

Electronic Media Reviews

Food Education in Japan: A Review of the Online Representation of the *Shokuiku* Campaign

Unbalanced nutritional habits of Japanese people have become a matter of serious concern to the Japanese government and to a number of Japanese non-governmental organizations. There are increasing numbers of Japanese who skip breakfast and consume too much fatty food and ready-made meals that are available 24 hours at Japan's ubiquitous convenience stores. Weight problems, such as being overweight but also extremely underweight, which have become a problem for young Japanese women in particular, are among the repercussions of unbalanced eating habits. According to data from a yearly comprehensive health survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) for the year 2008, the habit of leaving home without breakfast concerns roughly 26% of women in their 20s and close to 22% of women in their 30s but also 30% of men in their 30s and roughly 27% of men in their 40s. Furthermore, roughly 36% of men in their 40s and 30% of men in their 20s battle excessive weight, whereas more than 22% of women in their 20s and 17% of women in their 30s show the opposite tendency toward being underweight or even extremely underweight.¹ Weight problems are among other health problems considered lifestyle-related diseases (*seikatsu shūkan-byō*), such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and coronary heart disease. These threaten to place an increasing burden on the medical system in a society that has already been strained by increasing medical costs due to demographic changes, such as the aging of the population.

Against this background, this review will provide an overview of the online representation of the governmental campaign *shokuiku*, which aims to improve the nation's nutritional habits. The term *shokuiku* was created through combining the Chinese characters *shoku* (to eat, food or diet) and *iku* (to nurture, education or guidance) and can roughly be translated into English as "food education" (henceforth I will use the Japanese term *shokuiku*). Specifically, the review will feature the *shokuiku*-related Web site contents of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF; <http://www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/index.html>), MHLW (<http://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/kenkou/eiyou.html>), and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT; http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/sports/syokuiku/index.htm).

In their joint efforts to effect changes in the dietary habits of Japanese citizens beyond merely accumulating and providing data, MHLW cooperates closely with MAFF and MEXT. Data on health and nutritional habits compiled by the above-cited MHLW surveys are well documented online and readily accessible to the

public. The surveys underline the results of the United Nations e-government Survey 2010, according to which Japan ranks 17th among the major 20 e-government nations.

Japan has an e-government development index value of 0.7152 and is currently the second most developed e-government nation in East Asia following the Republic of Korea, which is ranked number one in East Asia and has an e-government development index of 0.8785 (United Nations, 2010, p. 60; see also Assmann & Maslow, 2010). However, the comprehensive survey is only available in the Japanese language. Furthermore, considering the fact that the health and nutrition survey is conducted on a yearly basis, the accessibility is slightly delayed. For example, the most recent survey accessible online is the 2008 survey, which was posted in November 2009.

Apart from the link to the health and nutrition survey, the *shokuiku* section of the MHLW Web site offers a link to the "Food Guide Spinning Top" (*Shokuji baransu gaido*), which is a colorful guide that features nutritional components and suggestions for the composition of daily meals based on grain and wheat dishes, vegetables and fruits, meat and fish, as well as dairy products and sweets. In contrast to the health and nutrition survey, this guide is available in both Japanese and English. Unlike other *shokuiku*-related Web site contents that lack visual and audiovisual presentation, this food balance guide is colorfully illustrated and features entire meals, not merely ingredients. There are also local interpretations, such as the Kagoshima Food Balance Guide,² which features a variety of dishes using the pork of the Berkshire pig, a rare breed of pig known in Kagoshima under the name *kurobuta* (literally meaning "black pig"). Furthermore, there are food balance guides for various age groups, such as children, young people, middle-aged people in their 40s and 50s, and elderly people.³ These colorful food balance guides, which are likely to be the most well-known component of the *shokuiku* campaign, have been widely disseminated in schools, universities, and sports facilities.

There is a particular interdependence between MHLW as the bureaucratic institution that accumulates comprehensive data on the health and eating habits of the Japanese population and MAFF, which implements the governmental campaign *shokuiku* and works in close cooperation with food producers and agrobusinesses in Japan that further distribute governmental food policies within the population. It has become obvious by the availability of food balance guides for different age groups that the *shokuiku* campaign targets Japanese people of all ages and professions. The powerful bureaucracy jointly conducts its nationwide food education campaign in educational and sport facilities, and public and private enterprises with the aims of creating greater awareness of the variety of local and seasonal foods available in the immediate vicinity, strengthening food preparation and cooking skills among children and adults, especially young mothers, as well as deepening knowledge about the complicated relationships between food production, distribution, and consumption.

MAFF has had a key role in the dissemination of the term *shokuiku*. In 2005, MAFF released the "Basic Law on Food Education" (*shokuiku kihon-hō*), which is not a law in the strict legal sense but rather acts as a guideline on healthy food choices and appropriate food preparation methods to the public, including parents and educators. This law also encourages farmers, fishermen, and food-

related businesses to take on greater responsibility in providing information about food and nutrition and to act as mediators between food producers and consumers. The section on *shokuiku* can be accessed from the home page of MAFF. Featuring six columns, the Web site is concisely laid out and very accessible. In contrast to the online presentation on the MHLW Web site, information about the concept of *shokuiku* is readily available in English as a PDF file.⁴ MAFF provides an explanation of the meaning of *shokuiku* and presents a number of food-related educational events that take place in various prefectures throughout Japan, such as food markets, food fairs, and cooking schools. Further sections provide resources on food labeling systems, in particular the Quality Labeling Standard and the Japanese Agricultural Standard, which is a food certification system in accordance with food labeling standards established by MAFF. The section on “*shokuiku farm*” provides information about private farmlands for community use (*shimin nōen*) where citizens can have a firsthand experience of farming on small farmlands growing vegetables and fruits or cultivating rice. A selection of links provides access to related governmental Web sites of MHLW and MEXT as well as to a number of organizations that support the concept of *shokuiku*.

The term *shokuiku* signifies wider political implications in that the concept not only serves as a guideline to promote healthy eating habits but also advocates a return to native foods, such as rice (Japan’s major staple food), tofu, and miso—foods that have been partially replaced by wheat products, meat, and dairy products in the daily diets of Japanese people. Furthermore, by emphasizing the richness of Japan’s native food culture and the reliance on domestic and local food products, the concept of *shokuiku* also advocates an increased independence from foreign food imports and seeks to raise Japan’s food self-sufficiency rate, which is currently at merely 40% and represents the lowest self-sufficiency rate among the major industrial nations.⁵ In particular, the lack of food self-sufficiency and a number of food-related scandals, such as the case of tainted dumplings imported from China at the beginning of 2008, have recently been discussed in the media (Yoshida, 2008) and underline the political dimensions of *shokuiku* with regard to long-term food security and the preservation of a distinct food culture. The establishment of the term *shokuiku* links food and health education with food policy and food activism.⁶

Finally, MEXT is responsible for advancing the concept of *shokuiku* in schools, representing the dimension of the *-iku* element in this campaign. The most interesting and playful component of the *shokuiku*-related Web site contents of MEXT is a yearly poster-drawing contest for schoolchildren, who are given different themes related to food, meals, family dinners, table manners, and food culture and are then asked to draw a poster featuring one of the above themes. The most original posters can be viewed online.⁷ One example for the motto “It will be your turn to preserve food culture” (*Shokubunka—tsugi wa anata ga mamoru ban*) is a poster that shows a bowl filled with rice that resembles the Fujisan, topped with a pickled plum resembling the Japanese flag. Another student drew a family sitting around a table sharing food, displaying the motto “Talk with each other—[share] the events of the day at the dinner table” (*Katariau—sono hi no dekgoto shokutaku de*). This drawing contest demonstrates that the *shokuiku* concept represents more than a mere nutritional guideline. Apart from providing guidance on nutritional issues, MEXT in particular seeks to preserve table

manners, the custom of sharing food within a family aside from trying to strengthen a sense of responsibility among Japan's youngest to pass on Japanese food culture to the next generation.

In conclusion, the *shokuiku* concept represents a comprehensive and powerful food policy network that is well documented and cross-linked online. The accumulation of data on the population's nutritional habits provides information that is as much a part of this food policy as is the accessibility of guidance on nutrition, which has both an informative and an educational component. Establishing a network with food producers, food distributors, and nongovernmental organizations contributes to the implementation of a comprehensive presence of the *shokuiku* concept. It is important to keep in mind that the Web site contents of MHLW, MAFF, and MEXT represent the voice and opinion of the Japanese government on food education. However, given the comprehensive materials and the information on food policies and their implementation, all Web sites offer insightful information not only for consumers concerned with food safety and consumption, but also for researchers interested in policy developments related to food-related and health problems.

Notes

¹For current statistics, see the data provided by the MHLW entitled *Heisei 20nen Kokumin kenkō eiyō chōsa kekka no gaiyō* [Overview of the Results of the Survey of Health and Nutrition of the Japanese Population for the Year 2008], available at <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2009/11/h1109-1.html> (retrieved July 31, 2010).

²The detailed food balance guide is available at the Kagoshima Prefecture Web site, available at <http://www.pref.kagoshima.jp/sangyo-rodo/nogyo/syokuiku/k-bg/k-bg.html> (retrieved on November 12, 2010).

³A selection of food balance guides for various age groups is available at http://www.maff.go.jp/j/balance_guide/b_sizai/index.html (retrieved July 31, 2010).

⁴For further details, see the English version of the *shokuiku* concept published by MAFF, available at <http://www.maff.go.jp/e/pdf/shokuiku.pdf> (retrieved on November 12, 2010).

⁵For details on Japan's food self-sufficiency rate in international comparison, please see: http://www8.cao.go.jp/syokuiku/data/whitepaper/2008/book/html/sh04_1.html (retrieved on November 12, 2010).

⁶To examine the impact of *shokuiku* on food activism, see Kojima (2009).

⁷See <http://www8.cao.go.jp/syokuiku/more/promotion/poster/22/kekka.html> (retrieved July 31, 2010).

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