Supporting Roles in Food Culture II

The Origins and Transition of O-zen

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Japan's diet has developed into its own unique culture with the acceptance and incorporation of aspects of the food cultures of China and other countries. Elements comprising food cultures are not limited to ingredients, but also include seasonings and cooking and eating utensils, the roles of which should not be underestimated. In this issue, we will explore Japan's food culture by tracing the transition of *o-zen* (a low dining tray or table) from its origins to the present day.

The Legendary "*Zen*" Character

The word "*o-zen*" is the combination of the Japanese honorific "*o*" and the Chinese character "*zen*" meaning, in this case, a small dining tray or table. The Chinese character "*zen*" first appeared in Japan in the *Nihon Shoki*, or the *Chronicles of Japan*. According to the Chronicles, a vassal named Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto prepared a dish of bonito caught with a bowstring and clams gathered on the beach for the twelfth Emperor, Keiko, who visited Minato in Awa-no-kuni (present day southern Chiba Prefecture) in memory of his late son Yamato Takeru's achievements in putting down a rebellion in eastern lands. The Emperor enjoyed the dish and praised the cook's culinary skills, bestowing upon him the title Kashiwade no Otomobe (Imperial Chef), which, in its written form, includes the "*zen*" character. This incident was recorded in the historical records of the Takahashi clan, descendants of Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto. Due to his excellent service, Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto was appointed head of Wakasa and Awa Provinces and the title of Imperial Chef has been assumed by his descendents.

At the imperial office for fermented foods, which include fermented grains and beans, vegetables, and fish, Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto is deified as Takabe no Kami—the god of fermented seasoning production—and symbolized by a great earthenware pot. The fermented foods that fell under the auspices of the imperial office for fermented foods are known today as soy bean paste, soy sauce, pickles and fermented fish products, and they form the foundation of Japanese cuisine.

The Chinese character "*zen*" was read "*kashiwade*" in classical Japanese. This is because food was once served on *kashiwa* (oak) leaves. When the Chinese character for "*zen*" was introduced from China, the Japanese reading of "*kashiwade*" was given to the character. Later, people stopped reading the character as "*kashiwade*" until only the "*zen*" reading has survived to mean: 1. a collective term for a small table or tray on which food, drink, and eating utensils are placed; 2. an act of offering, serving, and eating food; 3. great variety and extravagance in a meal; 4. a counter for servings of rice and pairs of chopsticks; 5. actions related to daily life such as preparing and putting away *o-zen*; 6. the general term used to refer to common expressions that are integral to overall social life.

The Appearance of *Takatsuki*

Prior to the introduction of chopsticks to Japan, it is thought that people ate with their hands. Around the end of the third century, Chen Shou of China's Western Jin Dynasty (256–316) described the lifestyle of late Yayoi-period (mid tenth-century B.C. to mid third-century A.D.) Japanese people. Chen Shou wrote:

> *[Japan] has a mild climate and people eat raw vegetables in both winter and summer. Father, mother, and children sleep in separate rooms. Meals are served on takatsuki (elevated bowl or deep dish of earthenware) from which people eat with their hands.*

It is assumed that people sat cross-legged on the floors of stilt houses and ate food served on a *takatsuki* with their hands.

The *takatsuki* described by Shou were primarily of earthenware until the Nara period (710–794) and were commonly used along with other dishes and bowls. The

Yamai Soshi, presumably by Kasuga Mitsunaga, illustrates mealtime in the Nara period. A square serving tray (*ita-oshiki*) holding a bowl of rice, a bowl of soup, and some side dishes sits between the two people. Property of the National Diet Library.

Kasuga Gongenki Emaki, by Katashina Takakane, illustrates a kitchen scene in the Kamakura period. Cooked food was served in small portions on a *takatsuki* tray table. Property of the National Diet Library.

introduction from China of *takatsuki*, with a single center leg, initiated Japan's use of *o-zen* and tables at mealtimes. In addition to the hygienic benefit of raising food above the floor, the height of *o-zen* came to express varying degrees of authority, courtesy and respect.

During the Nara period, a simple square tray with no legs called *ita-oshiki*, on which dishes were placed, was introduced and used for everyday meals. *Ita-oshiki* were probably devised to increase hygiene and convenience. The square serving tray was depicted in *Yamai Soshi*, believed to have been the work of Kasuga Mitsunaga, and is similar to the trays used much later. *Ita-oshiki* were made of thinly shaved cypress with a short lip around the entire circumference to prevent dishes from falling off. "*Ita*" means "board" and "*oshiki*" is thought to mean either "leaf" or "mat". There is a variety of *oshiki*, including those with hewed corners and those with legs, which were used to serve superiors. *Oshiki* trays were placed on earthenware *takatsuki* and called *oshiki takatsuki*. A version of *The Tale of Genji* author Murasaki Shikibu's diary, traditionally thought to have been illustrated by Fujiwara no Nobuzane, depicts oshiki takatsuki with vermilion surfaces and black legs.

Two other *oshiki takatsuki* are white and all are loaded with various dishes.

Initially, *oshiki* were placed on top of *takatsuki*. Later, the two were integrated by adding a center leg to the *oshiki* tray. These new *takatsuki*, made of wood and often finished with lacquer, became the mainstream. Commonly, the top surfaces were finished with vermilion lacquer and the sides, bottoms and legs were finished with black lacquer. The thirteenth scroll of the major work, *Kasuga Gongenki Emaki*, by Katashina Takakane, illustrates food served on a square *takatsuki* in the kitchen of a priest's house. Another well-known work from the same period, by Tokiwa Genji Mitsunaga, illustrates a lacquered *maru-takatsuki* (round *takatsuki*), indicating the existence of two types of *takatsuki* at the time. Other remaining works show *tsuigasane* tray tables—single units made of unfinished, white wood and consisting of a tray on a square base—holding various dishes; *kakeban*, similar to *tsuigasane* but slightly taller and more decorative; and *daiban*, a larger, rectangular table with four legs and broad lips with the top surface often finished with vermilion lacquer. There were three sizes of *daiban* for serving one person (120 cm in width), two people (240 cm in width) and a middle size (180 cm in width) for use as needed. All sizes of *daiban* were for ceremonial use. *Oshiki, takatsuki*, *tsuigasane* and *kakeban* were used more routinely.

The various types of tray tables identified the place where they were used. Those finished with lacquer were used by court nobles and unfinished, white wood tray tables were used by temples and shrines. Although one tray usually served one person, several trays may have been used to serve just one person. Though fine tables such as *daiban* were already in use in Buddhist rituals, the various common serving trays were all just made of thin wood. It is said that this was to imitate the oak leaves used as plates in earlier days. Often made of thin Japanese cypress boards that were then bent into shape, these tray tables were generally referred to as *magemono* (bent object) or *himono* (cypress object). The craftsmen who made them were known as *himono-shi* (masters of cypress objects) and the next generation saw the appearance of more advanced techniques of lathe turning and joining.

The Appearance of Zen

Simplicity and fortitude were the driving forces of the new Kamakura period (1185–1333). Samurai meals were frugal, and strict new schools of Buddhism, particularly Zen, became popular. Zen taught its followers to train their minds and bodies ascetically. The preparation and consuming of simple meals was regarded as one form of ascetic training. However, traditional Zen principles regarding meals did not apply to those served to guests. This led to the development of *shojin ryori* (vegetarian "devotion cuisine") in which no animal products are used and protein is acquired through soy bean products, nuts and seeds. These meals were served on the same trays used in the previous period.

Shuhanron Emaki, said to be the work of Kamon-no-suke Hisakuni during the 18th century Edo period, is a well-known hand scroll painting. It depicts three men, one who enjoys eating, one who enjoys drinking, and one who enjoys both in moderation, explaining their individual the-

Shuhanron Emaki, presumably by Kamon-no-suke Hisakuni, illustrates mealtime in a samurai family of the Muromachi period. Property of the National Diet Library.

Reproduction of the food Oda Nobunaga served Tokugawa Ieyasu over a two-day period at Azuchi Castle in 1582. The five tray tables and serving bowls were all extremely ornate. Photo courtesy of The Asahi Shimbun Company.

ories on food and *sake*. One scene shows Buddhist monks and a child dining in a *tatami* (traditional Japanese mat flooring) room. Large portions of rice are served in vermilion-lacquered bowls on unfinished, wood *tsuigasane* tray tables. As no meat or fish is visible, the meal may be a representation of *shojin ryori*.

The Ashikaga clan, which established the Muromachi shogunate (1336–1573), placed its capital in Kyoto and strived for cultural enhancement. As a result, culinary arts, table manners, and table setting styles progressed until there existed a great variety of bowls and plates. During the Nanboku-cho period (1336–1392), the banquet style known as *honzen ryori* was established. The aforementioned *Shuhanron Emaki* also includes a scene depicting the large reception room of a samurai family with unfinished, white wood tray tables of two sizes holding vermilion lacquered bowls.

As *honzen ryori* was the style of cuisine used for ceremonial functions, there are many historical records and works of art describing such scenes. One of these is the formal five-tray feast that Oda Nobunaga served Tokugawa Ieyasu at Azuchi Castle in 1582. Another is the meal served to Emperor Go-Mizunoo when he visited Nijo Castle in 1626, the occasion that finally established the authority and power of the Tokugawa clan. A variety of unfinished, white wood and chalked individual serving trays with legs were used in addition to various types of *tsuigasane*. During this period, when *honzen ryori* was perfected, the meal itself, as well as the trays that held bowls and plates of food, began to be called "*zen*".

It was also around this time that tray tables began to be manufactured by a variety of craftsmen, including those who crafted eating utensils and furniture in addition to the dedicated *himono-shi* (masters of cypress objects). Originally crafted by bending thinly shaved wood to form trays, the various craftsmen introduced different methods for producing trays that were lacquered with vermilion on the inside and black on the outside and were 36 cm in diameter and 12 cm in height. Higher quality trays were made of sandalwood or black persimmon wood. Other trays, including those with two or four legs, or no legs at all, as well as tray tables with legs forming a closed base around the bottom of the tray also appeared. Japanese cedar, Japanese cypress and other materials were used together to form a square object that would later be lacquered.

There were a number of variations on the four-legged tray table, usually lacquered black but sometimes vermilion or a combination of the two colors, for use depending upon the importance of the event or the status of the person being served. The dimensions of these tray tables also varied: a 28.5–36 cm square for the tray, 1.5–3.6 cm for the height of the lip, and 6.6–10.5 cm for the height off the floor.

Two-legged tray tables had legs that spanned most of, or the entire, length of the side of the tray. The dimensions of these tray tables ranged from a 30–33 cm square for the tray, 1–3 cm for the height of the lip, and 3.6–28 cm for the height off the floor. Many of these trays were lacquered with clear vermilion, were popular in farming villages, and commonly used for guests or by the male members of the family.

The dimensions of legless trays varied from a 25–30 cm square for the tray, 6–15 mm for the height of the lip, and 1.5–2.1 cm for the height of the entire tray. Many were finished with vermilion and black or clear vermilion lacquer, and were commonly used by women and servants in farming villages.

Tray tables with legs forming a closed base around the bottom of the tray had a separate lid of 30 cm square and were 10–20 cm tall. Some had a built-in drawer and were used by samurai attendants and servants.

Clearly, a great variety of trays and tray tables for serving dishes had appeared by the beginning of the Edo period. It was during the Edo period (1603–1867) that distinct uses for the various types of trays and tray tables were defined by social standing. Generally, trays that sat higher off the floor or were more ornate were used by those of higher social ranking.

Shichi Nan Shichi Fuku Zumaki-Fukuju (Seven Happinesses and Seven Misfortunes–Happiness and Long Life), by Maruyama Okyo, illustrates preparations for a formal dinner hosted by a samurai family of the Edo period. This type of dinner, believed to be the origin of traditional Japanese cuisine, was an important ritual imposed on samurai families. Offering superiors and high officials lavish entertainment helped to preserve the shogunate system and maintain the social hierarchy. Property of Shokoku Temple.

The use of tray tables increased with the formalizing of banquet cuisines over the periods in which the samurai were an active social class. As social hierarchies developed and were enforced, banquet styles and eating utensils followed a similar course. During the Edo period, however, common townspeople who had gained financial power came to use the eating utensils previously reserved for the samurai and nobles. The introduction of exotic foods during the latter half of the Edo period led to the development of new forms of Japanese cuisines, popular with the commoners of Edo. It was the introduction of these foreign cuisines that led to the appearance of the more communal dining style, where several people sit together at a large table, in Japan.

Chabudai to Dining Table

A chabudai table. The original *chabudai* ranged in height from just 15 cm to a maximum height of 30 cm. Property of the Museum of Life in the Showa Era.

The practice of forming trays by bending wood lasted for as long as a thousand years in Japan, from the Heian period (794–1185) to the Meiji era (1868–1912). During this time, their shapes changed. With such a long tradition, new forms of tray tables began to take root during the Edo period and all of the various types came to be generally referred to as "*o-zen*". It was during the Meiji era of "cultural enlightenment," however, that the concept of sharing a table was introduced.

Dining customs around the world can generally be divided as follows:

1. Diners sit on the floor/diners sit on chairs

2. Food is served to individual diners/food is shared among all diners

3. All dishes are served at once/dishes are served one at a time

In Japan, traditional dining customs call for diners to sit on the floor, for food to be served to individual diners, and for all dishes to be served on an individual tray or tray table at once.

Many of the traditional Japanese dining customs remained even after the communal dining table was introduced. The same applies to use of the *chabudai*, a small and low table with collapsible legs, commonly used from the middle of the Meiji era (circa 1890) until around 1955. The *chabudai* is unique to Japan and thought to have been invented in the Yokohama area as it is made using a wood lathe in the western style of furniture making.

Originally, *chabudai*—like their predecessors, the individual serving tray or tray table—were taken out at mealtime and stored after the meal was over. The folding legs made this convenient. As they were stored when not in use, people continued to refer to them as "*o-zen*". However, as the Japanese people became more accustomed to the family dining table, they began to leave the tables out. As residential flooring materials shifted from tatami mats to wood floors, the general structure of homes also changed to include a dining area that held a dining table. It was during the postwar era of rapid economic growth that the traditional Japanese concept of storing serving trays, tray tables, and chabudai when not in use was all but eliminated. The Japanese, however, can remain proud that they have maintained their original food culture and the majority of their traditional dining customs.

Information provided by Royal Warrant, Hashikatsu Honten K.K.

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Cover: *Kannazuki Hatsuyuki no Soka;* by Utagawa Kunisada, property of Seikado Bunko

The tenth month of the lunar calendar (*Kannazuki*, or "godless month") was wintertime, and the winters must have been much colder than those we have today. This scene depicts ladies of the evening pausing at a *soba* (buckwheat noodle) stand to warm themselves on the night of the first snowfall. *Soba* stands like this were frequented by ladies of the evening and the stands were open from fall through spring.

The *Meiwa-shi* (Records of the Meiwa era) tells us that some *soba* stands of the time (1764–1772) had wind chimes, that they used clean bowls, that their *soba* was not cheap, and that the stands were quite popular. Initially, *soba* stands that served ladies of the evening did not have wind chimes, but the custom soon spread until many *soba* stands hung wind chimes. The *soba* stand in the painting on the cover of this issue also has a wind chime.

Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864) was born to a family of ferry-boat operators working at Itsutsume in Honjo, Edo. At around fifteen years of age, he was accepted as a student of Utagawa Toyokuni I, the great master of the Utagawa school of *ukiyoe* (woodblock printing). By his early twenties, Kunisada had already reached the forefront of the *ukiyoe* world. He left the world with more than 10,000 prints. In 1844, he declared himself Toyokuni II, after his master. However, Toyoshige, adopted son of Toyokuni, had already taken the name Toyokuni II, leaving Kunisada to be commonly known as Toyokuni III.

Between 1804 and 1830, Kunisada used the name Gototei, after his birthplace. During this period, his work reflected the daily lives of common people. The print on the cover of this issue is from that time, and is signed "Gototei Kunisada."