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Writing 50

14 May 2010

Causes and Effects of the Japanese Obesity Epidemic

In spring of 2008, newspapers around the world were astonished that Japan had effectively declared fat illegal. In April of that year, Japan passed legislation requiring all working adults deemed overweight to lose their extra pounds, with the punishment of company fines. This should sound strange to an observer familiar with the Japanese lifestyle, because Japan is generally considered to be one of the healthiest nations. That being said, why has such a law been enacted? I will argue that this new law has been enacted due to a steady shift in eating habits over the past several decades, covering the rise of fast food in Japan, the rise of diseases associated with poor nutrition, and goals set about by the nation's health program. The ultimate idea is that the enacting of this legislation is a direct result of all of the aforementioned factors, all brought about by forces of globalization and Americanization of fast food in Japan.

From a historical standpoint, Japan is one of the healthiest nations on the planet. One of the more influential factors affecting Japanese health is the use of rice as the national staple food. Since rice consists of complex carbohydrates and low-fat content, it composes a healthy meal. Traditionally rice is eaten at every meal because it's filling and doesn't contain many calories. Vegetables, too, are consumed en masse in Japan, with as many as four or five different varieties of vegetables traditionally served at a meal. But perhaps the most important part in Japan's status as a healthy nation is its consumption of fish over red meat. The Japanese people account for 10% of the world's fish consumption. They eat popular foods such as salmon and tuna containing many heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids in small meal proportions, hence it's no wonder that

Japan is regarded as a healthy country (Kovacs).

However, despite the history of this healthy Japanese diet, Japan has been becoming more overweight in recent years. Data from the *Nihon Toukei Nenkan Heisei 22 Nen*, or the Japan Statistical Yearbook of 2010, marks some great changes in nutritional trends throughout the past 40 years in Japan: trends that provide great insight into the genesis of the obesity legislation. According to data collected over a span of almost 40 years, the amount of food (in grams) consumed has had a very slight increase over the years. Despite this drop in caloric intake, the consumption of two groups of food has remained relatively unmoved over the 36 years measured— meats and fats. Today, the Japanese diet is becoming proportionally more influenced by red meat, perhaps due to the introduction of the “Americanized” fast food menu items such as hamburgers. This emphasis on red meat also means a decreased consumption of fish, one of the healthiest traditional Japanese foods. The proportional increase in oil/fat consumption can also be attributed to the fast food industry in Japan, as the preparation of several fast food dishes such as french fries requires a large amount of oil. Consumption of beverages, including sodas, has increased dramatically as well, with an 18% increase in only five years. Fast food chains can be seen as contributors to this increase as well, due to their ready supply of sodas filled with empty calories.

Also, the rise in certain kinds of diseases and causes of deaths in Japan can be attributed to this introduction of Americanized food preparations. The table “Deaths and Death Rates by Leading Causes of Death” in the Statistical Yearbook outlines the most prevalent causes of death in Japan and how these rates have changed since 1970. Most dramatic is the rise of colon-cancer-related deaths: from 1970 to 2007, the Japanese Statistical Bureau, from less than 4,000 yearly to nearly 28,000, marks an approximate 900% increase in death by colorectal cancer. Heart-related diseases too have risen in the same fashion, with more than double the number of

heart-attack related deaths from 1970 to 2005. The same holds true for diabetes-related deaths as well, with a 204% increase over the same period of time. These statistical proportions are vastly disproportional to the changes in numbers of total deaths in Japan, and as such, this increase cannot be attributed to mere population growth; rather, the changes of Japanese food habits, over the past 40 years, can be seen to play a great part in this change. Diets high in red meat often lead to a greater risk of colon cancer (American Cancer Society 2010); meat that hamburger restaurant chains readily provide. The fat content that hamburgers provide, approximately 45 grams per meal, can be seen as contributing to the rise of heart-related deaths as well.

Also important to note is where these foods are coming from, because the Statistical Yearbook demonstrates that a greater proportion of meat consumed in Japan is not made in Japan. Production of raw meat has not changed much, with beef productions averaging approximately 500 thousand tons from 2000 to 2007. However, beef intake has noticeably risen since the 1970s in Japan, nearly doubling in 40 years and still steadily climbing. Among many possible reasons for this rise in beef consumption and marginal rise in greater beef production, the introduction of fast food to the Japanese diet seems to play a noticeable part. John Hayes, the senior director for U.S. supply of McDonald's, said in a 2002 interview that exporting ground beef around the world is a big priority for McDonald's. Regions receiving this fast-food beef include "Mexico, the Caribbean, Latin America" (Peck), and East Asia, one of the major targets for beef export. The health problem in Japan seems exacerbated by not only the importation of American beef, but also the way that it's prepared in fast food restaurants nationwide.

All of the aforementioned shifts in Japanese eating habits seem to have led to the current Japanese obesity epidemic, and the weight term "*metaborikku shoukougun*," or metabolic syndrome, has become a very prominent theme in the Japanese mind. Metabolic syndrome, as defined by the American Heart Association, is a group of risk factors that result in an increased

risk for coronary heart disease. These risk factors include abdominal obesity, imbalance of cholesterol levels, raised blood pressure, and a bodily resistance to insulin. Oddly enough, despite its medical definition, the term metabolic syndrome is generally used in Japan as “shorthand” for overweight under the term “*metabo*,” a truncation of the term itself. The term itself has become a sort of comedic relief for the problem of obesity, often used in more humorous situations than in serious ones, such as in the name of the weight-loss group “The Seven Metabo Samurai” (Onishi).

One result of this culmination of weight-related problems in Japan is the recent enactment of the so-called *metabo* legislation. The legislation itself was enacted in April of 2008, so reports Norimitsu Onishi of the New York Times. Under the new law, both companies and local governments in Japan are required to measure the waistlines of all adults in Japan. The maximum circumference of a man's waist has become 85 centimeters, and 90 centimeters for women. Most of the international media coverage of the so-called *metabo* law has been misleading, particularly information pertaining to what the law is meant to do. Many news outlets claim that the law makes fat “illegal,” but this proposition is exaggerated because the law does not explicitly punish overweight individuals. All it entails is that the company a person works for, or the local government someone lives in will have to pay a fine to the government for each overweight person, and the overweight people in question will not be the ones to be fined. (Onishi 2008). Although the possibility of job discrimination due to this law is possible, the extent of my research has not found this to be a great concern.

This new legislation can also be seen as a smaller part in a greater shift for health care priorities, specifically the program known as “Health Japan 21.” Health Japan 21 is a national health promotion program, which operates mainly through preventative treatment. Its goals include targeting the causes of the growing national weight problem and taking steps to ensure

that these causes are curtailed. One of the problems that have been observed to be linked to diminished health is a lack of knowledge about one's own proper body weight and lack of knowledge about how to maintain a healthy weight (Udagawa et al, 447). However, the proportion of people who understand these weight factors has diminished since the program started, signifying how the program has yet to have a significant impact on the Japanese people. That being said, the enacting of the recent *metabo* legislation in Japan should be seen partly as an attempt by the Japanese to meet their goals for this health program. In order for the Japanese population to understand how to maintain their weight and how to reach the desired 90% target, the Japanese will have to create a way to speed up the process in order to combat a decline in such a demographic. The *metabo* legislation could very well prove to be just that process.

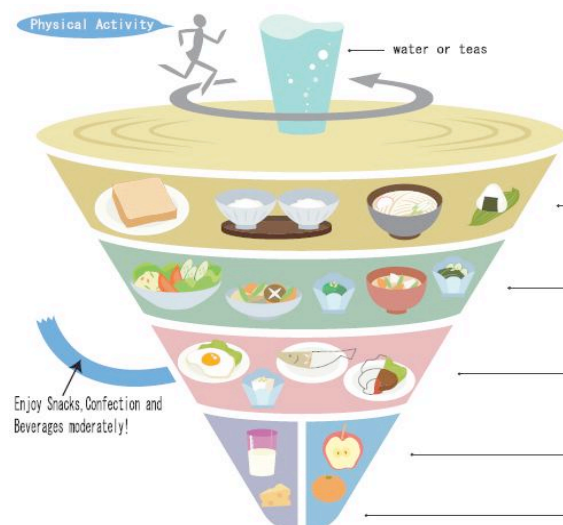


Fig. 1. The Japanese “Spinning Top of Health” Model. Source: Japan; Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare; “Japanese Food Guide Spinning Top”; Web.

One further example of Japan's changing health care tactics is the recently employed Spinning Top of Health model (see fig. 1). In 2005, the Japanese Ministry of Health created this spinning-top model as a means of proliferating more accessible health information across the country. Its

shape is similar to that of the American food pyramid model, although being top-shaped it is upside-down when compared to its American counterpart. Along with information pertaining to recommended servings of food per day, the model also displays a need for balance due to the nature of a spinning top, which requires balanced weight on all sides (Yoshiike et al 151). This emphasis on balance may seem perplexing because Japan is historically a nation whose diet is quite moderate in nature. As previously stated, the traditional Japanese diet consists highly of fish and vegetables, so for the Japanese government to push a need for balance in diet seems quite strange. It should be inferred that with the introduction of Americanized fast food, this seeming imbalance of nutrition has come about as an imbalance that the Japanese health ministry understands and has started to fight back against.

The photographs Onishi implements in his 2008 New York Times article raise a number of questions pertaining to the prevalence of the obesity epidemic. One poster created by the city of Amagasaki depicts a man attempting to put on a pair of blue jeans. Due to the size of his waist, he appears unable to do so, and the beads of sweat across his face accompanied with the heartbeat onomatopoeia “*doki*” indicate his frustration. Below him is the question, “Can you still wear pants you wore when you were twenty?” Figure 2, a poster at a Japanese public health clinic in Matsuyama City, shown in the article, depicts what appears to be a child, an infant, and a small dog all doing stretch exercises.



Fig. 2. Metabo poster in Matsuyama City. Source: Photo by Ko Sasaki printed in Norimitsu Onishi, "Japan, Seeking Trim Waists, Measures Millions," *New York Times*, 13 June 2008, Web.

All three of the characters depicted have a very noticeable bulge in their stomachs. Above these three is the phrase "*datsu metabo*," translated by Onishi as "Goodbye, metabo." Below is written in Japanese "New Matsuyama City health promotion: let's make health our main objective," indicating how fervent of an attack the Japanese government is making against obesity.

Due to the dramatic nature of their attempts to inform the readers about obesity, both, the Matsuyama City and Amagasaki anti-metabo posters seem to project the idea that obesity in Japan is a major problem that must be tackled as soon as possible; but how accurate is this implication? Historically, Japan has been one of the healthiest nations in the world with a recorded average life expectancy of 82 years (CIA 350). So why would such a relatively healthy nation become so concerned about the health of its people? One answer to this question is that the rate at which Japan is becoming an obese nation is steadily on the rise. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD), health data of 2009 indicates that obesity rates in countries around the world, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, have all risen by as much as 20% in the past 40 years. Japan is no exception, as its self-described overweight and obese population has risen from 18.6% in 1979 to 25.1% in 2006 (OECD). While this is much lower than overweight population rates of many other countries, such as the United States with a measured 67.3% in 2006, and while only 3% of the population classified as "obese" in Japan, this increase is still very significant for a country such as Japan that is typically regarded as healthy. Increasing obesity rates have been measured worldwide, and Japan seems to be caught in the crosshairs of a global phenomenon.

As previously mentioned, the introduction of American fast food in Japan can easily be attributed to the rise in obesity; however, long before the introduction of “Big Macs” and french fries, Japan had already been well versed in the idea of fast food. As explained in “Fast Food and Intergenerational Commensality in Japan: New Styles and Old Patterns,” Japan had created their own models for fast food restaurants centuries before the introduction of its Americanized counterpart. These establishments were generally nothing more than food stalls run by street vendors, each selling his own specialty item to passersbys (Traphagan and Brown 120). The types of foods sold at these stalls were generally wheat or buckwheat noodles, skewered chicken dishes known as *yakitori*, and the ever-popular boxed lunches called *bentou* whose usage in Japan dates back to the late 15th century (Noguchi 120; 319).

Not only does Japan fully understand the idea of fast food, but also its presence has been so internalized and personalized by the Japanese that fast food has been turned into a national and cultural icon. Paul H. Noguchi, professor of anthropology at Bucknell University, explains that the aforementioned *bentou* boxed lunches hold a special cultural role for the Japanese: “[boxed lunches] are marked with significance beyond the pragmatic. They help lend order to the lives of Japanese people and help identify who they are” (317). This implementation of boxed lunches as cultural objects seems to demonstrate how inherently nationalistic the idea of fast food is to the Japanese people: fast food is not seen as a particularly foreign entity in Japan. As such, the implementation of Americanized fast food in Japanese culture has been so seamless because the Japanese see restaurants such as McDonald's as a continuation of their own national heritage.

Such a blending of Japanese traditions with typically Western icons is indicative of a sort of global culture: a globalizing force that seems to play a considerable part in the reasons for the Japanese obesity dilemma's existence. One idea that is very apt to the current dietary situation

would be the George Ritzer proposition of McDonaldization in his book “The McDonaldization of Society.” By Ritzer's definition, McDonaldization is “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world” (1). One of the basic elements of Ritzer's McDonaldization is food standardization, ensuring that fast-food chains provide the same food, in the same fashion, and that restaurants “will appear and operate much the same” anywhere around the world (83). What this standardization characteristic entails, for a foreign market, is that the same kind of McDonald's food that is eaten in America will be prepared in the same fashion anywhere else in the world. Japan is no exception; much of the nutritional content of Americanized fast food dishes in Japan is quite similar to that of its American counterpart.

Ritzer also makes a point about how globalization and Americanization are very closely related, an idea that seems very applicable to current day Japan. The Western world is said to have a heavy influence on the homogenization of the cultures with which it comes in contact. Much of Ritzer's idea of McDonaldization, and globalization in general, is that its primary source has historically been Western civilization. As Thomas L. Friedman puts it, “globalization has a distinctly American face” (309). So as Japan has come to prominence after 1868, it has created connections with countries worldwide, taking in international ideas and making them their own. More specifically, Japan has taken in a wealth of American concepts, not the least of which being technology, fashion, and language (in fact, the Japanese word for fast food is a corruption of the phrase itself, “fasuto fuudo”). American fast food is simply another artifact caught in the influx of a massive Westernization front.

However, the Japanese conception of fast food has historically been that of snack food, and the idea of fast food as a meal has only recently come about via influence from the West. One of the seeming prerequisites for fast food in Japan is that it generally does not constitute as a

full meal, but rather a snack to be shared with family and friends. Traphagan describes several instances of families in Japanese McDonald's restaurants splitting hamburgers into sections for the whole family to eat, with french fries and beverages being shared with the entire group (125-129). This may seem bizarre to an American observer, but this tradition of sharing food among friends is a very typical dining habit between the Japanese (129). The trouble in this situation is that comparatively unhealthy food is being eaten in place of traditional healthy foods such as salmon and rice. As such, even though fast food has existed in Japan for many centuries, it is only recently that the problem of weight has become a troublesome issue.

Further evidence of the indigenization of American fast food in Japan is the fact that many Japanese believe McDonalds to be a Japanese business. Ritzer employs anecdotes in his book about how McDonalds is considered “Americana as constructed by the Japanese” (172), and that the Japanese youth is unaware of McDonald's as an American enterprise (xiv). About one third of Japanese people even consider the hamburger to be the “most representative food of Japan in the twenty-first century” (Traphagan 131). Now, the problem is the silent infiltration of American fast food and its replacement of the Japanese equivalent. The Japanese see McDonald's fast food in the same way they view their own indigenous kinds of fast food; now, they fail to realize the foreignness of the food, or its adverse health effects.

One of the generally observed results of this Americanization of the Japanese dietary habits is the localization of the food that is being taken in. The Japanese have turned westernized fast food into a unique Japanese product. This sort of Americanization has manifested itself in a slightly “Japanified” menu with indigenous flavors that would appeal more to a local consumer, as a kind of portmanteau of western food ideology and east-Asian taste. A quick selection of the more prominent examples of this fast-food blend is the ever-popular Teriyaki Burger and the Ebi Filet-O, containing of a patty made from fried shrimp, both of which are offered in all Japanese

McDonalds. A further instance of Japanification is the indigenous restaurant chain Mos Burger, a Japanese-born hamburger joint whose menu is comparatively healthier than that of McDonalds, in terms of calorie count and levels of fat per dish. Even though McDonald's is still much more popular in Japan than Mos Burger (Traphagan 132), the creation of this indigenous chain demonstrates how the Japanese are propagating the very entity that is assisting in ruining their health.

Since Japan is incorporating a large amount of Americana into its lifestyle, America's problem with obesity is now Japan's problem too. To any native citizen of the United States, obesity and diet are two painfully important topics in modern society, as demonstrated by the aforementioned 67.3% of American people who were classified as overweight in 2006. Such a dramatic proportion seems attributable to the American fast-food diet, as evidenced by the Morgan Spurlock film "Super Size Me" (2004), which demonstrates how American fast food ruins one's personal health. Now since the advent of the first Japanese McDonald's in 1971, as well as the nearly 3000 McDonald's constructed since then (Traphagan 132), the health problems of Japan can easily be mirrored to those of the Western world. This Americanization of Japan has contributed to the slow but steady fattening of the Japanese people that comparatively should not be too concerned with their health. This should be taken as a sign to the world of how drastically obesity may have to be fought in the future. Fast food restaurant chains are proliferating around the world, and the health effects that they create upon the nations they inhabit are too big despite recent legislation aimed to combat this health crisis.

The creation of the *metabo* legislation in Japan should be taken as a sign to the world of how drastically obesity may have to be fought in the future. With obesity-related illnesses and deaths increasing in recent years, Japan has demonstrated that the answer to the health crisis may just have to be government intervention on a global scale. Moreover, Japan is not the only

country falling victim to the negative effects of internationalization and globalization, so each individual nation may have to act in a similar fashion to combat the problem. Yet the question remains about the future of the Japanese diet, as well as their sense of personal health. Whether or not Japan's changed health program will be effective remains a mystery, and although the new health program is close to ending, its results are not yet known. Regardless of the program's success, Japan is setting a precedent for the world to follow Japan's example.

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