Special issue: *Exploring the Path of Soy Sauce* (part 2)

Where Did Soy Sauce Come From?

In search of the roots from China to the Thai interior

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Map of Xishuangbanna and neighboring countries

Summary of Part 1

Soy sauce has become a seasoning widely used the world over. When and how did soy sauce first make its way to Japan? I began my journey in search of the roots of soy sauce in China.

During my journey from Shanghai to Hangzhou and Jing Shan Si , I saw a wide variety of *hishio*, a fermented seasoning which is also the base from which soy sauce is made, with histories dating back hundreds of years. I also witnessed the creation of Chinese dishes utilizing soy sauces with a wide variety of colors, flavors and aromas. I was finally able to discover the "illusive homemade soy sauce" made from soybeans in Xishuangbanna on the southern border of Yunnan Province. I was impressed by its mysterious and time-intensive method of production.

I next made my way to Korea where I witnessed the making of soy sauce and *miso* from *misodama* (balls of *miso*) in exactly the same way they were made in China's Yunnan Province. I came to the opinion that the Path of Soy Sauce followed the route from the Chinese mainland to the Korean peninsula and finally to Japan.

No Life Without *Nuokmam*

I arrived in warm Ho Chi Minh City at the end of January. Ho Chi Minh City is said to have the most street vendors of all cities in Asia, selling any item imaginable. More than half of these street vendors sell foods. A common dish at these street stalls is a noodle soup with noodles made of rice flour. These soups may contain beef, chicken, pork, or shrimp in addition to a variety of vegetables. Ho Chi Minh City residents of all ages seem to relish this extremely aromatic dish.

I decided to try the dish at a stall with a logo of a cow's face, which naturally specializes in beef noodles. The size of a serving seemed to be a good quantity for breakfast or a late dinner. The noodles, though being slightly firm, were quite soft and slid smoothly down my throat. The soup, though primarily of soy sauce flavor, had just a hint of fishiness. This flavor comes from *nuokmam*, a soy sauce which utilizes fish in its processing. *Nuokmam* is a very common and traditional seasoning used throughout Vietnam.

The Vietnamese people say that there is no end to the day or night without this fish soy sauce known as *nuokmam*. *Nuokmam* is a common ingredient in the sauce used to flavor *yakitori* (grilled chicken), and to flavor the spread in Vietnamese-style sandwiches. Not unexpectedly, therefore, *nuokmam* is widely used to season famous dishes such as spring rolls, as well as common meat and seafood dishes, soups, stews, sauces and dressings. The color of *nuokmam* is a lighter brown than standard Japanese soy sauce, and the aroma of fish is distinct. The flavor of *nuokmam* is at once captivating. With *nuokmam* used so widely, Vietnam can clearly be said to be a country and culture integrated in the sphere of soy sauce cultures.

In large Vietnamese cities such as Ho Chi Minh City, people generally eat breakfast at one of the street stalls. Following this local tradition, I headed out for breakfast. I saw a young woman of about twenty years old having her breakfast before heading off to work. Placed before her was a large plate of rice with a dish of fried vegetables and another dish that looked like salted fish organs. A small dish of *nuokmam* was also provided as a condiment that the young woman used generously to flavor her fried vegetables, which she then piled on top of her rice. Before I knew it, this young woman had completely finished all of the food in front of her and was on her way to work in seemingly high spirits.

Despite eating such a large quantity of rice, this young woman like most Vietnamese women, was very slender and delicate, belying the common belief that the small, fine build of Vietnamese people is due to a lack of food or nutrients. I asked a knowledgeable tour guide about this. He told me that although the Vietnamese don't enjoy an extravagant diet, young women work very hard to maintain a figure suitable for the traditional *aozai* dress. Caring mothers will sacrifice their own meals so that their daughters can have a well-balanced meal with sufficient protein and nutritional value. Flavoring with *nuokmam* helps to fulfill this ideal. The combination of the mother's care in providing well-balanced meals and the fulfilling flavor of nuokmam

The "bread basket" region on the way to *Quy Nhon,* Vietnam. The blessings of the Mekong Delta are overwhelming.

ensures a satisfying diet without excess. In this way, healthy, slim daughters grow up without worrying about being unable to wear the *aozai* dresses or a stocky build. It would seem that a slim figure achieved early on is easily maintained throughout life.

At dinnertime, I entered a government restaurant where I found a group of young women looking very attractive in their *aozai* dresses. I asked them, "What is *nuokmam* to you?" Upon hearing my question, the young women began laughing. I thought that they seemed very happy to discuss nuokmam with me. Their responses included, "…it's a necessity.", "…it's the flavor of home.", "…it's the flavor of my mother's cooking." and "…it's something we can't live without." Now I understood. To the Vietnamese people, *nuokmam* is something they can't live without.

I began to wonder how *nuokmam* is made. I decided to head north on Route 1 to visit the *nuokmam* factory in the well-known coastal city of Quy Nhon.

A fishing port near *Quy Nhon.* The people here live in close harmony with the water.

Fish Soy Sauce, a Gift of Nature

Quy Nhon is the capital city of Binh Dinh Province on the central coast of Vietnam. The beauty of the long coastal beaches with their beautiful white sand is beyond description. The central coastal region of Vietnam is known for having some of the best fishing grounds in the country with large numbers of mackerel, horse mackerel, sardines, shrimp, crab and squid which are exported around the world. This bounty from the sea is also the source of ingredients for *nuokmam*, the national seasoning.

In a *nuokmam* factory situated outside the city of Quy Nhon, I found that *nuokmam* is made from small fish that have been pickled. The fish are prepared as they would be for salted fish organs, and the liquid filtered off and used for *nuokmam*. The unique flavor comes from the workings of a microorganism that decomposes the fish proteins. Though basic *nuokmam* is completed after a fermentation of one hundred days, high-quality, clear *nuokmam* requires one year of fermentation and ripening. *Nuokmam* is quite salty with an amount of salt equal to one third the amount of fish added. The manager of this factory explained the production of *nuokmam* to me using body language and gestures.

First, small fish are placed on top of small stones arranged in the bottom of a wooden pail. Salt is then poured over the fish and another layer of fish added. This layering is repeated until the pail is full. A variety of fish are used, including mackerel, horse mackerel and sardines, but all are small. The factory manager also told me that since larger fish are eaten at home and the smaller fish are used for such purposes as the making of *nuokmam*, these gifts of nature are used completely with nothing wasted. Though historically *nuokman* was made at home by individual families, these days most people buy factory-produced *nuokman*.

In Vietnam, it is said that fish is to rice as a child is to its parents. Though this refers to the tradition of rice being the main dish with side dishes consisting of fish caught in the sea or rivers, this does not mean that the fish was simply boiled or grilled. Fish soy products are also included when considering the aspect of fish in the Vietnamese diet. Just as with salted fish organs, a wide variety of fish soy products can be found for sale in the markets of Ho Chi Minh City.

In Japan, the salted organs of squid are well known. In Vietnam, however, fish soy products are made from a wide variety of ingredients including small shrimp and fish. These products are often made by simply pickling the seafood in large quantities of salt. In a Ho Chi Minh City market, I decided to try a fish soy product made of shrimp. Though it was extremely salty, I imagined that this saltiness must be of great importance. Not only would lengthy preservation be possible, but the saltiness also means that only a small amount is necessary when eaten together with rice.

I came to realize the wisdom behind the saltiness of Vietnamese fish soy products. Only a very small amount is required to enhance the deliciousness of rice, which can then be eaten in larger quantities. The idea that fish is to rice as a child is to its parents seems to actually mean that a meal is possible if rice and fish soy products are available. It is this wisdom that led to the birth of fish soy sauce, *nuokmam*, from fish soy products.

Fish soy sauces are still produced in large quantities in coastal regions of China such as Guangdong and Fukien Provinces. Production here, too, has a long history. If we assume that China is the origin of the "*hishio* culture," we can assume that fish soy products and fish soy sauce were brought to Vietnam from China by early settlers. The Vietnamese, then, refined and assimilated *nuokmam* to make it the national seasoning it is today.

In Japan, the yearly consumption of soy sauce is estimated at approximately ten liters per person. In Vietnam, however, the yearly

An agricultural village near Quy Nhon. Time seems to have stopped in this village surrounded by palms.

consumption of *nuokmam* is estimated at approximately twelve liters per person. Clearly, the Vietnamese people love their *nuokmam!*

The Curiosity of Meat Hishio Found in Taiwan.

There is a wide variety of hishio in Taiwan as well. I wonder if they originally came from the mainland.

Taiwan has a population of approximately 23,000,000. The population of Taiwan is generally divided into one group consisting of those who lived on the island prior to World War II and a second group consisting of those who immigrated to the island from the Chinese mainland during and after the war. There is, however, a third group of mountain-dwelling people, known as the Takasago, who are considered the true natives of the island. This group currently consists of approximately 300,000 people who originally spoke a language similar to that spoken in Indonesia.

A fish-market stall in Taiwan. *Sushi* and *sashimi* made from fresh fish are popular dishes in Taiwan.

Running north to south through the middle of the island of Taiwan is a three-thousand meter class chain of mountains with the coastal mountains to the east. The Takasago people resided in these mountain belts. When people from the Chinese mainland began to come to the island, some of the Takasago were assimilated and moved to low-lying regions. Some, however, remained in the mountains. Those who remained in the mountains are still often referred to as the mountain people and maintain their own language, culture, and continue to live in traditional ways. It seems that among these people, the ancient "*hishio* culture" has also remained. Today, the Ami people can be found living in the approximate center of the eastern side of the coastal mountains. I decided to visit an Ami village to find out just how *hishio* has been passed down through the generations.

I took a bus along the coastal route to an Ami village located approximately sixty kilometers south of the city of Hualien. When I arrived at the town nearest to the Ami village, a man from the village had come to meet me. A travel agent in Hualien had arranged for him to be my guide.

The Ami village continues to be separated from the cities developed by mainlanders and was located on a high hill. Though the Ami traditionally lived higher up in the mountains, they have moved down the east side of the coastal mountains where they lead a primarily agricultural lifestyle.

The next day, my Ami guide led me through the village from where we could see white smoke spiraling up the seemingly endless mountains. Fields were being burned in preparation for the planting of new crops. When I told my guide that I'd like to take a closer look, he kindly drove me up the mountain.

We found a middle-aged couple burning their fields in which corn and peanuts would be planted. As my guide watched the fields burning, he said that when he was young, he would go hunting once the work of burning the fields had been completed. Originally, the Ami were a hunting people living high up in the mountains. Even after moving down the mountains, however, the mountains continued to be a food source for the people.

The Ami used both traps and dogs in their mountain hunting. The traps they used can be divided into two general groups. One was used for trapping large animals such as wild boar, deer and mountain goats. These traps were placed high up the mountain and required spending the night in small huts.

The second type of trap was used for catching small animals and birds, and were generally placed near the village or around the fields. When dogs were used for hunting, the five or six dogs per person would chase and catch the animal, which was then speared by the Ami hunter. This type of hunting was considered very dangerous as sometimes the hunter became the prey, especially in the case of wild boar. I asked my guide how the various animals were eaten. He told me that most meats were salted and dried into a kind of jerky that could be preserved. I wondered if this type of processing could be similar to the "meat *hishio*" process. Could the ancient meat *hishio* found on the Chinese mainland have found its way to the Ami culture? I eagerly asked my guide if anyone was still preserving meat in this way. He told me that he would ask around the village the next day and then continued talking about hunting in general.

"Meat *Hishio*" of the Ami People

The next morning, my guide came to pick me up saying that he would show me something interesting that afternoon. At lunchtime, my guide invited me to his house. Upon arriving, I saw that food had been prepared and placed on a table in the garden area in front of the house. Then a man came out into the garden holding what seemed to be a pot of some kind in both hands. Without thinking I yelled out, "meat *hishio*!" I found myself looking at the elusive meat *hishio* for which I had been searching.

A Taiwan cafeteria. I met a person who spoke Japanese here. Soy sauce is used widely in this cafeteria.

Black soybeans, the main ingredient of Taiwan's soy sauce.

With exaggerated gestures, the man lifted the pot's lid and took out a chunk of meat. Though I could see that the meat was brown and had been salted, I had no idea what kind of meat it was.

The man told me that the meat was not wild meat, but rather simple pork that had been salted and prepared in the same way the Ami traditionally prepared wild meats. After being salted and stored for one year, the meat was clearly meat *hishio*. Although beef is generally used on the Chinese mainland, the present day Ami appear to use pork.

The man told me to try a piece of the meat. He sliced off a large chunk and gave it to me. The meat was incredibly salty. I was told that I shouldn't eat the meat alone, but rather together with a small handful of rice. This way of eating sounded just like what I had seen in the Yunnan Province of China. I asked the man if this meat *hishio* was used to flavor other dishes. He replied that it added wonderful flavor when fried with vegetables. If it is also used as a seasoning, it must truly be meat *hishio*.

In Taiwan also I had found traditional meat *hishio* along with the burning fields and paddies. This provided me with even more proof that the rice cultivation and fermentation culture had traveled from the Indochina peninsula and southern coast of the Chinese mainland directly across the sea along the Kuroshio current to Japan. Soy sauce, it seemed, had taken a sea route to Japan.

In search of the roots of *miso* and soy sauce, I found myself once again heading across the Indochina peninsula and up the Menam River to the mountain belt of Thailand's interior.

The Large Soy Sauce Belt Extending from Bangkok to Yunnan

The city of Bangkok, situated on the mouth of the Menam Chao Phraya River is called the City of Angels by the Thai people. With waterways extending from the Menam Chao Phraya River, this water city is also referred to as the Venice of the East. Though Bangkok today is a teeming international city of skyscrapers, the waters of the Menam Chao Phraya River are, even today considered by the people of Bangkok a necessity of life.

In the language of Thailand, *me* (*mae*) means "mother" and *nam* means "water". Therefore, the Menam River, called the Chao Phraya River by the people of Bangkok, is truly considered the "river mother". In actuality, the blessings provided to not only the people of Bangkok, but to all the people of Thailand, by this "river mother" are immeasurable. In Bangkok, the waters of the Menam and Khlong Rivers not only provide a convenient means of transportation, but their most beneficial contribution is the fertility they provide to the broad area of land beyond the city. The waters of these rivers have created the fertile Menam Delta, known as one of the eminent "bread basket" regions of the world.

Making nanpura, a type of fish soy sauce, by hand in a Thai village.

Approximately eighty kilometers south along the Chao Phraya is a small town surrounded by familiar scenery. There is a floating market here with small boats and sampans selling fresh fruits and vegetables. The market opens at dawn, with its peak selling time at about 7:00am.

Along the shore are boats selling breakfast. White steam can be seen coming from the pots of noodles. I found three types of dishes here;

A floating market outside of Bangkok. The scene here is something out of the past.

noodle dishes, rice gruels, and varieties of fried rice. I tried a noodle dish representative of traditional Thai noodles made from rice flour. The noodles, with a certain heartiness, were boiled and then the soup and other ingredients were poured over them. The soup appears weak from its pale color, but it seems that a lot of fish is used as a base to create this soup with its surprisingly strong flavor. This soup too, appears to use the fish soy sauce, or *nanpura*, that has become a sort of national seasoning in Thailand.

Nanpura is made by pickling small fish in salt for one year and then filtering off the liquid. *Nanpura* seems to have been influenced by the *nuokmam* introduced from Vietnam in the 20th century and quickly gained popularity with the Thai people. These days, *nanpura* is a fermented seasoning made from pickled shrimp or small fish on which most Thai cuisine is dependent.

Nanpura today is generally made from fish caught in the sea, though it was originally made using freshwater fish. A large quantity of *nanpura* is made in the Menam Basin in central Thailand. I decided to travel up the Menam River from Bangkok to see if I could find out exactly how *nanpura* is made. A trip up the Menam would also be a trip through Thailand's history.

Up the Menam

Approximately one hour out of Bangkok, I came across a Buddhist pagoda in an area surrounded by the Menam Chao Phraya and its tributaries. Here were the remains of the ancient Ayutaya capital city prior to the capital being moved to Bangkok.

Passing the Ayutaya remains, I came across a group of local village people fishing in a small river that empties into the Menam. They were using triangular shaped nets with bamboo frames to catch small fish. I got out of my boat and peered into the buckets containing their catch. The buckets were full of small fish approximately four to five centimeters in length. My guide informed me that these fish would be used to make *nanpura*. I was surprised to hear that *nanpura* is made from such small fish. My guide reminded me that though saltwater fish is often used these days, *nanpura* was traditionally made from such small freshwater fish as those I saw here. When I learned that the villagers would have a broker take the fish to a plant for processing, I asked to go along to see the processing plant.

Upon arriving at the plant, I saw wooden buildings that looked like warehouses lined up. Upon entering one of the buildings, my nose was assaulted by the very salty smell that I had experienced in countless fish soy sauce plants. Along the wall, wooden barrels were aligned with their wooden lids lying on the floor. Under the lids were the concrete fermentation vats. An amount of salt equal to 1/3 the amount of fish is combined with the fish. The mixture is then left to ferment for a period ranging from several months to just over one year. The fermentation vats were partitioned so that processing could be staggered year-round. During fermentation, the fish disintegrates and becomes a ripened liquid which is then pumped into the wooden barrels. After filtering the liquid through a cloth, the production of nanpura is complete.

Outside the plant, a small woman was bottling the nanpura. Using a funnel to fill each bottle, all of the bottles were soon filled. This *nanpura* must surely taste homemade. I stuck my finger into some of the light brown *nanpura* and tasted it. The intense salty smell was gone. The flavor, with its faint aroma of fish, differed slightly from the flavor of Vietnamese nuokmam.

Miso Soup of the Thai Mountainous Region

I next made my way north to another of Thailand's major cities, Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai is a highland city, surrounded by mountains. In the agricultural outskirts of the city, I saw farmers making a seasoning unique to this region. First of all, they crush a large quantity of freshwater crabs in a small mortar. To this paste, they add very fragrant leaves and salt. The mixture is then pounded to a very fine paste and the liquid squeezed out. The liquid is then put into a pot and boiled. This process is exactly the same as that I saw used in China's Yunnan Province to make crab *hishio*. In Yunnan, however, salt is added and the mixture pickled for several days, while the Chiang Mai process is completed in a single day. Though the process is basically the same, the product made in Chiang Mai is more precisely referred to as crab *miso* rather than crab *hishio*.

The people of northern Thailand spread the mixture on vegetable and fruit. It seems that the people living on the western edge of Yunnan, Xishuangbanna, and the people of northern Thailand share a very similar food culture. If the origins of Japanese culture are found in Yunnan, it seems that the people of northern Thailand share a common thread with the culture of Japan. I felt that it was necessary for me to take a look at the lifestyles of the many minorities living in the mountains to the north of Chiang Mai. From Chiang Mai, I continued on to Mae Sai, a small border town north of Chiang Rai, situated high up in the foothills of the Himalayas. In Mae Sai, I was witness to the colorful red, blue and black of the traditional clothing of these very small minorities. In this mountainous region live several small minorities, including the Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Lisu and Mien peoples. I decided to visit an Akha village.

I arrived at lunchtime and saw a small woman wearing a red, cone-shaped hat preparing lunch. White steam was rising from a pot that gave off a very familiar aroma. The woman opened the lid and showed me what looked just like *miso* soup. I pleaded with her to give me a taste. It was obviously *miso* soup with vegetables and small pieces of meat. More precisely, it was *butajiru*, a thicker version of *miso* soup with pork.

The woman told me that the soup was made by dissolving a concoction and adding meat which had been salted and dried for two or three months over an open hearth. This dried meat sounded like bacon to me. I asked her to show me the concoction used to make the soup. It was round and smelled like natto (fermented soybeans). I had seen this also numerous times before. When she showed me how it was made, I was again reminded of what I had

The mountain people of Thailand use a variety of *hishio* in their cooking
I discovered *miso* soup here, with the same flavor as that found in China's *Yunnan*.

Ancient ruins in Thailand. This is the site of the seat of the first Thai kingdom.

seen in *Yunnan*. First of all, soybeans are boiled and placed in a bamboo basket where they are fermented for two or three days. Next, they are ground into a paste with a mortar and balls of the paste are flattened into a disk the size of the palm of the hand. Finally, the disks are dried in the sun for two or three days.
This is exactly the same fermented food product I had seen in *Yunnan*. In *Yunnan*, the product was lightly fried before being dissolved, but here, just as with *miso* in Japan, it is placed directly in heated water and dissolved. I came to understand the strong connection between the Yunnan province of China, the mountainous region of Thailand, and Japan. My heart leaped as I considered that the key to untying the mystery of the birthplace of soy sauce may be hidden in the mountainous region of northern Thailand.

Mochi (Rice Cakes) at New Years

My next stop was a Hmong village. The village looked just like an old Japanese village with the thatched roofs on the houses, and the faces of the children looked just like the faces of Japanese children. When I asked the villagers if they knew what soy sauce was, they replied that they did. When I asked if they made it themselves from soybeans, they said that they purchased it in town. If these people have the same food culture as the people of Yunnan, then they must also know the flavor of soy sauce. I wondered if soy sauce had disappeared from even this Hmong village to be

At a *Hmong* village, they served the *mochi* and I provided the soy sauce. Japanese soy sauce goes well with *Hmong mochi*.

replaced by nampura, the fish soy sauce, as the primary seasoning. The primary food eaten in northern Thailand is the variety of rice used in Japan to make *mochi* as it is with the mountain people. As in Yunnan and in the mountains of Taiwan, small handfuls are eaten without utensils. Additionally, just as with people who live in broad-leaf forests, the mountain people of Thailand enjoy a fondness for sticky foods. I would not have been at all surprised to see the Hmong people making and eating *mochi*.
When I announced that I had come all the way from Japan to learn about the foods of the Thai mountain people, a very friendly person kindly offered to share some *mochi* with me. Luckily, I had brought along some Japanese soy sauce! The Hmong villagers and I enjoyed freshly made mochi with Japanese soy sauce.
The *mochi* made by the Hmong is very delicious. Compared with Japanese *mochi*, the color is more wild and the flavor goes very well with Japanese soy sauce. The villagers seemed to enjoy it as well, as they came back repeatedly for more. I learned that the mountain-dwelling people eat *mochi* at New Years, just as the Japanese do, and know well how the flavor is improved by eating it with soy sauce.
I also found *miso* soup in the Hmong village. At the northern edge of the Golden Triangle, where the mountains of Yunnan stretch endlessly, people with the same food culture can be found. With facial features very similar to the Japanese people, it seems that this is the true source of the *miso* and soy sauce culture. In the distant past, we must surely share the same ancestors.

Where Did Soy Sauce Come From?

Why did *hishio* develop in Asia? I had come to understand that the development of *hishio* was strongly tied to the rice-growing culture of the region. Eaten alone, rice is rather bland. Various forms of *hishio*, including those made from grasses, beans and fish, were created as side dishes that complemented the flavor of rice. Further development led to seasonings such as soy sauce and fish soy sauce made from soybeans. Fish soy sauce was also used throughout Japan. Traditionally, salted fish organs were eaten as side dishes with the leftover liquid used as seasoning. Fish soy sauce was later developed and made throughout the country. However, fish soy sauce came to be widely replaced by the refined flavor of the seasoning made from soybeans, known today as soy sauce. In this way, *miso* and soy sauce came to be the primary seasonings used in Japan.
Why didn't a seasoning similar to *hishio* develop in Europe? Was there never a product resembling *hishio*? Actually, there was. The Bible makes reference to a product resembling fish *hishio* used by the ancient Romans. Fish was salted, concentrated and sold publicly. It seems that this salted and concentrated fish had a place among the earliest seasonings, along with such spices as pepper, ginger, cinnamon, peppermint and nutmeg. Why did this fish product never develop into *hishio*, but rather disappear from the food culture of Europe?
The disappearance of this product is also tied to the primary diet of Europe. The European diet has always had animal products at its root. Meat, with its high levels of fat and protein is delicious eaten as it is, or with the addition of simple seasonings such as salt. Flavor could be further improved simply by boiling meat in the sauces that became the mainstream seasoning used throughout Europe. In this way, the European food culture developed into one with no need for the development of a product resembling *hishio*.
Though very rare, a product resembling salted and concentrated fish sold during the Roman times can still be found in Europe. It is

used in countries such as Italy, where it is known as anchovy sauce. Anchovy sauce is very salty with a strong fish smell. It is made by first soaking the anchovies in lightly salted water. Next, the heads and entrails are removed and the fish are pickled in an amount of salt equal to twenty percent the quantity of fish. The fish are then ground into a fine paste and further flavored with more salt, vinegar, water or lemon to create a product very similar to fish *hishio*. This product is then used as an ingredient for such dishes as canapés and pizza enjoyed throughout the western world.

In addition to the spices and meat and dairy products, this rare fish paste has long occupied a position in the mainstream of European seasonings. Until the rather recent introduction of soy sauce from Japan, fermented seasonings had all but disappeared from Europe for nearly two thousand years. Perhaps Japanese soy sauce caused a revival of the flavor of the Roman Empire. Where did the Japanese soy sauce, which made its advance into Europe, originate and how was it developed?

Soy Sauce, Purely Japanese

Is soy sauce a seasoning unique to Japan? I began "Exploring the Path of Soy Sauce" in order to answer this question. In my travels through East and Southeast Asia, I came to understand that soy sauce was not unique to Japan. I found that soy sauce is used in traditional Chinese and Korean dishes. I found that the traditional homemade soy sauce made from *misodama* (balls of *miso*) can still be found in China's Yunnan Province. I also found that fish soy sauce, a seasoning used in a wide variety of dishes just as soy sauce is used in Japan, and its close relatives are found in countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Cambodia Laos, Malaysia and Singapore.

But where in Japan did soy sauce first make its appearance? From where was it introduced? It seems clear that the techniques for making *hishio* came from China. Since a kind of *tamari* soy sauce made from *miso* can be found in China's Yunnan Province, the birthplace of Japanese culture, it seems that the path must follow a route from the Chinese mainland to the Korean peninsula, and finally to Japan, if the same production methods can be found in Korea.

It is often said that the Japanese are much better at refining what has already been developed than they are at creating entirely new concepts or objects. Therefore, it seems to follow that the Japanese were able to take the soy sauce introduced from China, increase processing with aging and refining, and develop a soy sauce with a very delicate flavor.

Where in China was soy sauce born? It is not certain that soy sauce made its first appearance in Yunnan. Adding fish soy sauce to the discussion of soy sauce in general, it must be remembered that the cultural sphere of soy sauce is extremely broad, and that both environmental conditions and methods of development must be considered. Let's think about this from the assumption that soy sauce evolved from *hishio*. It is thought that *hishio* developed as a preserved food made by salting foods. The method for salting all varieties of foods developed spontaneously depending upon environmental conditions. This spontaneous development combined with local wisdom occurred throughout a broad area of Asia. Can we not therefore assume that soy sauce evolved in the same manner?

In my research throughout East and Southeast Asia, an area displaying a wide variety of fermented foods and encompassed by the soy sauce culture, I have come to the conclusion that we need not assume that soy sauce developed in one particular place from which it traveled to other regions. Soy sauce seems to have developed spontaneously throughout Asia and to have been cultivated to suit the tastes of each geographic region and country.

Japanese Soy Sauce Conceived in Japan

The flavor of Japanese soy sauce differs greatly from the flavor of Chinese soy sauce. Chinese soy sauce smells strongly of soybeans and the flavor is very strong. As Chinese soy sauce traveled to Vietnam and Thailand, *nuokmam* and *nampura* were developed. The flavor of these versions more closely resembles Japanese soy sauce and suits the Japanese palate more than does Chinese soy sauce.

Though fish *hishio* was once used, bean *hishio* became the mainstream once it was introduced to Japan. It is said that the reason the flavor of Japanese soy sauce resembles *nuokmam* and *nampura* is that all three developed from bean *hishio*, which better suited the palates of the local people. Soy sauce evolved separately in China and Japan and today, the soy sauces of the two countries are quite different. Therefore, Japanese soy sauce is entirely a Japanese invention.

The results of my exploration of the path of soy sauce have led me to the conclusion that there is no single birthplace of Japanese soy sauce. Soy sauce, along with a variety of other foods, developed spontaneously and independently based on local wisdom and needs in several parts of Asia. Taking this into consideration, it seems safe to assume that soy sauce developed spontaneously in different parts of Japan as well.

References

●The following books were used as reference in preparing Part 1 and Part 2 of this article.

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Photos obtained, with gratitude, from the book *Oshoyu no Kita Michi* by Kozaburo Arashiyama and Katsuo Suzuki, published by Tokuma Shoten.