Encounters and Transitions in Foodways: Japan and the West

General Remarks on the Perpetual Transition in Culinary Culture

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General Discussion: Transition in Culinary Culture

Culinary culture is constantly evolving. The various socioeconomic forces that promote and stimulate change have strong links to the time and location where these changes take place; thus, factors that bring about changes in food are based on particular conditions created at a specific time and location. However, even when taking into consideration the differences in time and place, a certain degree of universality can be found in culinary transitions that occur in different societies, and similar forces can be identified in these processes. In this article, I will provide some general remarks concerning the dynamics in food culture, as it has been illustrated in recent academic studies on the subject.

Creation of Culture

According to Ulf Hannerz, a human being possesses culture–meanings and meaningful forms that can be manipulated with some degree of deliberateness–and is also, at the same time, possessed by culture, shaped by it and made somewhat robotic by it. In the particular instance of culinary culture, this definition implies that specific "foodways" which are established in a society determine the way in which members of that society feed themselves, as well as influencing the manners related to the production, distribution and preparation of food within that society. Meanwhile, these foodways are continuously transformed by the perpetually changing circumstances of food consumption and production. In other words, food habits develop in close relationship with the economic and social conditions of a specific region in a specific time-span, while simultaneously influencing those conditions.

In the case of 20th century Japan, for example, industrialization and urbanization has had a major impact on the production, distribution and consumption of food. At the same time, however, changes in diet have provided incentives for the further progress of industrial development and social transition in Japan. Environmental problems caused by new methods of food processing and distribution and obesity among children owing to increased fat intake are two examples of the negative influence brought about by the Westernization of eating habits in Japan. On the other hand, the expansion of the food and catering industries has strongly stimulated the Japanese economy, which contributed to improved employment conditions and created more career opportunities for women–clearly positive consequences of the modernization of Japanese foodways. The Japanese society that is continuously influenced by these and other developments will undoubtedly undergo further dietary changes in the future.

Profit and Culinary Culture

Because it is essential in supporting human life in the physiological sense, and because it is an indispensable component of our daily existence, culinary culture is intricately linked to the economy. Eating habits are, however, also used as a means of social display, or a symbol of social status. There is an evident tendency for the upper social classes in various societies to maintain a diet that is different from and more refined than that of the lower social classes. It is precisely this mechanism that is one of the sources of economic gain for those who provide sumptuous foods and luxurious tableware. Before focusing on the connection between food and prestige, however, let us first focus on food and profit; for culinary culture is an important source in the development of economic activity.

There are those who gain or lose economically as a result of changes in foodways. Those who profit from existing eating habits are likely to attempt to prevent change, while those who expect to profit from the diffusion of new eating habits will support them. When considering changes in food, it is necessary to keep in mind that this kind of economic conflict always occurs, and that fundamental market mechanisms such as the principle of supply and demand and reductions in production costs owing to technological progress are intricately related to culinary transition as well.

Sidney Mintz is one of the first anthropologists to examine the relationship between eating habits and economic development. In his 1985 book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, he describes the history of sugar consumption in England, the Netherlands and the United States, and links its popularization to the rising sugar supply in Europe via sugar cane plantations in the New World. Sugar was first used in Europe for medicinal purposes, and by the 15th century it began to appear regularly on the tables of nobility. Along with the introduction of tea and coffee in the 16th century, sugar became increasingly popular among the well-to-do.

The 18th and the 19th centuries are regarded as a turning point in the history of sugar consumption in Europe. The annual per capita intake of sugar in England, for example, increased 25 times between 1700 and 1809, and an additional five times by the end of the 19th century. By the late 19th century, the image of sugar in Europe had changed from that of a luxury item to a daily food. Mintz argues that this transition had little to do with the cultural and nutritional needs of the European populations; rather, it occurred primarily as a result of pressure in the pursuit of profit among the producers and distributors of this commodity.

Drawing on Mintz's sugar research, Michael Jiménez studied the diffusion of coffee in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries. Coffee was brought to the U.S. in the 18th century by immigrants from Europe. As in the case of sugar, coffee was first considered a luxury out of reach of the common people. This situation began to change in the 19th century. Between 1830 and 1870, for example, the annual per capita consumption of coffee doubled. By the beginning of the 20th century, the annual per capita intake had increased to 5-6 kilograms (12-13 lbs.) and coffee, once a luxury item, became the national drink of the American people. Jiménez argues that the popularization of coffee in the U.S. was made

possible mainly through technological progress that led to cost reductions in coffee processing and transport. He also points out that vigorous advertising and sales policies carried out by coffee distributors had a powerful impact on the popularization of coffee.

Throughout the 20th century, the influence of the food industry on eating habits grew constantly. Along with the advance of capitalism, changes in culinary culture came to be increasingly dominated by the pursuit of profit by those involved in the production, processing and distribution of food. The nature of this influence should not necessarily be perceived as negative. Industry efforts to sell new foods undoubtedly introduced diversity into our diets and played an important role in the worldwide diffusion of local foods and eating customs.

Adel Den Hartog describes a relatively early example of the link between culinary globalization and the food industry in his study of the diffusion of milk and dairy products in Indonesia. He argues that in the early 20th century, European food industries began to look upon Indonesia, a Dutch colony at the time, as a new market for their products.

The Dutch had introduced dairy cattle husbandry into Indonesia in the 17th century. However, owing to the tropical climate, dairy supplies remained low throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and extremely high costs limited distribution. Although condensed milk produced in the U.S. and Europe was also imported during the latter half of the 19th century, it was targeted primarily at European communities within Indonesia. Generally speaking, milk and dairy products were practically unknown to the local population before the 1920s, when large-scale sales campaigns for condensed milk began to be carried out by Dutch producers. After gaining independence, the Indonesian government continued to promote the further dissemination of milk and dairy products as a means of improving national health.Subsequently, they are now considered daily commodities. Den Hartog's study illustrates how the efforts of the food industry to open up a new market for their products contributed to the rapid popularization of dairy products in Indonesia.

Prestige and Culinary Culture

Along with the economic aspects, prestige is another strong force that shapes our foodways. Many sociologists and ethnologists are convinced that social prestige has been the primary motivation for the refinement of culinary culture all over the world.

Günter Wiegelmann, a forerunner in ethnographic food research in Germany, classifies food innovations into two categories: "famine innovations" and "expensive innovations." The former term describes a situation in which people are forced to eat things they had not previously consumed owing to shortages in their daily food, and which they continue to consume even after the original food supply is recovered. In other words, a new food item enters the culinary repertoire of a society or a social group out of necessity. This is well illustrated by the rise of potatoes from famine food to the core of the meal in many Western societies.

The term "expensive innovations" refers to a situation wherein a new food item enters the diet of a society or a social group as a result of the urge to emulate the food habits of those who have a higher social status. Wiegelmann points out that in the case of "expensive innovations," food is removed from its physical function of sustaining the body, and becomes linked to the identity of the consumer. He argues that changes in culinary culture do not generally occur because of hunger, taste or other factors related to food as such; but rather, as a result of social competition.

Other scholars also have dealt with food as a status symbol. Jack Goody, for example, in his 1982 book *Cooking, Cuisine and Class,* compares the connection between prestige and food in European, African and Asian societies. Stephen Mennell's famous work *All Manners of Food,* in turn, attempts to identify the reasons for the considerable differences in culinary development between France and England, and attributes them to the comparative strength of social competition in the two countries.

Goody argues that African societies, regardless of class, maintain a simple diet composed solely of locally available ingredients. Hence, the wife of the head of the family prepares meals, regardless of social class. In contrast, conspicuous differences can be found in the dietary habits among different social classes in ancient Egypt, China, India and Europe. The culinary culture of the upper classes of these societies was much more refined than that of the lower featuring many extravagant imported ingredients and preparation on food by professional male cooks. Goody concludes that the lack of stratification in African diets and the clear class distinctions expressed in food that are observed in the cultures of India and China are related to the differences in social organization of these societies. The stronger the social hierarchy, the more intense the uniqueness of the culinary culture of the elite.

Conclusions

In this brief article, I have attempted to point out the principal forces that determine dietary transitions. It goes without saying that culinary cultures are influenced by many more aspects than the few issues discussed here. Nevertheless, prestige and profit deserve particular attention as the two major pressures that determine culinary change.

The work of Wiegelmann and other scholars introduced here has been essential to the progress of the sociological study of food. Until the 1980s, Western scholarship over-emphasized the role of "cultural patterns" in diet, and underestimated the dynamic character of foodways. Claude Levi-Strauss, for example, searched for social codes when examining food habits without taking historical backgrounds into consideration. Thanks to Goody, Mintz and Mennell, it is now generally accepted that culinary culture is constantly evolving, and that it is shaped by specific forces that evolve in specific times and locations.

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