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## \*Serial\* *Home Economics Education in Japan 6*

This serial focuses on the characteristics and current issues surrounding home economics education in Japan, while also providing a historical perspective.

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# Learning about Life Culture in Home Economics

## : Its Inheritance and Creation

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### Introduction

Through history, and to date, people have always made a living by adapting to their local natural and social environment, with as much ingenuity and wisdom as they could find. In home economics, at elementary school, junior and senior highschool levels, children learn about such ingenuities and wisdom of life of their ancestors, as life culture. The objective of teaching life culture in home economics is not only to teach them to be moved by this heritage and to recognize their role of inheriting and passing it on to the future; it is at the same time to encourage them to carefully study their own lives, to identify issues, to try to find solutions, in other words to create their own, new life culture.

This paper introduces how children are learning about life culture, of food, clothing, and housing.

### Dietary Culture

For a long time the contents of lessons on food consisted of studies on nutrition, foodstuffs, and cooking. It is only since the 1980's that learning on food culture was added.<sup>1)</sup>

Japan is characterized by its topography and geography: it is long North and South, being surrounded by sea, its highly mountainous land with limited flat plains; with its temperate and wet climate, abundant precipitation and distinct four seasons.

Under these conditions the seas, mountains and farmland produced a rich variety of fresh food, and our ancestors used them to create unique dietary culture, which has been inherited to date. This is the dietary culture called "*washoku*"<sup>2)</sup>. *Washoku* was registered in 2013 as UNESCO's World Intangible Cultural Heritage. Its application for registration was successful because the application was based not on the traditional Japanese cuisine per se, but on "dietary customs," that is, the Japanese dietary culture.

"*Washoku*" consists of well-balanced meals, with rice as a staple and combined with grains, vegetables, fungi, fish, shell fish, and sea-weeds (Fig.1). "*Washoku*" has been developed and nurtured in close association with local events and important moments in life such as children's growth, births



Fig.1 Serving a Washoku meal

In *washoku* table setting, the *shushoku* and the soup dish are placed in the front, the main dish behind. The chopsticks are laid in left-to-right position, with the bigger end ends on the side of the dominant hand.

At junior high school variations of rice dish are introduced, such as vinegared rice put together with other ingredients to make *gomoku sushi*, *zouni* or a type of soup containing *mochi* or rice cake which is made by pounding steamed rice. As with elementary school level, along with explanations of how to prepare them, the textbooks also explain that *sushi* and *zouni* were special dishes prepared on special occasions at important hallmarks of life (called “event dish”), that these “event dishes” featured ingredients unique to or abundant in the locale that are in season; that these are the essence of a long history of experiences and techniques of our ancestors.

In home economics class senior highschool students learn about the global aspect of food culture, that in drastically different climate and geographical conditions, different foods are used as staple food. Specific examples are given: in the Arctic North the Inuit with their traditional lifestyle as the nomad eat raw meats of reindeer and seals; in the equatorial tropics where plants grow fast and are

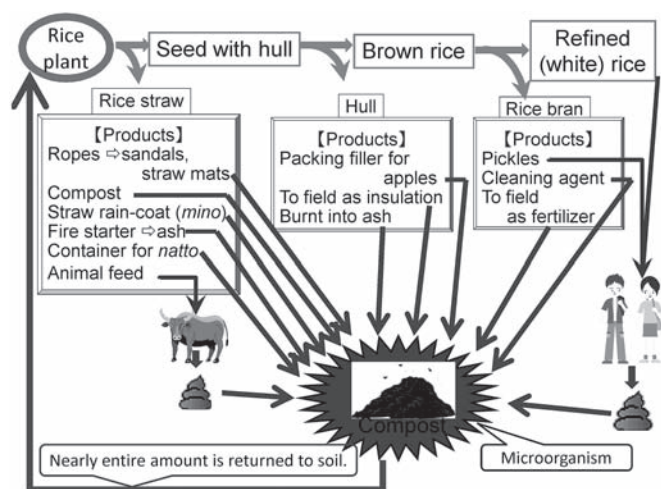


Fig.2 Recycling Life in Edo Period,using Rice as Example

and deaths, events praying for plentiful harvests both on land and at sea, and other events to deepen community ties.

In Japan approximately 50% of energy intake is from grains. This makes grains the central food in everyday meals. In Japan this is called “*shushoku*” or staple food. A *washoku* meal consists of a *shushoku* which is cooked rice, “*okazu*” or non-staple dishes made of food from land and sea, a soup dish, and pickles prepared in microbiological processes. The grain for the staple dish is usually rice, sometimes supplemented or substituted by barley and wheat.

Now let us take up *shushoku* and explain how the subject is treated in the dietary culture studies, at elementary school, junior and senior high schools respectively, citing from textbooks as reference.

At elementary school, along with the method of cooking rice, the textbooks explain the evolution of the heat source for cooking, from wood, to gas, to electricity.

plentiful, wild potatoes and coconut milk are central to the people’s diet; in the dry land of the Middle East where the livestock is the main livelihood, the diet centers on sheep/cattle meat and dairy products such as milk, cheese, yogurt and butter as well as breads made of wild cereal grains that grow in the dry climate; and in the hot and humid climate of East and Southeast Asia, people cultivated rice and their rice-centered culture developed.

At senior high school, students also learn about the recycling nature of life, with an illustrated example of how the rice-centered diet in the Edo Era

recycled itself: the mountainous land in Japan gave abundant spring water, which was put to efficient use for rice production; growing rice in paddy fields benefitted from the minerals contained in the water and allowed harmful elements in soil to be washed away; the seeds of rice were consumed by people and the by-product, rice straws, was processed into various products such as compost, sandals and ropes, and used in various aspects of life; used rice straws were then recycled as fuel, their ashes were applied in the fields to modify the soil (Fig.2). The rice grain consumed by people were then recycled, as excrements, fermented and turned into fertilizer. It is explained that during the Edo Period large urban centres such as Edo (present Tokyo) and Osaka were indeed very clean and the rivers too, as their human waste was recycled and utilized by neighbouring farming communities. In fact in the old days rice, the staple food for the Japanese, was precious.

The ordinary people came up with ways to save on rice, by blending it with barley or potatoes, or eating wheat-based noodles and dumplings as substitutes for rice. Some regions would develop a dish of soup with lots of vegetables and some wheat dumplings in it, serving *shushoku* and *okazu* in one bowl. This type of soup dish had different names in different regions, some of which are “*dago-jiru*”, “*dango-jiru*”, “*houtou*”, “*hittsumi*”, “*suiton*” etc.

These regional dishes were handed down from old to new generations; they are called “regional cuisine” and feature in the teaching materials.

The photo on the left was taken when a junior high class invited a local senior to teach the students how to make one such dish, “*dago-jiru*” (Fig.3). Cooking with the local seniors help the students learn how to prepare a regional dish, and at the same time learn the background of how the dish was created and how people managed with ingenuity when they faced food shortages.



Fig.3 Students cooking with the local seniors

## Clothing Culture

It was only about 140 years ago that the Japanese adopted Western-style clothing. Today it has taken roots as everyday clothing for most Japanese. The Meiji Era saw very concerted efforts to adopt Western culture, when the Western-style clothing was first introduced as military and other uniforms. As it is simple to put on and allows ease of movements, today the Western clothing is worn by most Japanese in everyday life. The kimono, Japan’s traditional clothing, was still worn as everyday clothing until the Second World War, but after the War it has become clothing for special occasions only, mostly for weddings, funerals and special festivities. This shift is partially explained by the availability of ready-made Western clothing and by the fact the kimono is very expensive, and, once worn, relatively lacks ease of movement.

The kimono has its advantages: with its large areas of openings, it gives better ventilation, making it suitable for the hot and humid climate of Japan’s summer. The fabric for the kimono is made in rolls of approximately 36 cm in width and 12 meters in length, one roll being for making one adult-size kimono. Any unused parts of fabric is not cut off but left attached on the kimono, sewed and tucked away, making it easy to reform or remake and making it very economical. With the kimono one size fits all: it fits all body sizes by adjusting the overlap amount of the front bodices, and adjusting the length by the amount of tuck at the waist-line (called “*ohashori*”), which is covered by the *obi* or sash belt. Also its simple and uniform shape has inspired unique dyeing, weaving and pattern designs, thus the kimono has developed into very elegant and glamorous clothing. Because of these advantages and

uniqueness, the kimono is still alive today as part of Japan's traditional culture.

There are certain types of kimono that are worn regularly in everyday life today. *Hanten*, a cotton-padded jacket worn over regular clothing, and *jinbei*, a 2-piece casual ensemble for summer, are still in regular use today. So are *ubugi*, kimono for newborns, and *yukata*, cotton casual kimono for summer. The more formal types of kimono are object of admiration by the youths of today, for their elegance and glamour, and a considerable number of young Japanese today choose to wear them when they attend their "coming-of-age" ceremony and at university graduation exercises. The kimono for its unique features suited to the local climate and customs, and its culture, are worth being studied by the students in the home economics as the science of wisdom from real life.

At junior and senior high schools, the composition, materials, the technique of putting it on, and history of the kimono are taught, as well as some simple practical exercises. For example, in senior high school practice menu are *hanten*, *happi* (short work jacket), *jinbei* (2-piece casual home-wear), *yukata* (cotton casual kimono worn indoors and at summer festivals). Students would use sewing machines along with hand-sewing, and learning the hand-sewing techniques enables them to understand the logicalness of sewing the kimono by hand, the traditional method of kimono-making. The practical also helps students develop dexterity of hands. The students learn that the kimono contributes to effective utilization of resources as it has a very long life, worn not only for a lifetime but over several generations.

Today people have easy access to the clothing, and clothing is considered disposable. It is because of this fact that learning about the kimono and its culture presents to the youth an opportunity to learn the way of life that uses objects with care and for a long time.

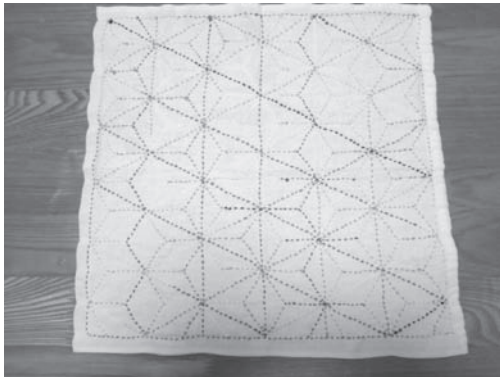


Fig.4 Works of *sashiko* stitching



Fig.5 *Yukata* have a popularity among young people.

### Habitat as life culture

Traditional Japanese houses were built using wood from the rich forests of the land: the wood was used to build the posts and beams, with a kind of earthen mortar and Japanese paper to complete the framing. Its advantage was superior ventilation coming from the large openings. Its main disadvantage was its flammability as all the materials burn easily.

This is why records show that densely built-up urban areas of Japan often suffered major fire disasters. Modern-day advances in science and technology have brought modifications to the materials, building methods and structure, resulting in improvements on flammability and utility

of wooden houses. At the same time new issues, of sanitary and environmental nature, have been identified.

In Home economics the students are taught on the advantageous features of the slowly disappearing traditional houses and housing customs, so as to give them a hint in taking a second look at the present-day life from housing perspective. At elementary schools, the students learn the modern methods of regulating heat and humidity in homes but at the same time learn that in addition, the traditional wisdom existed of making use of nature in cooling off in the summer. Examples are given such as sprinkling water on the ground for evaporation effect (*uchimizu*), and use of shading plants (e.g. wisteria pergolas) and shades made of reeds (*sudare*). This knowledge should encourage students to think of alternatives available to them, in reducing power consumption and contributing to conservation of resources and slowing down of global warming. This should also call their attention to the need to protect the nature.

The housing in Japan rapidly adapted the Western style after the World War II. In cities that were burnt down to the ground during the war, new houses were built that incorporated the dining-kitchen. This resulted in the rapid spread of the housing style that combined the Japanese and Western styles. The shift from the life style of sitting on the floor to one that used chairs brought about a major change in the living space: instead of storing away in closets various supplies used in everyday life until they are needed, thus leaving a large empty space in rooms, in the new hybrid style houses, pieces of furniture for different purposes were used, with permanent footprints in the room, reducing the living space inside new homes, and middle-class homes typically, especially in large urban centres, now have small living space. On the bright side, the shift occurred from centering house design on the guest-receiving formal room to one centered on living or family-room, contributing to democratization of family relationships.

At junior and senior high schools, the functions and use of houses are also taught, as well as regional housing environment and its issues. The students also learn about the advantages and beauty of traditional housing; they learn to be resourceful in better uses of living space in today's housing, and to understand the importance of communication among the family as well as of respecting privacy.

Historically neighbours used to form closer ties within respective neighbourhoods through communal work such as street cleaning and preparation for local festivals.

When the great earthquake hit Western Japan 20 years ago (Hanshin-Awaji Great Earthquake), the disaster revealed the weakening of neighbourhood ties. To deal with further ageing of the society and for safety and security of the communities, forming closer community ties will be even more important from now on. We hope that learning about the subject will nurture the youth who will be the community builders of the future.

## In Closing

In the past handing down of life culture from generation to generation took place within families, and within communities from their elders to the young, on various occasions in everyday life. However, today, families have changed both in form and function, the communities have lost close ties, and we are losing the path through which we used to pass on our heritage that was the life culture of the times. By complementing what remains today, that is by teaching life culture in home economics, we hope to maintain this path of the circle of inheriting culture, which is at risk today.

Through lessons about life culture, children learn about the ancestral wisdom that has been passed down through long history of births and nurturing of lives. Students have written as their reaction that after these lessons they, too, aspire to become wise and resourceful like their ancestors. This seems to serve as an evidence for assuming that teaching about life culture is bearing the fruits,

in nurturing the youth who will be the creators and bearers of new life culture in the future.

**Notes:**

- 1) Misako Kuwahata: “A Study on Dietary Education from the Perspective of 《Regional Dietary Culture》” Kazama shobo, 2003, 45-135
- 2) <http://www.maff.go.jp/j/keikaku/syokubunka/culture/>
- 3) In Japan, under the School Education Law, the textbooks that can be used in classrooms must have been reviewed by the Ministry of Education for their suitability as school textbooks and be approved. At present 2 elementary school, 3 junior high school and 6 senior high school textbooks are used in classrooms as approved textbooks for home economics. In this paper the textbooks from the following publishers are used as reference: for elementary school, Tokyo Shoseki (Home Economics 501) and Kairyudo (H.E.502); for junior high school, Tokyo Shoseki (H.E.721) and Kairyudo (H.E.723); for senior highschool, Jikkyo Shuppan (H.E.303) and Kyoiku Tosho (H.E.033). The photo on “*serving Washoku*” was taken from the textbook by Kairyudo (Home Economics. 723).
- 4) The photo on *Yukata* was taken from the textbook by Tokyo Shoseki (Home Economics.031)