

# The Price of Harmony: The Ideology of Japanese Cuisine

**Abstract:** Japanese gastronomy is celebrated justifiably for its harmony with nature and seasonality. Neglected in this celebration are the ideological values and the environmental impact of the gastronomy. Lack of sustainability, degradation of the soil, and industrial practices in agriculture are fundamental to creating Japanese cuisine. In addition, the idea of Japanese food as superior to other nations' cultural practices is rooted in political and

historical approaches. How does the culture psychologically balance the idea of harmony with the harmfulness of degradation and ideology?

**Keywords:** Japan, gastronomy, sushi, ideology, Jiro, organic food, petrochemicals, overfishing, sustainability

Jiro dreams of sushi, but how about sustainability? Evidently not.

JIRO ONO, AT HIS FAMOUS subterranean restaurant in the upscale Ginza neighborhood of Tokyo, renowned by way of three stars accorded by the Michelin guide and the subject of a feature film, routinely serves endangered marine life. Seafood Watch, an independent nonprofit organization that assesses the environmental risks of overfishing, lists the following that he serves: bluefin tuna, eel, yellowtail, and sea urchin.

Jiro is not alone in aggrandizing the pleasures of harmonious bonding with nature through eating. The celebrants of his sushi restaurant, where dinner for two is about six hundred dollars a couple for twenty-two pieces of fish, never mention the disconnect. It is a collusion between a chef who purports to have a special Japanese relationship to food and food writers who are buying a myth of harmony. Articles and videos show food writers, eyes closed to demonstrate ecstasy from eating, and the audience often learns that the sushi is the best the person has ever had. Might as well be—it's like a prisoner's last meal, because in the foreseeable future some species now being served by Jiro and others will be gone due to overfishing.

Jiro and many other Japanese chefs talk about the importance of rare, seasonal ingredients that provide their guests with a profound way to experience nature. Writers who describe the cuisine of Japan note the perfection of shapes and colors, deep tastes, the flavor of *umami*. Not just fish, but the super high quality of such products as single-breed chickens, beef so high in fat that it is white, and remarkable melons, strawberries, mushrooms, and miso.

But in growing and preparing these products as a link to Japanese harmony with nature, and in writing about them, neither chefs nor food writers discuss the impact on the environment. Specifically, the use of pesticides, single-crop agriculture such as rice, the fishing methodologies that endanger fish, and practices that introduce toxins into the soil and change atmospheric conditions.

With respect to rice, celebrated in Japan, the impact on the environment is completely ignored in food writing. And yet, rice's contribution to global warming is obvious and alarming. As an article in the *American Journal of Plant Sciences* (de Miranda et al. 2015: 2009–2018) notes:

Rice is one of the most important agricultural products and it is cultivated in almost all countries in the world. Its production requires usually large flooded areas. Under these conditions, many greenhouse gases are generated, such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and its derivatives. Cultivation of rice is responsible for the release of relevant amounts of these gases and contributes decisively to global warming.

Surely this is at least worth mentioning, even briefly, when writing about the splendid use of rice in sushi.

There *is* mention of whale hunting, in violation of international law (along with Norway and Iceland), but little is heard about drift netting. Japan leads the world in drift netting: the deployment of huge nets that trap anything—hundreds of thousands of dolphin, sharks, skates, sea turtles, and other aquatic life are caught unintentionally, slaughtered, and tossed out—as they are swept through the sea. In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly banned this practice, but Japanese fishermen continue to implement the nets; it is easier and more cost-effective than going after one type of fish.

On land, disregard for the environment is the norm as well. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2016), “Japan uses much more pesticide per hectare than the United States—ten times as much insecticide, twice as much herbicide, and almost 50 times more fungicide, in 2007.” And according to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO): “phosphatic fertilizer application in 2010 was over four times higher per hectare in Japan than in the United States. Nitrogenous fertilizer application was 50 percent higher in Japan, and potassium fertilizers were applied almost twice as heavily in Japan.” Human exposure to these fertilizers is linked to gastrointestinal disorders, CNS disorders, and respiratory problems, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Japan is also one of the leading producers of synthetic chemicals. On the list of the world’s top fifty chemical companies, published annually by the independent industry magazine *Chemical and Engineering News*, eight Japanese firms, just over 15 percent of the entire sector, are identified with these ranks: 11. Mitsubishi (26.3 billion dollars in sales), 18. Sumitomo (17.8 billion), 19. Mitsui (17.2 billion), 21. Toray Industries (17 billion), 31. Shin-Etsu Chemical (11.9 billion), 36. Asahi Kasei (10.6 billion), 42. DIC (8.2 billion), and 44. Tosoh (7.7 billion). The entire global sales of all fifty companies is \$961.3 billion, which means that Japan produces a little over 10 percent of the world’s synthetic chemicals. These chemicals alter the environment, and their long-term effects on health after human and animal consumption are of concern. The production of agrochemicals and petrochemicals is not an expression of harmony with nature.

The above-listed Japanese companies are major global industry leaders as well as employers collectively of tens of thousands of Japanese along with ancillary industries and resources linked to them, such as banks, light industry, transportation, allocation of public monies, roads, train lines, airports, and research funds. Within the internal Japanese economy itself, regardless of their significant world share of production of agrochemicals and petrochemicals, this industry is a dominant force. Most of these companies are part of the Nikkei 225: blue-chip stocks in the Japanese stock market. Hence, they are fundamental to the country’s economy and as accepted as Ford, General Motors, IBM, Apple, and Google are to U.S. investors.

According to an article in *Inter Press Service* (Kakuchi 2013):

In total, the agricultural industry comprises just over one percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP), which touched six trillion dollars in 2011. This situation, experts say, is the result of a national policy that ignored agriculture in favour of industrial

development—through the auto manufacturing and electronics sectors—to turn Japan’s devastated post-war economy into a high-tech exporter nation, and the third largest economy in the world after the United States and China.

So much for harmony with nature.

Less dramatically, but of importance, is the Japanese view of organic food. Given the high rate of pesticide use in Japan, and after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, consumers there looked for safety in the food supply. Consumer societies faced with comparable worries have turned to organic food as a resource: in the United States, according to the Organic Trade Association, it is 5% and in Europe, according to the Organic Data Network, it is between 13% (Switzerland) and 2.6% (Norway) with an average of about 6%. But in Japan, according to an article in *Japan Today* (McCurry 2015), “organics accounted for a mere .4% of the total domestic food market.”

According to the above-mentioned FAO: “Proper analysis of the Japanese organic market is faced with the difficulty that until recently, no clear definition of ‘organic product’ existed.” The FAO notes that organic food in Japan, translated as *yuki shokuhin*, is subdivided into five categories: organic (no chemicals used for more than three years); organic in transition (no chemicals used for a period between six months and three years); reduced pesticides (50 percent less pesticides than the average pesticide application); no chemical fertilizer; and reduced fertilizer grown (less than 50 percent of average fertilizer use).

The categorization leads to confusion on just what precise properties a product must have to be considered wholly organic. Further, the FAO notes, “a survey carried out by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries [MAFF] in the early 1990’s showed that of 1,459 so-called organic farming households, only 32 percent practiced chemical-free farming; the remaining 68 percent were classified as practicing ‘reduced use of agro-chemicals.’” It wasn’t until April 2000 that “new Japanese Agricultural Standards (JAS) legislation for organic agriculture was implemented.”

It is fair to say therefore that the very few who have access to the truly (and rarely) harmonious nature of Japanese gastronomy do not reflect the national behavior toward nature. The evidence shows that the most widespread behavior is utter disregard for sustainability, extensive use of pesticides, and high production of petrochemicals and agrochemicals.

But a societal myth persists that Japanese revere nature and have a closer relationship to it than those who are not from Japan. In the modern era, the ideology of this myth has

its roots in wartime propaganda. Brett Walker (2015: 244–45), writing in *A Concise History of Japan*, makes this clear:

In 1937, the Education Ministry articulated the idea of Japan's "unparalleled national polity" in the *Kokutai no hongī* (Cardinal principles of national polity) . . . which linked Japan's "beautiful nature not seen in other countries" to its unique "national essence". . . . [T]he *Kokutai no hongī* explained: "Natural features overpower India, and in the West one senses that man subjugates nature, and no deep harmony is found between man and nature as in our country. On the contrary, our people are in constant harmony with nature."

This view, which perpetuated a myth of superiority in relationship to nature, was used systematically to justify the subjugation of people who would "benefit" from Japan's "civilized" attitudes toward nature. It had no connection to the reality of Japanese environmental practices then (or now), and was completely absent in wartime behavior with respect to *human* nature—how noncombatants were treated, for example.

But the modern era, both wartime and postwar, is precipitated by underlying and ancient expectations. Behavior in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the latest manifestation of what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Japanese speak poetically of their majestic and superior relationship to nature. On the other hand, environmental degradation continues largely unabated. What might account for this? Is it more than a contradiction, and perhaps two facets of one perspective?

One possible explanation can be found in Japanese concepts of *honme* (本音) and *tatema* (建前). Roughly speaking, *tatema* is the public self and *honme* the private self, but these definitions do not capture subtlety and implications. Looked at from a deeper psychological perspective, rather than as a set of terms used to designate social behaviors, these words are identities that are egosyntonic, which means unexamined and in harmony, ironically, with an idealized view of oneself.

Consistent with this analysis, it means that when a person is demonstrating behaviors that conform to societal expectations, he or she is not aware of doing so. And when a person holds on to fantasies about oneself, he or she does not see these as imaginings, but rather experiences them as true. Pragmatically, what this means is that it is possible to bifurcate life: To convince oneself, as in the Japanese example, that reverence and harmony exist with nature while dining on beautiful sushi made from endangered bluefin tuna. It is a happy myth that enables a great sushi chef to speak dreamily of fish while forgetting how the fish were caught and how few remain.

Certainly, as Japan continues to modernize, the goal will be the integration of *tatema* and *honme* so that the artificial divide between public behavior and private fantasy will close.

Once closed, it may be that Japan's truest desire for harmony may go from fantasy to reality. There is that potential. For example, due to Japan's aging population and limited population growth, there is less need for high-yield crops (brought about by pesticides). Fewer people to feed. It may also be that a smaller population will have greater access to more education that could lead to greater attention to the importance of protecting the environment, both on land and at sea, through practices that take the long view.

According to the *Japan Times* (Pesek 2017), "Current trends suggest that between now and the early 2060's, Japan's 126 million population will shrink 31 percent, while working-age ranks drop 42 percent." Fewer people could mean a greater appreciation to maintain what exists and to protect that for future generations.

In addition, changing roles of women in agriculture could affect the ways in which the environment is treated. Further quoting the article in *Inter Press Service* (Kakuchi 2013):

[T]he Japanese government poured 50 billion dollars into efforts to promote awareness on women farmers' right to land ownership and income, cutting against the grain of traditional farming culture where farm titles are held by the husband or father in a family. "This is the only way to go if we are going to attract the younger generation who expect gender equality," said Yoshie Oguno at the ministry of agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

Should the ways of treating the environment change, we may see a sequel to that movie about sushi: *Jiro Dreams of Sustainability*. 

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