

Shokuiku at the Japanese International School Berlin

Shokuiku, literally “food education”, in social studies refers to a concept introduced by the Japanese government for the “acquisition of knowledge about food as well as the ability to make appropriate food choices”, as it is described by the Ministry of Forestry, Agriculture and Fisheries in the basic law for *shokuiku* (Ministry of Forestry, Agriculture and Fisheries). It was introduced in light of concerns during the 1990s that the Japanese public was growing distant toward traditional Japanese food culture (Reiher 2009: 68). What the government understands as “traditional” however, is largely up to interpretation. This is not the only aspect of the law that has been called into question, however. While it was put into action to help the general public making “appropriate” food choices, the government’s use of the term “appropriate” has been called into question by Reiher (2012), noting also that the government setting guidelines for what foods the Japanese population is supposed to consume is an invasion of privacy (Reiher 2009: 71). Additionally, the nationalistic wording of “traditionally Japanese foods” being required to be reintroduced into Japanese schools has been criticized by scholars such as Takeda (2018).

This made us wonder whether *shokuiku*, as defined by the Japanese government, truly affects Japanese citizens’ food consumption patterns. As the term brings to mind an educational context, we choose a school setting for our research. Specifically, we used the *Japanese International School Berlin* as a case study to find out what role *shokuiku* plays outside of Japan. It is a rather small school with less than 30 students aged 6-17. The school teaches exclusively in Japanese and only allows for the children of Japanese citizens to enroll. Being an educational facility officially recognized by the Japanese government (Ministry

of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), most of the school’s staff grew up in Japan and therefore were directly influenced by *shokuiku*, making it ideal for our purposes. We utilized a mixed-methods research approach, consisting of questionnaires, a personal visit to the school during lunch hours to observe the students’ eating habits, and an interview with one of the teachers.

In June 2024, we handed out three different versions of the questionnaires: One for the teachers, one for the students’ parents, and one blending the two^[1]; we received 5 filled-out questionnaires in total (3 from the teachers, 1 from the students’ parents and one from the aforementioned blended version). Every version of the questionnaire ranged from more basic questions on who at home decides what lunch the student gets to bring to school, to more specific questions regarding the perceived differences in how much importance Japanese children put in food education compared to those in Germany. Despite this, we chose to avoid a direct comparison with the German education system, as this would have been out of the scope of our abilities, opting instead to only take direct comments on the German system and anecdotal evidence from our own youth into account. Unfortunately, due to ethical considerations, we have been unable to directly consult the students about their opinions on the matter. While this was unfortunate, we were able to get sufficient insight into the students’ thoughts on the matter through personal observations and retellings by, as well as informal conversations with their parents through the questionnaires we handed out. All our participants were in their late 50s to 60s and most of the teacher participants also had kids of their own, although those did not attend the school.

Lunch Breaks at German Schools

It is important first to note a principal structural difference between lunchtime at Japanese schools and lunchtime at German schools. At Japanese schools, there is a mandatory lunchtime period that both teachers and students are asked to be present for. From our experience at German schools however, this lunchtime period tends to be rather short and therefore barely allows for you to finish your meal. Many schools' cafeterias also lack the necessary capacities to accommodate all the students, causing many to skip it outright. In addition, all Japanese students are required to participate in both lunch distribution during lunchtime, and in cleaning up before classes start again.

The participants in our questionnaires appeared to share an understanding that this principal difference also shapes students' attitude towards food. They all felt as though the Japanese lunchtime routine played a vital role in helping Japanese children develop camaraderie among their peers through this shared experience. Some of our participants also added that the phrases *"itadakimasu"* (= "I receive this meal", equivalent to the German "Guten Appetit") and *"gochisōsama deshita"* (≈ "Thank you for this meal"), which are intrinsic to Japanese eating culture, help develop a sense of gratitude toward food at an early age. Conversely, as some of the participants noted, this sense of gratitude is not present to the same extent at German schools, resulting in more food being left unfinished and thrown away.

"If you don't receive food education as a child, your relation to food will be in complete disarray"

—This was one of the bolder statements we received in regards to what one participant felt was comparatively insufficient food education at regular German schools.



Picture 1: entry to the school's kitchen. The sign reads "cooking room"

As far as the contents of the food itself goes, it would appear there is also a consensus among the respondents that Japanese schools have the upper hand in providing "foods with a healthy balance in contents" that allow the students "to get in touch with different [food] cultures" and which "simply tastes better". They appeared to think rather fondly not just of the culture surrounding *shokuiku*, but also the food being served at Japanese schools itself. The *Japanese International School Berlin* keeps in line with schools in Japan in having a fixed lunchtime everyday. However, as it does not have its own cafeteria, students have to bring their own lunch. "A homemade meal", one participant says "conveys parental love like nothing else" - Students eating mere store-bought breads and apples on the other hand they consider "sad".

Eating Lunch with Students and Staff

This, of course, got us curious about the exact contents of the students' *bentos* (*bento* being the Japanese word for lunch box, broadly speaking). We got to visit the school's three classrooms during lunchtime, which allowed us to confirm that all the teachers and the students were present during this time and all participated in the expected rituals of "*gochisōsama*" and "*itadakimasu*". During the short lunchtime of about 30 minutes (this aspect seems to be one similarity between German and Japanese schools), we got to eat with the staff members and ask them about the various meals they and the students brought. At a glance, it appeared to us as though the majority of students brought Japanese-style lunch boxes filled with pickled vegetables and fruits and/or soups in thermos cans - The nutritional value of German lunches was questioned at multiple points during our research, so this was not unexpected.



Picture 2: One student was packed a thermos can of soup by her parent, though neither she nor the teaching staff were able to tell us what kind of soup it was, leading to her homeroom teacher dubbing it わからないスープ (lit.: "I-Don't-Know-Soup")

Some of the participants in our interview speculated that the existence of home economics class in Japan may be one of the reasons Japanese children are comparatively familiar with basic cooking principles with a focus on nutritional value. We did notice a home economics room next to the classrooms (Picture 1), so this is likely something the school is trying to push for as well.

After all, our interview partner also wrote the following in the questionnaire she handed in:

"Shokuiku is not just about education, but also closely linked to leading a healthy lifestyle as an adult".



Picture 3: bento box with homemade onigiri (filled rice balls) and tamagoyaki (omelette)

In Germany on the other hand, she noted, not only is there no home economics class, but "access to both vegetables and fish is also limited", so supposedly neither children nor adults have the option to lead a healthy lifestyle as easily. Naturally, this is a rather biased view, as there is a large variety of vegetables easily accessible in German supermarkets as well; although it makes sense that one would be less inclined to buy them if they did not grow up in an environment where they had to learn to make proper use of them.

However, among both the students and the teachers, we also spotted quite a few simple German sandwiches, also known in Berlin as “Stullen”, in lieu of a traditional Japanese *bento*. From what we could tell, a few of them were store-bought as well, as were some of the fruits.



Picture 4: Another student had this typical German-style “Brotbox” with “Stullen” wrapped in clingwrap and sliced cucumber for lunch

Although it did still appear as though quite a fair amount of those in charge of the students’ meals put time and effort into preparing even these comparatively simple lunches, we did expect there to be a much clearer majority of Japanese-style lunches that the students brought, after what we had just heard and read about the nutritional value of Japanese food. Granted, this may simply be due to the cost of the ingredients necessary to prepare Japanese foods with high nutritional value in Germany.

As our interview respondent noted:

“While we are trying to make it a point to eat a miso soup with rice every day, they are unfortunately forced to mainly gravitate toward cheaper meats instead of fish at home”.

Regardless of the content of the *bento*, the vast majority was still packaged like a Japanese-style *bento* - so much so that one young girl specifically pointed out her German-style lunch box to us as a novelty.



Picture 5: The same girl who proudly showed us her German lunch box followed us out of her classroom. She very eagerly introduced herself to us in German before she scampered off, giggling to herself. The name is changed to protect her anonymity, though she did also give a German name which was uncommon in the school.

Perception of German Food

Finally, in order to gain deeper insight into the most pressing issues for the teachers at the school, we conducted an interview with one of them. She is actually also the respondent to our questionnaire that provided the previous statement for us. Having first enrolled him at a nursery school in Japan, her son is now enrolled at a regular German school, so both she and her son are confronted with the differences between the two school systems on a daily basis. She echoes many of the complaints the other staff have toward German cafeterias and their lack of healthy options as well, adding that her son is simply fed up with having to eat the same foods every day and chooses to just not eat there at all anymore as a result.

She told us about a workshop on German food education her son's school organized, which she attended with her son. While she appeared to be relieved that German schools even offered something similar to the home economics classes she grew up with in Japan, it also gave her an opportunity to witness how much food was being wasted by students and how chaotic certain aspects seemed. These days, her son is still only able to cook certain meals for himself, although he is trying to include healthy ingredients as much as possible, which is something he picked up from the workshop.



Picture 6: a bowl of ramen made from scratch with fresh ingredients

She also shared the other participants' sentiments regarding the camaraderie aspect that comes with eating lunch together at the same time and the rituals associated with Japanese eating culture. Moreover, she appeared quite critical of not just the food served at German schools, but also of German food and eating culture in general, stating:

"It's a systemic problem, right? I feel the sentiment in Germany is slanted toward 'quantity over quality' and I even hear a lot of Germans say so [...]. In Japan, on the other hand, people love gourmet food and place a lot of importance on it."

Conclusion

Our fear going into this project was that the respondents may not be completely aware of what we mean when we talk about *shokuiku*; that *shokuiku* is a made-up construct by the Japanese government that we were merely presuming was something everyone at international Japanese schools was aware of. However, the respondents seemed quite eager to cooperate in our research, with the questionnaires alone already painting a clear picture of the role *shokuiku* plays at the Japanese International School Berlin.

Through this small sample study, we were able to ascertain that *shokuiku* indeed plays a role at Japanese schools outside of Japan as well and that it is something that continues to be on the mind of both parents and teachers alike. They shared with us certain differences they noticed in the manner in which thinking about food is being taught to children at Japanese schools compared to those in Germany, starting with simple phrases that Japanese children learn to adopt when eating from a young age, through more regimented periods in which every student is required to eat with the

entire student body and staff. Moreover, there was not a single participant that did not in some way lament the lack of these aspects in German schools.

Judging by the foods the students brought to the school, it would appear that a majority of them were influenced by Japanese eating habits. It appeared to us as though either the students and/or their parents also felt a lingering attachment to Japanese food itself. It did appear as though *shokuiku*, although literally the Japanese term for food education, had a different connotation to the teachers than the English equivalent. Whether this perception is influenced by the Japanese government's stance on the matter, we cannot say. Finally, among the respondents to our questionnaires, one noted that it "would now be interesting to see how important Germans perceive food education to be" - A companion piece to our research conducted at a German school in Japan may be something worth looking into in the future. ■

[1] We encountered a situation where one of the teachers told us she could not be present for the children's lunch hours and therefore requested we provide her with a custom questionnaire putting more focus on her perception on *shokuiku* as a parent. Additionally, she also agreed to be our interview partner, so some of her comments overlap with what she told us during our interview.

Sources

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