

2024

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Recommended Citation

Tan, Ying Yi (2024) "From “Defilement” to “Modernity”: How Japan's Encounter with the West Brought Beef to the Table," *Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal*: 5 (2), 236-256. 10.24968/2693-244X.5.2.9 <https://works.swarthmore.edu/suhj/vol5/iss2/9>

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From “Defilement” to “Modernity”: How Japan's Encounter with the West Brought Beef to the Table

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The long Tokugawa – Meiji transition (1850s – 1880s) is arguably one of the most profound socio-economic transitions that Japan underwent in its history. This paper uses beef consumption in Japan as a lens to further investigate the players involved in this transition. Historically more eschewed than other types of meat and tightly associated with the notion of the “other,” beef became an embodiment of progress and modernity during the Meiji Period. Through tracing the historical shift in the Japanese perception of beef, this paper argues that the evolution of beef consumption corresponds to the radically shifting attitudes of the Japanese towards the West.

To address the current research gap in the reception and integration of beef into Japanese cuisine, this paper starts the investigation from the late Tokugawa period. The early story of a “beef culture” reflects that a large part of Japan's modernization efforts was initiated by pioneering merchants and curious individuals in the late Tokugawa treaty ports. The paper also examines the diverse reactions of common Japanese toward beef, an essential part of the larger “westernization” campaign during the early Meiji period. Through popular folk literature and artworks, journals from western visitors, and an array of sources on Japanese food market, this paper illustrates that as Japan encountered Western culture in the nineteenth century, her people simultaneously resisted and adapted to it, creating a unique blend of tradition and modernity that was embodied in dishes like *gyūnabe* (beef stew).

Introduction

Perhaps surprisingly, Japan, the nation that monopolizes one of the world's finest beef today, does not have a long history of beef eating. In fact, meat in general rarely appeared on Japanese dining table since the eighth century. It was not until the "forced opening" of Japan's ports after 1850s that this taboo gradually diminished with the introduction of Western cuisine. In January 1872, Emperor Meiji, the new figure head of Japan in replace of the Tokugawa shogunate, publicly announced that he and the Empress enjoyed beef and mutton regularly, marking an end to the centuries-old official ban on meat eating.¹ The Meiji government then actively encouraged the consumption and production of meat, which played an essential role in the national campaign of rapid modernization and integration of Western customs throughout the late nineteenth century.

Beef deserves particular attention in this radical dietary shift and the political transformation happening in the background. Several historians and archaeologists have noted that although meat consumption existed in the Tokugawa period, beef was almost always conspicuously eschewed.² There were indeed much fewer existing records of domestic consumption of beef before 1860 in comparison to that of other domestic animals. Within two decades, however, beef not only became closely intertwined with the notion of "civilization" among the progressive Japanese, but also appeared more frequently than any other type of meat in Meiji literary discussion and artistic works.

How did the Japanese change from reluctant recipients to active proponents of beef-eating? And why beef, in particular, experienced such a tremendous status change during this period? To answer these questions, this paper examines the historical shift in the Japanese notion of beef from a source of "defilement" to an embodiment of "modernity" in the

¹ Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power, and National Identity* (Wiltshire: Cromwell Press, 2006), 24.

² Hans Martin Krämer, "'Not Befitting Our Divine Country': Eating Meat in Japanese Discourses of Self and Other from the Seventeenth Century to the Present," *Food and Foodways* 16 (2018): 38.

Tokugawa - Meiji transition (1850s – 1880s). It argues that a close study on the evolution of beef consumption in Japan corresponds to the radically shifting attitudes of the Japanese towards the West in the latter half of the nineteenth century, serving as a historical basis to understand how Japan during this period resisted, embraced, and adapted Western culture.

While a growing number of scholars have taken up the role of food in Japanese history, most of them focused on its political implication in the Meiji and interwar periods. The “sudden” acceptance of meat since the Meiji period is frequently brought up in these discussions due to its tight association with the government’s efforts in rapid modernization. Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, for example, elucidates in her book *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power, and National Identity* that the new Meiji government was actively involved in propagating and elevating meat-eating “into the symbol of Japan’s transformation into a modern nation.”³ William Steele’s study (2003) on Meiji diplomacy also includes the adoption of meat as one of the imperial government’s creative attempts in participating equally in the international order.⁴

There is, however, not yet a scholar effort to differentiate beef from other types of meat nor examine its history thoroughly. Different from the common narrative, the fashion of beef consumption predated the formation of the Meiji government by at least a decade. To fully understand this story, one must also look at the treaty ports in the late Tokugawa era. As Simon Partner contends in his book *The Merchant’s Tale*, much of the groundwork for Japan’s spectacular leap into modernity during the Meiji period was in fact laid in the Tokugawa period.⁵ Treaty ports like Yokohama acted as a conduit for foreign cultures, a laboratory for adaptation, and a catalyst for changes. More importantly, what drove the transformations in

³ Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 33.

⁴ William M. Steele, *Alternative Narratives in Modern Japanese History* (Richmond: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 132.

⁵ Simon Partner, *The Merchant’s Tale: Yokohama and the Transformation of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 219.

these cities was not the elites nor officials, but “mundane profits seekers.”⁶ The early story of beef in Japan supplements this argument perfectly: the first foreign and Japanese butcher shops were all established in Yokohama, and Yokohama merchants were the first to promote beef to the Japanese. Through tracing the beef-eating culture starting from the late-Tokugawa treaty ports, this paper further consolidates the emerging claim that a large part of Japan’s modernization efforts was not initiated by ruling elites in the Meiji period but by pioneering merchants and curious individuals in the late Tokugawa era.

Moreover, there is also a considerable absence in the existing study of how the non-elite Japanese perceived and reacted toward beef, an essential part of the larger “westernization” trend during the Tokugawa – Meiji transition. More than the state records and scholar pamphlet, the diverse reactions of common Japanese toward this dietary transition further speak to the complex facets that feudal Japan underwent in accepting western cultures. Akira Shimizu in his dissertation *Eating Edo, Sensing Japan* provides a successful model to analyze the role of Japanese merchants in driving the national taste for pork.⁷ I fully align with his emphasis on the agency of ordinary masses in social transformation, and thus use his work as a guideline for my discussion on beef. Through the lens of folk accounts and popular artworks, this paper uses beef to illustrate that the Japan’s “westernization” was not a simple “copy and paste” process but involved a complicated interplay of rejection, selection, and adaptation.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section draws a rough landscape of meat eating in pre-modern Japan, specifically investigating beef’s relative absence and why it was historically tied to the notion of the “other.” The second section is devoted to a close look into the emergence of beef-eating in the Tokugawa treaty ports, particularly Yokohama, in the 1850s. Numerous Japanese and English journals and woodblock prints provide

⁶ Partner, *The Merchant’s Tale*, 211.

⁷ Akira Shimizu, “Eating Edo, Sensing Japan: Food Branding and Market Culture in Late Tokugawa Japan, 1780–1868” (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011).

fascinating details on this cultural exchange. The third section then moves the setting to Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and examines the various Japanese efforts in “domesticating” beef in the Meiji period by analyzing a few intellectual and artistic works that discuss beef as a new way of life. In doing so, this paper concludes that the dynamic interplay between beef and modernization can be viewed as an epitome of Japan’s active but selective integration of Western customs, a process that extended from the late Tokugawa to the early Meiji period.

Meat Consumption in Pre-modern Japan

In 675 C.E., Emperor Tenmu issued the first official decree prohibiting meat eating in Japan, outlawing the eating of beef, horse, dog, monkey, and chicken from late spring until early autumn, the height of the farming season. As the leading Japanese food historian Naomichi Ishige explains, the main purpose of this ban was to discourage the practice of eating beef and horse meat among the peasantry and “protect the livestock population that was already sparse to prevent drought, insect damage and famine.”⁸ Farming animals were essential for agricultural production, but for an island country with limited arable land, raising big livestock like cattle was also resource intensive. It was therefore in the best interest of the government to discourage consumption to ensure a steady output of grains.

Furthermore, Naomichi suggests that this decree could also be interpreted as a reflection of the Buddhist teachings considering the wide range of animals included.⁹ Buddhism was introduced to Japan during the seventh century and most of its adherents, including Emperor Tenmu, viewed meat eating as a violation of the Buddhist principles of refraining from unnecessary killing. Additionally, Japan’s native religion Shintoism considered blood and dead

⁸ Naomichi Ishige, *The History and Culture of Japanese Food* (London: Kegan Paul, 2001), 53.

⁹ Naomichi, *The History and Culture of Japanese Food*, 55.

bodies as “impure” elements that should be avoided.¹⁰ Together, these two religions further bounded meat eating with the notion of defilement and bolstered the cultural taboo.

In the following twelve centuries, these economic and religious considerations motivated an expanding governmental prohibition and a public avoidance of all types of meat. Hans Martin Krämer’s study indicates that since the time of Emperor Tenmu’s edict, only the outcast communities that dealt with animal slaughtering continued to consume dead mammals openly. These groups were thus socially stigmatized and often referred to in the derogatory term *eta* 穢多 (two Chinese characters that translates to “impure many” or “much filth”),¹¹ which corresponded to their inferior social status.

By the Tokugawa period (1603 – 1868), the government again reinstated and specified a series of meat prohibitions. The fifth shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (r. 1680-1709) even went as far as banning the “killing of all living creatures in any form.”¹² An increasing number of Tokugawa literature included “not eating meat” as a unique defining component of the “Japanese identity,” accentuating the narrative of Japan’s cultural distinctiveness and supremacy. One voluminous work on Japanese food published early in 1697 says, “About China and the barbarian countries we say that if it is not meat, they don’t eat it, while fish is what we desire.”¹³ Readers were thus advised to avoid eating meat because it is a foreign and inferior practice.

As another example, in response to the intrusion of foreign vessels in Japanese waters in the early nineteenth century, Aizawa Seishisai (1782-1863), an important Confucian scholar who contributed to Japanese nationalist thought, similarly antagonized Westerners as “wily,

¹⁰ Krämer, “Not Befitting Our Divine Country,” 36.

¹¹ Krämer, “Not Befitting Our Divine Country,” 37.

¹² Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey, “The Laws of Compassion,” in *The Dog Shogun: The Personality and Policies of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi*, 128-43 (University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 129.

¹³ Krämer, “Not Befitting Our Divine Country,” 49.

meat-eating barbarians.”¹⁴ This phrase reflects how meat-eating was an undesired, if not detrimental practice, that was associated closely with the “other” with a culture less sophisticated than Japan.

However, it must also be noted these stringent government prohibitions and cultural taboos were mostly targeting the consumption “red meat,” or that of domestic four-legged mammals. Game meat (the meat of an animal that is typically found in the wild) and that of large marine mammals like whales appeared more frequently in the Tokugawa cookbooks and beast markets.¹⁵ In a travel diary to Ise shrine written in 1848, for example, the author provides a menu of the banquet that clearly features crane,¹⁶ reflecting a rather ambiguous attitude toward game meat even among the pilgrims.

The Absence of Beef

Among all types of meat, consumption of beef was clearly more forbidden than others. In 1616, the Tokugawa shogunate announced an individual ban on the slaughter of cattle and the sale of those that died naturally. The “Edict of Mourning” in 1688 also deemed physical contact with dead cattle and horses as the most serious defilement, sentencing the offender to a period of 150 days compared to 70 days for those of other four-legged mammals, such as pigs, deer, and wild boar.¹⁷ While most scholars agreed that these bans were primarily driven by the need to protect cattle for agriculture, the clear restrictions on handling dead cattle in the edict reflect that the shogunate hoped to reach such a goal not through accentuating cattle’s

¹⁴ See Aizawa Seishisai, *Shinron* (New Theses, 1825); translated in Constantine Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 106: “Unless a Great Hero bestirs himself to assist Heaven’s normative processes, all creation will fall prey to the wily, meat-eating barbarians...”

¹⁵ See Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*; Shimizu, “Eating Edo, Sensing Japan”; Jakobina K. Arch, *Bringing Whales Ashore: Oceans and the Environment of Early Modern Japan* (University of Washington Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Anon, “Ise sangu kondate dochuki,” trans. Laura Nenzi, in *Nihon shomin seikatsu shiryō shusei*, vol 20, ed. Haraguchi Torao, Takeuchi Toshimi, and Miyamoto Tsuneichi, 601-620 (Tokyo: San’ichi Shobo, 1972).

¹⁷ Akira Shimizu, “Meat-Eating in the Kojimachi District of Edo,” in *Japanese Foodways: Past and Present*, ed. Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assmann (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 93.

practical values, but through spurring deep social antipathy toward the consumption of beef. Consistent with the emphasis of these Tokugawa edicts, Akira Shimizu's investigation on the beast market in Edo reveals that although eating mammal meats was more common than generally believed, there was an obvious "preference for game animals and the avoidance of beef."¹⁸ Kaneko Hiromasawa's archaeological excavation, similarly, indicates that while wild boar, deer, bears, dogs, and horses were all part of the Tokugawa period diet, beef is conspicuously absent from the list.¹⁹ The ambiguous attitude toward meat arose in the Tokugawa period did not extend to beef.

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry arrived unannounced in Edo Bay with a fleet of American warships, demanding Japan end its policy of seclusion to the West. The Tokugawa government had little choice but to comply, signing a series of "unequal treaties" that opened five ports to unimpeded trade and foreign settlements. As a result of this opening, a substantial influx of Western visitors arrived at Japan. Many noted down the peculiar meat-eating landscape in Japan with beef particularly avoided. In the chronicle of his travels in Japan in 1860 and 1861, the Scottish botanist Robert Fortune asserted that the Japanese do not live on vegetables and fish only as he encountered a few butcher shops on the streets of Edo. But he also remarked that he did not find any beef in these shops, "for the Japanese do not kill their bullocks and eat them as we do."²⁰ The French naval officer Dane Edouard Suenson also observed that although the Japanese in Yokohama "eat pheasant as people in Europe eat chicken," they "do not eat beef at all."²¹

Frustrations about the absence of beef were a constant subject of complain of the Europeans and Americans with culinary traditions that voiced a clear preference for it. Sir John

¹⁸ Shimizu, "Meat-Eating in the Kojimachi District of Edo," 94.

¹⁹ Kaneko Hiromasawa, "San'ei-chō and Meat-Eating in Buddhist Edo," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 19, no. 2-3 (1993), cited in Krämer, "Not Befitting Our Divine Country," 35.

²⁰ Robert Fortune, *Yedo and Peking: A Narrative of a Journey to the Capitals of Japan and China* (London: John Murray, 1863), 123.

²¹ Cited in Shimizu, "Eating Edo, Sensing Japan," 145.

Rutherford Alcock (1809 - 1897), the first British diplomatic representative to live in Japan, exclaimed in his 1863 journal, “Have my reader ever realized what it is for months or years never to taste beef or mutton? If not, I can tell them the most robust philosophy quails under such a prospect.”²² When he finally managed to secure some beef, Alcock lamented on its low quality, as the only cattle that could be obtained were “taken from the plow” and “old and worn-out.”²³ Only on rare occasions, foreign residents in the treaty ports were able to receive fresh beef imported from Shanghai.²⁴

In sum, although it is inaccurate to simply generalize pre-modern Japan as a meat-free country, red meat was certainly never an essential part of the Japanese diet since the eighth century. There is an especially noticeable avoidance of beef due to cattle’s agricultural importance, the notion of defilement, and its negative connotation with the “barbarian” civilization. By the late Tokugawa period, when the country was just opened to the West, the general population in Japan still did not eat beef, nor was there a local supply for it.

Beef and “Barbarians:” Resistance

Among the five ports that opened to the Western powers, Yokohama stood out due to its proximity to Edo and came to serve as the center of Japan’s encounter with the West in the final years of the Tokugawa period.²⁵ Within a decade, the city quickly transformed from a shabby fishing village to a cosmopolitan emporium and “a byword for exoticism, glamour, and prosperity,”²⁶ attracting Japanese and foreigners alike. The intense curiosity and fascination of the rest of the country towards the influx of Westerners also prompted an outpouring of

²² Rutherford Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of a Three Years’ Residence in Japan* (New York: Bradley Co., 1863), 173.

²³ Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon*, 96.

²⁴ Hugh Cortazzi, *Victorians in Japan: In and Around the Treaty Ports*, Bloomsbury Academic Collections (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 76.

²⁵ Partner, *The Merchant’s Tale*, xxvii.

²⁶ Partner, *The Merchant’s Tale*, 4.

woodblock prints, travelogs, and guidebooks in 1861-1863. They tended to dwell on the strange and exotic lives of the foreigners in Yokohama and are especially valuable in revealing the reaction of the common Japanese to their “first contacts” with the Westerners.

Western butcher shops and westerner’s craving for meat appeared frequently among the list of the “bizarre” customs that Japanese artists and authors thought worthwhile to mention. In Hashimoto Sadahide’s bestseller *A Record of Observations in the Open Port of Yokohama* published in 1862, there’s an excerpt on a western butcher shop in Yokohama. The drawing depicts two hairy and strange-looking Westerners butchering cattle. Their hands and the knife are covered by blood, while their facial expression gives a sense of enjoyment. The text accompanying this drawing depicts the various reactions of the Japanese witnessing this scene: “Japanese who were watching commented on how gruesome, how unsightly, this was; in the meantime, the spectators grew in number...”²⁷ They also compare cattle slaughtering with that of pigs, as pork stew had become widely popular in Japan. The story eventually ends with the butchers setting loose ten black dogs that scare away the spectators. The caption beside the print reads that even as Americans, those who conducted the business related to butchering could only “live on the extreme edge of town.”²⁸

Both the text and the print reflect a strong cultural revulsion and bewilderment toward cattle butchering, and to an extent, toward those newcomers and their culture, among the Japanese public in its early contact with the West. The negative association between beef and “foreignness” and “barbarian” established by the Tokugawa intellectuals persisted, so people resisted to eat it as the westerners did. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that the taboo against general meat consumption had started to dismantle, and interest in meat was growing.

²⁷ Hashimoto Sadahide, “From Yokohama Kaiko Kenbunshi (A Record of Observations in the Open Port of Yokohama).” In *The Japanese Discovery of America*, edited by Peter Duus (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 135-137.

²⁸ Hashimoto, “From Yokohama Kaiko Kenbunshi, 136.

Beef and Novelty: Embracement

The growing presence of foreigners in Yokohama and their insatiable demand for meat not only brought conflicts but also lucrative business potentials, which eventually motivated some pioneering Japanese businessmen to tap into this “meat business.” According to “Yokohama shōnin roku” (The List of Yokohama Merchants) published in 1862, seven merchants were registered to sell meat in the city and two of them specifically carried beef, the first in the country.²⁹ During the 70th anniversary of the Asiatic Society of Japan, Paul Charles Blum (1898 – 1981), an American intelligence officer born and raised in Yokohama, also testified to the development of local butchering with some anecdotes he gathered. According to Blum, one of the first foreign-style butcher shops in the Japanese part of town appears to have been established by a man named Isekuma, who had met intense objection from his wife on his nascent and “undignified” business at first:

His wife objected to the disgusting innovation. In fact, she objected so strongly that the house had to be divided by a wall, her husband conducting his meat shop on one side while she operated a *meshiya*, or Japanese-style restaurant, on the other. The story has a happy ending. He succeeded; she failed; the wall was removed.³⁰

There was limited information on whether these Japanese butchers consumed meat themselves, but the above instances reflect that the strong urge to seek new economic opportunities had surpassed social stigmatization, cultural aversion, and even political prohibitions on beef in the final years of the Tokugawa period. These Japanese butcher shops also brought beef closer to the Japanese residents of the city, normalizing its presence and stimulating public interest.

²⁹ Shimizu, “Eating Edo, Sensing Japan,” 171 (Table 5).

³⁰ Paul C. Blum, “Yokohama in 1872: A Rambling Account of the Community in Which the Asiatic Society of Japan Was Founded,” in *Culture, Power & Politics in Treaty Port Japan, 1854-1899: Key Papers, Press and Contemporary Writings*, ed. J. E. Hoare, vol 1: Historical Perspectives (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 275.

While these early butchering businesses mostly supplied beef to Western consumers and legations, by the mid-1860s, Yokohama merchants sought to expand their business by promoting beef to the Japanese audience. This, of course, corresponded to the burgeoning curiosity and demand for Western products among the local population in Yokohama. As the volume of international trade skyrocketed, more Japanese in Yokohama had personal contacts with the Westerns, and invoked by curiosity, also tried Western technologies, clothes, lifestyles, and food, including meat dishes.³¹ These experiences dispelled the stereotypes associated with the West, which had become a source for new knowledge. The shift in attitude thereby transformed the negative association between beef and the barbaric “other” into a synonym for novelty.

John Black (1826 – 1880), a keen journalist who observed the radical transformations around him in Yokohama, noted that by the mid-1860s “many [Japanese] began to eat meat and declare that they like it ... thus giving the best proof of their approbation. As yet, none dared appear openly in foreign costume. Anyone who did so would certainly have been roughly handled. But it was not long before they adopted them without fear.”³² This passage indicates that although the official laws were still in effect, the cultural and social taboo against meat was much lifted among the general population in Yokohama.

In his comprehensive account on the transformation of Yokohama, Simon Partner investigates all sorts of Western influences evident in the port city during this period, pointing out that “not only new modes of transportation but also new habits of clothing, food, housing, and hygiene were taking root in the Tokyo-Yokohama area and spreading into the hinterland.”³³ It speaks to the fundamental role of Yokohama, and treaty ports in general, in

³¹ Partner, *The Merchant's Tale*, 153.

³² John Reddie Black, *Young Japan: Yokohama and Yedo, a Narrative of the Settlement and the City from the Signing of the Treaties in 1858, to the Close of the Year 1879 with a Glance at the Progress of Japan during a Period of Twenty-One Years* (San Bernardino: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), 400.

³³ Partner, *The Merchant's Tale*, 178.

fueling the emergence of a beef-eating fashion before the Meiji government renounced the ban of it. This happened as Japan navigated its transition from a relatively isolated and feudalistic society to an open and modernized one.

Akira Shimizu's study on the meat culture in Edo gives direct support to this assertion. In his discussion of the emergence of beef in Edo, he sheds light on a few anecdotal sources on Nakagawaya Kahei, the first Japanese merchant to handle meat (especially beef considering other types of meat appeared in beast market before) in Edo. Originally from Yokohama, Nakagawaya began to run advertisements for his meat shop in newspapers since 1867. One of those read:

This person (Nakagawaya) recently opened up a store on the wharf side of the British legation in Takanawa, Edo and sells different kinds of meat. Meat is not only good for health; it is also good for people physically fragile and ill to regain vigor and helps them recover from illness. Moreover, [he will] select different parts [of beef] and make them available at the lowest possible prices.³⁴

This advertisement is noteworthy for its promotion of beef as a healthy food option. This narrative is consistent with the promotion of other meats sold in the market. The advertisement also includes an illustration of a cow's body, which is divided into fifteen parts with appropriate methods of preparation, such as boiling, stewing, and roasting. These parts were further divided into five different classes, catering to Japanese customers with varying backgrounds.

Nakagawaya's thorough understanding of the cattle would most likely be result of his with encounters with the western butchers in Yokohama as there were no local precedents of professional cattle butchering in Japan; and his targeted advertisement reflects a rising demand for beef from diverse social classes in Edo. Considering the exceptional antipathy against beef-eating and butchering in pre-modern Japan, this gradual embracement of beef stands as a significant piece of evidence of the emerging revolution in Japanese lifestyle that took root in

³⁴ Translated and cited in Shimizu, "Eating Edo, Sensing Japan," 159.

the treaty ports as represented by Yokohama. These emporiums served as laboratories for foreign influence and catalysts for drastic cultural and political changes that eventually spread inland in the mid-1860s.

Beef and Modernization: Adaptation

The rule of the Tokugawa government came to an end with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The goal of the restored imperial government was to break off from the “evil” Tokugawa traditions and modernize the country based on Western models. This goal could be best captured under the slogan: *wakon yosai* (“Japanese spirit, Western technology”). On this note, the taboo on meat eating was frequently brought up as an example of how the undesirable customs of the past prevented the Japanese from gaining equal status in a Western-dominated world, the most prominent advocator being philosopher and educator Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901).

In his famous piece “On Meat Eating” (1870), Fukuzawa contends that Japan’s reliance on a grain-based diet resulted in widespread malnutrition and poor health, which he regarded as a “national loss.” Drawing on a powerful metaphor, he then asserts that the Japanese must decide whether to become lions or continue living as sheep by embracing or rejecting meat as a crucial dietary component. He also employs dramatic language to urge his countrymen to accept meat and dairy products as means of strengthening national physique so that “for the first time we will not feel ashamed to be called Japanese.”³⁵ While not eating meat was used as a point of distinction between the Japanese culture and the “other” to argue for Japan’s cultural superiority in the Tokugawa era, not merely a century later, it was used by Fukuzawa to reflect the eminent need for reform.

³⁵ Fukuzawa Yukichi, “Nikushoku no setsu [On Eating Meat],” in *Fukuzawa Yukichi zenshū* [Complete Works of Fukuzawa Yukichi], ed. Keiō Gijuku, vol. 20, trans. Michael Bourdaghs (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1963), 49.

Following Fukuzawa's principles, the issue of meat eating assumed a significant position in Meiji politics on a national level. The acceptance of meat and the shift towards a more protein-rich and Western diet was seen as a sign of progress and modernization, as well as a rejection of traditional dietary customs. Beef, inheriting its tight association with the "primitive" Western culture from the past, gained a new metonymy for "enlightening" Japan with the changing Japanese attitude toward the West. The new Meiji government actively encouraged the domestic production of beef and dairy products, and the emperor himself propagated his consumption of beef in 1872 to chip away at this centuries-old taboo. As Katarzyna J. Cwiertka analyzes, this act has "elevated beef into the symbol of Japan's transformation into a modern nation and translated the reforms of 'civilization and enlightenment' into a language that could be understood easily by the common man."³⁶ Eating beef was not only not "dirty" anymore, but also necessary for the vigor and survival of the nation: in 1877, on the occasion of the Satsuma Rebellion, canned beef was introduced in the Japanese Imperial Army and served as one of the chief field rations of the conscript army ever since.³⁷

Corresponding to this political trend, the nation witnessed the rise of a beef-eating fashion among progressive Japanese in the form of *gyūnabe*, a beef stew that was first invented by the chef of Isekuma in Yokohama in 1862.³⁸ Since Japan at that time lacked a systematic cattle butchering and processing system, the beef, as described by Alcock, was still tough and smelly. To adapt to the appetite of the local commoners, the beef used in this dish was sliced thinly and prepared with traditional Japanese condiments such as *miso* (soybean paste), sugar, and *mirin* (rice wine) to remove the odor.³⁹ Like many other foreign customs that were adapted

³⁶ Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 33.

³⁷ More on this, see Colin Jaundrill, *Samurai to Soldier* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

³⁸ Kong Mi-Hee, 'A Consideration of the Characteristics and Historical Background of Japanese Fusion Cuisine Created Through Cross-Cultural Exchanges with the West in Port Cities,' *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 7, no. 2 (2018): 99.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 101.

in the Meiji period, this fusion dish incorporated beef, a Western ingredient, with Japanese culinary style as a form of successful domestication.

Eating *gyūnabe* emerged as the symbol of a new way of life. Many progressive Japanese rushed to beef stew restaurants and branded themselves as harbingers of enlightenment and advancements. Kanagaki Robun (1829 - 1894), a celebrated playwright of the Meiji era, crafted a satirical portrayal of this new beef-eating fashion in Tokyo in his illustrated monologues titled *Aguranabe* or “Sitting Cross-Legged at the Beef Pot.” The novel, written between 1872 and 1873, captures the conflicted reputation of beef restaurants and pokes fun at those beefeaters, a metaphor for a larger group of people who blindly celebrated Westernization as the ideal of Japan’s cultural transformation. The novel opens with an account of “Lover of Western Things,” in which a young man carrying a Western-style umbrella comes to the beef restaurant and declares the following:

Excuse me, but beef is certainly the most delicious thing, isn’t it.... I wonder why we in Japan haven’t eaten such a clean thing before? [...] We really should be grateful that even people like us can now eat beef, thanks to the fact that Japan is steadily becoming a truly civilized country. Of course, there are some unenlightened boors who cling to their barbaric superstitions and say that eating meat defiles you [...] In the West, they’re free of superstition, and that’s why they’ve invented amazing things like the steamship and the steam engine.⁴⁰

In this monologue, Kanagaki plays with contrasting definitions and rhetoric, such as “defile” and “clean,” “barbaric” and “civilized” to emphasize the drastic shift in the Japanese perception of beef and the Westerners who consumed it.

Certainly, Kanagaki was not the only one who used beef to illustrate the intense conflict between Japanese traditions and the newly introduced Western culture in the early Meiji period. The famous illustrator Kawanabe Kyosai (1831 - 1889) also used satirical drawings to ridicule this social phenomenon. *Gyūnabe* appears in his well-known triptych “Kaika injun” or “The

⁴⁰ Kanagaki Robun, “Things Heard around a Pot of Beef, 1872,” in *A Tokyo Anthology: Literature from Japan’s Modern Metropolis, 1850–1920*, ed. by Sumie Jones and Charles Shirō Inouye (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 67.

Engine of Progress,” which depicts a fight-to-death context between Western imports and native goods. A figure with a mask that writes 牛なべ (*gyūnabe*) appears on the upper right of the print, chasing another that says おでん (*oden*), a traditional Japanese version of the one-pot dish that features fish cakes, tofu, and vegetables but no meat. A man with the head of a cattle is arranged to hold the flag with the title of the print, stressing again the unique and novel role that beef played in Japan’s modernization. In another of his drawing titled “The Enlightenment of Fudō Myō-ō”, even the protector of the Buddhist Law, *Fudō Myō-ō*, is shown reading a newspaper (another western influence) while his fellow demons are cutting up beef to serve a meat delicacy to this newly “enlightened” beefeater.⁴¹

While all these literary works and illustrations mentioned above are mostly whimsical in nature and not without exaggeration, one can detect that the radically revolutionized narrative on beef consumption had deep political and cultural significance in early Meiji society. Whether or not to accept beef became a question associated with political and social modernity and an epitome of Japan’s struggle with its newfound Meiji identity. Given the historical avoidance and prohibition constructed around beef, this transition was not an easy one. Nonetheless, the *gyūnabe* fashion thrived with the nation’s determination to reform and modernize. From the 1850s to 1870s, Japan’s capital transformed from Edo, where no beef was found, to Tokyo, the same city but with several hundred establishments that served *gyūnabe*.⁴² This early popularization of beef reflects Japan’s gradual embracement and adaption of elements of western culture as a part of its own identity. More broadly, this signals the start of Meiji Japan’s active participation in a new international order led by the West.

⁴¹ Steele, *Alternative Narratives in Modern Japanese History*, 34.

⁴² Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 33.

Conclusion

The journey of beef from a longstanding social taboo to a popular cultural icon in Japan offers valuable insights into the ways in which food can serve as a theoretical lens for analyzing how people perceive themselves in relation to others. Initially, not-eating-meat was viewed as a positive attribute that distinguished Japan from its negative foil, the “meat-eating” Western civilization. This resistance towards beef consumption was rooted in the belief that this was a practice of “barbarians” that were inferior to the Japanese. However, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Japanese began to view the West as a new center of civilization and a model from which to learn. The West was no longer the “other,” it became the new “us” that Meiji Japan aspired to emulate and be a part of. Beef, with its prominent role in Western cuisine, became increasingly desirable and even essential as Japan sought to identify itself as a worthy member of the new international order established by the Western powers.

George Orwell once remarked that “the changes in diet are more important than changes in dynasty or even religion.”⁴³ Particularly eschewed and tightly interwoven with the notion of the “other,” beef, among all meat, became a central political and cultural symbol during this drastic social transformation. In addition to the common narrative that mainly focuses on Meiji intellectuals and state construction in facilitating this transition, this study demonstrates that this process was also built on the conscious efforts and selection of common businessmen, artists, and writers, and extended from the late Tokugawa to the Meiji period.

Today, *wagyū*, a type of high-end beef from specific breeds of cattle native to Japan, has become an intrinsic part of Japanese cuisine together with many foods with foreign origins, such as ramen from China and curry from India. *Wagyū* is now being exported back to the countries that brought beef to Japan’s table. Paradoxically, as much as people want to believe that their “national cuisine” is rooted in the nation’s own history and tradition, neither their

⁴³ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 107.

dishes nor their national identity was static. They are in a constant state of flux under the influence of other civilizations, as shown in the case of beef in Japan. Whether in the form of an expensive delicacy in a Michelin-starred restaurant or an affordable bowl of *gyūdon* in *sukiya*, beef always stands as a testament to Japan's ongoing attempts to define and redefine its identity under cultural exchange and adaptation.

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