed me seasoning sauce made by the Thai Golden Mountain brand. They buy it at an Asian grocery store less than a minute away in Kinshicho. When I asked the chef in Takadanobaba what he thought, he agreed that the above seasoning sauce tastes similar and could be used as a substitute. Seasoning sauce, commonly used in Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines, is a mixed type sauce made by adding brewed soy sauce to an amino acid solution. It corresponds to mixed soy sauce in Japan. With very little flavor difference, the sauces can seemingly be used interchangeably, as with Thai and Vietnamese oyster-flavored sauces. Chinese oyster sauces, on the other hand, do not substitute well.



Thai seasoning sauce in a Vietnamese restaurant

Indonesia

Home to approximately 260 million people (2016), the Republic of Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world, following China, India and the United States. Many Japanese know that the etymology of *jagaimo*, the word for potato in Japanese, is in *jagatara-imo*, brought to Japan via Jakarta by the Dutch in the 16th century. Japan had occupied Indonesia during World War II, but the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1958, and since the 1970s many Japanese companies have entered the Indonesian market. Economic exchange is flourishing, and yet there is much more room for development in terms of cultural exchange through food. When thinking of Indonesian cuisine, *nasi goreng* and *satay* come to mind immediately, but beyond that I am not sure. And because I have no real experience with Indonesian soy sauce, I don't know much about it. I visited the Indonesian Embassy in Higashi Gotanda, Tokyo, to find out about the



Ms. Widani (left) and Ms. Prasanti (right), Social and Cultural Department, Embassy of Indonesia in Japan

spread of Indonesian cuisine in Japan and the use of soy sauce.

The selection of Indonesian ingredients at generalist Asian grocery stores is limited, thus many Indonesians living in the Kanto region shop at Toko Indonesia in Shin-Okubo, Tokyo. Customers can also buy through the online store, an essential service for Indonesians living all around Japan.

Indonesian soy sauce includes *kecap asin* (dry) and *kecap manis* (sweet). The latter is highly viscous with a shiny black color and a strong sweetness peculiar to palm sugar. Mostly sweet and a touch salty, the balance of flavor reminded me of sweet soy sauce used on *mitarashi* dumplings, a traditional Japanese sweet, although the color is considerably darker and the taste richer.

Kecap manis is often confused with Thai sweet soy sauce, even though the flavor is very different. Ms. Widani, an official of the Indonesian Embassy, was quite resentful that the Thai variety had been incorrectly used in soup served at an Indonesian culinary fair in Japan. Tasted side by side, the flavor difference is obvious, thus the mix-up is a clear indication that Japanese people are far from familiar with Indonesian cuisine and seasonings.

Kecap manis is used in cooking and as a tabletop seasoning. Rice topped with a fried egg and plenty of *kecap manis* is apparently a popular daily dish in Indonesia. The same combination is also often found in the Philippines and Thailand, where Maggie seasoning sauce is the go-to topping, resulting in an entirely different flavor.

I had lunch with the embassy officials at an Indonesian restaurant near the embassy. The sound of the local language and the writing on the blackboard built my expectation for an authentic meal. Many customers were solo Japanese men, who may have been seeking the nostalgic flavors they experienced during a stay in Indonesia, contrasting with scenes at Thai and Vietnamese restaurants, where a significant proportion of customers are groups of women. Customers pour *kecap manis* from a bottle on the table onto their



Indonesian restaurant near the embassy



Nasi goreng (right) and satay (left back)

food. My order of *nasi goreng* (Indonesian fried rice) came with a side of satay chicken. Already in a rich, thick peanut butter sauce, the chicken was also topped with *kecap manis*. The rich sweetness from generous amounts of palm sugar is balanced by underlying salty flavors to create the distinctive flavor of Indonesian cuisine.

One dish in which *kecap manis* is indispensable is *semur daging* (Indonesian-style beef stew). I include the reference here for the recipe ^{*1)} I was taught as

part of a food education information program I was involved in. Dewi L Ihza Mahendra, the former ambassadress of Indonesia to Japan, is well known for cooking and has published a Japanese-English bilingual cookbook on Indonesian cuisine. To gain deeper understanding, Mahendra recommends a cookbook by a chef of Indonesian cuisine, William Wanso. In addition, I found a website, produced by the Indonesian government and containing beautiful videos on thirty dishes representative of Indonesian food culture, to be very easy to follow. ^{*2)}

Despite these resources, information on Indonesian cuisine is still limited. Cooking and food culture is often introduced in a new market by chefs cooking formal cuisine in restaurants, and by food researchers who provide classes or cookbooks so people can prepare casual dishes at home. Although many food researchers specialize in Thai or Vietnamese cuisine, there are few active researchers specializing in Indonesian cuisine in Japan.



Cookbooks by William Wongso (left) and Dewi L Ihza Mahendra (right)

*1) Semur daging, recipe from episode 475 on the *Oyako de cooking* food education site
<https://www.kids-station.com/minisite/cooking/recipe/detail/475.html>

*2) The 30 Indonesian Traditional Culinary Icons, Embassy of The Republic of Indonesia HP, <http://www.embajadaindonesia.pe/the-30-indonesian-traditional-culinary-icons/>

Philippines

Philippine Sari-sari Store and Community

Philippine soy sauce, called *toyo*, has long been produced according to Japanese brewing technology. Although it has a different flavor, it is closer to Japanese soy sauce than the viscous Chinese-style soy sauces of Thailand. Many Filipino people use Japanese soy sauce regularly, having been exposed to the leading Japanese manufacturers through a booming sushi culture. However, some households still use Philippine-made seasonings on a daily basis, and some restaurants place their focus on reproducing traditional Philippines tastes. In the Philippines, local shops called *sari-sari* stores are the Philippine version of a convenience store,

selling canned goods, seasonings, snacks and daily necessities. Many also have adjoining restaurants. The largest populations of Filipino residents in Japan are found in Aichi and Tokyo, followed by Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba. There is no single 'Filipino town' in Tokyo, unlike Shin-Okubo for all things Korean, but at least in the Kanto area, wherever the Filipino community exists, you can always find a *sari-sari* store. While Thai, Vietnamese and other Asian foodstuffs are typically sold at generalist Asian grocery stores, the existence of specialty stores in Japan selling only products made in the Philippines is probably owing to this *sari-sari* store business category.

I visited a *sari-sari* located on a prefectural road in southern Saitama Prefecture, home to many major corporate distribution centers. Families arrived by car for their weekend shopping, and a small girl exclaimed at the sight of large green bananas from the Philippines, prompting her Filipino mother to explain how to prepare them. A woman working in the shop told me she uses *toyo* instead of Japanese soy sauce at home simply because the taste is different. The store seems to really make Filipinos feel at home, with its extensive collection of the tastes of the Philippines.

The pork *adobo* I ate at the adjoining restaurant was made with *toyo* from the Philippines' leading manufacturer. *Adobo* is a typical *toyo*-based dish, but each family has its own recipe, changing the protein or adding vinegar. The *adobo* I enjoyed that day had the perfect flavor combination – a touch of sweetness, generous acidity from the vinegar, and salty soy sauce flavor – and it was simply delicious with white rice. On Sundays, the restaurant provides a buffet from 11:30am



Pork adobo
Made with *toyo* from a major Philippines manufacturer sold at the *sari-sari* store

until 7:30pm, costing 1500 yen for 90 minutes. I was told that a shop in Chiba also offers a Filipino buffet once a month, attracting many from the Filipino community. Many Filipinos are Catholics, and Sundays are reserved for gathering at church and catching up with family and friends. Once a week, they can taste the nostalgic flavors of Philippine cuisine, exchange information, and do some shopping at the *sari-sari* store before going home. Filipino communities such as these are typically found around *sari-sari* stores and Filipino restaurants.

The store I visited also provides a delivery service, including a broad range of goods from fresh papaya and frozen meats to prepared dishes and seasonings by the case.

The store services a Filipino-managed food town several kilometers away, as well as individual customers working in that area, meeting the demand from both business and retail sectors.



Sari-sari store mail order catalog
Prepared foods, fresh and frozen products, and seasonings by the case

Summary

The countries of Asia have a number of casual dishes in common. With similar ingredient combinations, the primary difference is in the seasoning. One example is simmered pork belly seasoned with *koikuchi shoyu* (dark-colored soy sauce) in Japan, *laochuo* in China, either *nuoc tuong* or *nuoc mam* in Vietnam, and *toyo* in the Philippines. The seasoning is really what makes the dish and tells the story of the flavors of each country.

The question then is, how can you achieve the flavor of home in the absence of your home country's seasoning sauces? In the search for substitutes for Asian seasonings, it becomes clearer which items are similar and which are totally different. In a rapidly globalizing world, this discussion may seem trivial, but I feel that the blurring of borders is also affecting our tastes and preferences. In terms of raising individuals capable of playing an active role anywhere in the world, it is just as challenging to have someone with no clear identity or preferences as it is to have someone who cannot live without Japanese rice and miso soup. As rice and fish consumption decreases, there is grave concern for the protection and transmission of *washoku* traditional Japanese food culture. How many

young people today talk passionately about their preferences for local soy sauce with their *sashimi*, or their favorite dashi or miso soup flavors? I believe that being able to speak about the food culture of one's own country is an important part of someone's charm and identity.

In this paper, I have reported on how the soy sauces of Asia are used in Japan, and cases where Japanese soy sauce can be substituted, based on interviews with a variety of people from the relevant countries living in Japan. While similarities exist in soy sauce-based Asian cuisine, there are certainly more differences. Focusing on the similarities and differences and comparing Japanese soy sauce with the soy sauces of Asia enabled me to look at the big picture, so I could compare and contrast Japanese food within the broader context of Asia and Asian cuisine.

There is no mistaking that *shoyu*, Japanese soy sauce brewed with koji, is different to Indonesian *kecap manis* soy sauce sweetened with palm sugar. I can hardly wait for the day when people around the world use words from the original language to name the soy sauces of Asia, showing respect for and a deeper understanding of those differences.