RICE, MEN, AND OTHER EVERYDAY ANXIETIES
Navigating Obesogenic Urban Food Environments in Osaka, Japan

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Introduction

Urban Environments as Obesogenic

Modern cities by (mis)design tend to be highly “obesogenic,” meaning they encourage unhealthy weight gain over time by decreasing physical activity and increasing intake of low-nutrient, energy-dense foods (Brewis 2011). Urban and suburban built environments can discourage physical activity by means of such features as streets with low walkability, long distances to desirable destinations without workable public transportation options, and lack of green spaces in which to play (Adams et al. 2014; Creatore et al. 2016; Cutts et al. 2009; Rundle et al. 2009). Employment in cities also tends to be highly sedentary, such as office work. And when food supplies are stable, as they are in wealthy industrialized countries like Japan, cities act to highly concentrate exposures to outlets selling cheap, low-nutrition, time-saving, fattening food (e.g., Murakami et al. 2011). These obesogenic food environments are sometimes referred to as “food swamps” (e.g., Cooksey-Stowers et al. 2017). Of these two factors – sedentary lifestyles and poor food environments – public health experts consider the latter by far the more powerful driver of the “obesity epidemic” (Luke and Cooper 2013; Swinburn 2013).

Most particularly, urban settings tend to be especially obesogenic because they drastically tip the time–cost equations that underlie less healthy food purchases (Swinburn et al. 1999). That is, any urban environment that presents citizens with highly and continuously accessible low-cost food, and where that low cost is created by providing foods that are cheaper because they are nutrient-poor and energy-dense, unhealthy weight gain and increasing rates of overweight and obesity are likely outcomes. In the Global North (where most studies have been done), the highest-deprivation neighborhoods of cities tend to have the greatest exposure to less healthy food environments, amplifying the effects of time–cost equations and thus associating poverty with higher obesity rates (Brewis 2011). The intervening risks can be variously created by both higher densities of junk or fast food outlets and lower access to affordable fresh food outlets like supermarkets in socioeconomically deprived neighborhoods (Bridle-Fitzpatrick 2015; de Assis et al. 2018; Giskes et al. 2011; Saunders et al. 2015; Sushil et al. 2017). Of course, the interactions between food environments, population weight, and poverty are not always simple; moreover, we cannot be sure that patterns observed in the Global North fully apply in the Global South. For example, Gartin’s study in urban Paraguay showed how
household shifts toward the middle class tended to encourage them to engage the choices of food available nearer to home, meaning they then consume lower-nutrient, higher-calorie diets more typical of food swamps in the Global North (Gartin 2012).

Urban obesogenic studies together present a picture of growing challenges, globally, of such food swamps to urban public health, with obesity risk created at the intersection of lack of relevant urban planning, neoliberal economics, environmental injustice, and cultural intolerance for “fat” bodies (Brewis et al. 2018; Shannon 2014). Posited solutions thus tend to focus on economic policies such as taxing junk food or subsidies for healthier food, changing school food environments, and teaching the public how to read nutrition labels (Block and Subramanian 2015), i.e., mostly policy and educational interventions. So far, most of these fail in the larger picture, in that consistent reversing of obesity risk at the population level is yet to be documented (Roberto et al. 2015). The factors that most matter for intervention success remain poorly described.

Related to this, what has been identified as particularly missing from the analysis of the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to obesogenic environments is the voice and perspective of consumer-citizens, as those who are navigating these complex foodscapes each and every day (Longhurst 2010; Shannon 2014). In this chapter, we begin to address this gap. We provide an ethnographic analysis of the stories of men and women living in the suburbs of Osaka, Japan. Our goal is to explore how people understand, react to, and cope with the types of complex, obesogenic food environments that increasingly characterize urban centers globally. We show that even in Japan – one of the reportedly “slimmest” industrialized nations globally (see Figure 34.1) – these consumer-citizens are fully aware of, and often overwhelmed by, the constancy of their complicated inner-city food environments. Feeling responsible for managing the risks posed by urban food environments to their families, they engaged daily in highly anxiety-provoking, complex trade-offs at the intersection of economic constraint, convenience, and health concerns.

![Figure 34.1](image)

**Figure 34.1**  Obesity as age-standardized percentage of adults in a range of countries, 2016 estimates.

**Notes:** Japan is lowest of the developed industrialized nations. Obesity is defined by WHO as body mass index (BMI) ≥ 30 (WHO 2018).
Obesogenic Urban Environments in Asia: Food Jungles rather than Food Swamps

As noted, much of the research on food deserts and food swamps as obesogenic environments has been focused in the industrialized, Westernized Global North (e.g., Bivoltsis et al. 2018). There is by comparison a small literature about obesogenicity of food environments in East Asia. In China, limited studies have shown inner cities to have a high density of fast and junk food outlets, indirectly associated with higher obesity rates (Hua et al. 2014; Li et al. 2011). Similarly, in urban Taiwan, proximity to and density of fast food outlets predict higher child weight (with lesser effects in rural areas) (Chiang et al. 2011). A study based on South Korean national-level data showed that people living in higher densities of fast food outlets had higher consumption of low-nutrient, fatty foods, and increased odds of obesity (Kim, Y. and Han 2016). However, a study using the same data combined with detailed GIS in urban Seoul, South Korea showed that unhealthy eating patterns were observed across the city in ways that were related to socioeconomic but not to location relative to fast food sources once socioeconomics was taken into account (Kim, D. et al. 2016). In Japanese cities, studies have shown that in some cases food environments appear to affect dietary intake and potentially obesity risk. Specifically, Murakami et al. (2010) identified that young Japanese women with greater neighborhood exposure to bread and confectionary stores ate more bread and confections – but no association between outlets of meat and vegetables and dietary quality, nor with actual body size. Choi and Suzuki (2013) found that some socioeconomic factors (elderly, unemployed, no car) were more important to inability to access healthy food in the environment than actual distance to different qualities of food sources. In a study in Aichi Prefecture, only those living alone were found to show associations between higher body mass index (BMI) and access to fast food outlets or convenience stores (Hanibuchi et al. 2011).

The patterns for urban Japan (and similarly urban South Korea) fail to show the expected association of distance from healthy food sources (food desert) or density of unhealthy food sources (food swamps) to dietary differences. The main exception identified so far is that those who live alone or are elderly seem to be especially at risk of exposures to the negative effects of obesogenic food environments. Immediate and easy access to affordable and healthy food options is similarly lacking in both higher- and lower-income areas of the city (Iwama et al. 2016). For this reason, it has been proposed that standard models of unhealthy food environments developed from cases in the Global North might not operate in the same ways in Asia, specifically East Asia. Based on analysis in South Korea, D. Kim (2014) coined the term “food jungle” to describe how lower-income consumers in particular must navigate the complex landscape of limited accessibility of affordable healthy foods and high access to cheaper low-nutrient choices. For this reason, our ethnographic study asked specific questions about how food choices were made within the household in relation to both economy and health, including how these were weighed against each other.

Obesity in Japan

At first glance, it may seem strange to deploy an ethnographic study of people’s encounters with obesogenic environments in Asia, and most especially in Japan, given that the nation has one of the very lowest obesity rates globally (Figure 34.1) and supposedly one of the “healthiest” diets (Gabriel et al. 2018). In 2016, 4.3% of Japanese adults were classified as obese (BMI ≥ 30). Adult Japanese males have notably higher rates of obesity and average BMI than do females. The average BMI of adult males was 23.6 (23.1–24.0) compared to 21.8 (21.3–22.3) for females, and the percentage of those classified as clinically obese was 4.8% (3.2–6.8) for men and 3.7% (2.5–5.2) for women. The percentage classified as overweight (BMI ≥ 25) was 32.5% for men (27.6–37.6) versus 21.8% (17.9–25.8) for women (all age-standardized statistics from the WHO 2018 database).
Importantly, studies suggest Asian populations accrue greater weight-related health damage (such as diabetes or hypertension) at lower relative body weights (WHO Expert Consultation 2004). By this model, the health risk of adults in Japan from “obesity” can be estimated as relevant to those with lower BMIs.

Certainly, the public health aspects of rising body weights are a much discussed concern within Japan, and one that has triggered major policy efforts. For example, in 2008, the Japanese government passed the metabōrikku shōkōkun kensha – law that mandated specific forms of employment-related oversight of body mass (Borovoy 2017; Borovoy and Roberto 2015; Manzenreiter 2012; Yamagishi and Iso 2017). This was a direct legislative reaction to obesity caused by “the combination of fat eating and lack of physical activity . . . and the adoption of the Western eating habit” (Tanaka and Kinoshita 2009). The law lays out a set of steps to be taken when a citizen is identified (by body measures like waist circumference and high blood pressure) as being at elevated risk for weight-related diseases. Subsequent steps include being provided with educational pamphlets and counseling, which focus on “realistic goals, incremental change, and small modifications to daily life” (Borovoy 2017). Notably these mandated interventions are not structural, but rather place the burden on individuals to “solve” the identified “problem” of high body weight. Despite these steps being taken at a massive scale across Japan, the rates of obesity continue to rise (Yamagishi and Iso 2017).

Everyday Eating in Japan

The Japanese concerns about obesity sit within a broader set of cultural shifts in appropriate and acceptable modalities of food and eating. Food, including the way food is selected, presented, and consumed, has been an important aspect of an idealized modern Japanese identity and society. In 2013, wasōkoku, typically translated as “Japanese food/cuisine,” was added to the UNESCO list of “intangible cultural heritage” (see Rath 2016, p. 9). Washoku emphasizes preparing and consuming high-quality foods which follow both seasonal and local availability (Freedman 2016), along with a combination of varied food items (meat, soup, pickles, and so on) with rice to provide harmonic, aesthetic, and sensate combinations. Thus, rice and fish, as trans-seasonal food items, are always eaten, but different fruits and vegetables tend to be eaten at different times of the year, and the preparation style also responds to the season. Everyday food, especially children’s food, should be simple and plain (soshoku); eating with family and others to enjoy the social and aesthetic components of eating is especially valued; eating alone is seen as especially sad (Takeda et al. 2018). And people widely recognize wasōkoku-influenced forms of dining, including home cooking and eating as a family, as most healthful (Goto et al. 2014).

Yet it can be hard in the confines of work, commutes, and school lives to meet these wasōkoku ideals. Eating fast food, eating out at restaurants, and eating alone are on the rise nationally. What people frequently consume in Japan is not wasōkoku but rather an updated version of kokuminshoku, “national people’s cuisine,” established during World War II. Kokuminshoku refers to “inexpensive dishes with foreign origins or ‘comfort food,’ chiefly ramen and beef curry,” leaving behind any of the militaristic overtones of the past (Rath 2016, p. 10). Curry rice is an especially popular dish with a long history in Japan; it is a dish of nostalgia, differing depending on family preparation techniques and spices used (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). It is a dish that consists (most typically) of a mound of white rice topped with the curry gravy, which may include pieces of meat and vegetables in it or perhaps a fried pork cutlet (katsu karē, or pork cutlet curry; see Figure 34.2, J) and a side of pickled vegetables. It is a popular noontime meal in Japanese restaurants.

The noontime meal itself wasn’t introduced until the beginning of the twentieth century; and the idea that it should differ from the morning or evening meal was not a given. But, as urbanization increased in the wake of World War II, and as the economy boomed during modernization, eating out at the noontime meal became both more convenient and more affordable and hence more
common. Rath notes, however, that “nutritionists and culinary experts contended in newspapers, cookbooks, and culinary schools that wives and mothers should provide a homemade lunch for their families to take with them to school or work” (2016, p. 13). But, as is clear from ethnographic literature over the past 30 years, for working wives and mothers, making lunches every day for husbands and children is laborious and time-consuming (see Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Nakano 2014; Ronald and Alexy 2011). Because of the increased eating outside of the home, men who are company workers are especially apt to become overweight over time; their poor eating habits are compounded by the stress of their jobs, leading to weight gain (Melby and Takeda 2014). Being a salaryman in Japan situates these men squarely in the new middle class that arose in the post–World War II period of unrelenting reconstruction by “company warriors and soldiers” (Dasgupta 2003). This dominant style of masculinity, which denoted white-collar company jobs as the ideal career track for men, directly contributed to the long work hours demanded of them by their companies; and the connection of the salaryman to ideals of life-long employment, reduced interest rates on home loans, and other perks made choosing other working conditions difficult if not impossible (North 2009).

These shifts in eating practices – especially for men and singles – have occurred alongside shifts in the availability of fast and convenience foods to urban consumers. Wages have been generally rising in Japan for decades (for example, doubling in the 1950s), allowing consumers more options to purchase outside the home; this change has taken place within the contexts of the much larger processes of both urbanization (and focus on a wage economy) and increasing globalization (and with it imports of both food and food franchises). In these contexts, the main shifts in Japanese (and more broadly Asian) eating practices over the last three decades include the following: higher consumption of protein, increased consumption of non-seasonal (temperate climate) items, more calories per day, meals with more items in them, more processed convenience and fast foods, and reduced rice but increased bread consumption (Gabriel et al. 2018; Pingali 2007). While rice remains a staple, bread in Japan is ubiquitous; there are German bakeries, French bakeries (e.g., Don Quixote is a popular Osaka chain), and even iggerisu (“English” bakeries). The bakeries in Japan (pan-ya, or “bread store”) typically focus on plain, savory, and sweet breads, selling everything from baguettes and loaves of rye, to rolls filled with spicy salted roe and cheese, to red bean filled buns.

The case of Osaka, Japan

Osaka, the third largest city in Japan and the site of our ethnography, is known as the “food capital” of the country, tied to the long history of very high-quality foods circulated through there to serve the imperial family’s residence until 1868. The current food environment of the inner city is dizzying. In the main commuter train station in the city center – through which some 8.2 million people pass each day – there are thousands of food retail outlets. Train stations, especially large central hubs where multiple subway, train, and bus lines make a stop, are destinations in and of themselves, not merely transit stations. Indeed, the Osaka train station area provides access to numerous subways, two private railway lines, and the national railway, and includes five massive department anchor stores, and numerous multi-leveled malls teeming with shops of every kind, including many food and drink establishments. The range of food options is broad in and near to the station, where there are not just multiple upper levels of shops and restaurants but multiple lower levels, too. Choosing restaurants on upper floors (e.g., the top floors of department stores and malls are where the “food floors” are most typically located) usually indicates that the price of the food also rises. But cheaper food options are also available at ground level or down side-streets; for example, during field work, we had a bowl of rāmen noodles for about 900 yen (about US$8.25).
at a street-level establishment specializing in southern-style mousemove. And, closest to the commuter transit zones, there are many even less expensive food-stalls selling high-carbohydrate noodles, cakes, and breads for under US$5.00.

As you move out away from the central urban hub to the residential zones where our interviews were focused, the high-rise malls and department stores give way to high-rise apartments/condominiums and single-family homes. Nestled amongst these areas are smaller transportation hubs which also concentrate access to many restaurants, grocery stores, and other shopping venues. For example, one area where we conducted several interviews was located about a 15-minute train ride from central Osaka station. Exiting the station, we had our choice of donuts, coffee, Japanese traditional sweets, and okonomiyaki (a savory wheatflour-based pancake dish) within a two-minute radius of the ticket wicket. Walking toward our interview locations from the station, we passed multiple clusters of restaurants, cafes, and bars and smaller butcher or vegetable shops.

Almost all residents are forced to navigate these food-dense urban corridors at least twice daily. The majority of Japanese people of school or working age (company workers, students, service industry workers, teachers) commute to and from work using mass transit of some sort; thus by definition they are passing through these obesogenic food corridors, filled with sights, smells, and sounds of affordable breads, sweets, grilled meats, and fried foods at every step. In this context, we find that the concept of an urban “food jungle” — rather than the more often discussed “food swamp” — is a good way to begin to analyze how people and the Osakan food environment relate.
Figure 34.2 (continued)
Figure 34.2 Examples of the food environment in Osaka, Japan, including: A) the commuter corridor under Osaka train station where 8 million people pass daily on their way to/from school and work; B) Cindi helps with preparing a store-bought dessert course in an Osaka home; C) cheap sweet buns for sale at a bread shop on the commuter corridor; D) common lunchtime fare: *yakisoba* (fried noodles), *onigiri* (rice balls sprinkled with seasonings), and soup; E) two women ponder the food guide map located in the train station area; F) street-side display showing all the restaurants within one mall; G) open-sided restaurants line the underground walkways between bus and train stations; H) snack shop displays the snacks street-side; I) automatic drink machines line the residential streets leading to the train station on the commute to central Osaka; and J) *katsu karē* (pork cutlet curry), a common lunch meal for busy company men.

Our Ethnographic Process

One of the authors, Cindi SturtzSreetharan, has been doing participant observation in Osaka for over two decades. For this specific study, we did topically focused, extended ethnographic interviews in 2017 with 12 adult women and four of their male spouses; we followed up on various key questions, and the urban space specifically, in 2018. The selection strategy for these interviews was purposive (Tracy 2010), based on capturing variation in both gender and socioeconomic class; we included spouse pairs from the same household to better understand how gender could impact how people understood and reacted to similarly obesogenic food environments. It is also important to recognize that Japan has very traditional gender roles: ideally, married women manage the home, and men work outside the home to support the family (see Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Iwao 1993). Women are also responsible for providing meals for the family when at home. Our couples all followed this pattern of male and female roles, like many married couples in (sub)urban Osaka. In the context of extended participant observation, Cindi SturtzSreetharan had interviewed many of the interviewees previously, and has visited their homes or eaten meals with them on multiple occasions, So, while we use the 2017 ethnographic interviews as the basis for the analysis, interpretation is shaped and added to by these prior interactions and observations.

The focused interview protocol itself was open-ended, with post-piloting pre-selected probing questions arranged in three key interrelated domains relevant to how people are experiencing life in the city: 1) food and eating; 2) the social meanings of the body; and 3) the connections between
health, weight, and food in the contexts of commuting. Interviews were tape-recorded, and these and detailed field notes were transcribed. Theme identification processes (Bernard et al. 2016) on these interview narratives were used to extract core themes related to the obesogenic urban environment, with the qualitative data management (organizing, coding, searching) done in MAXQDA software. Once core themes were identified, theme analysis was expanded by selecting exemplar vignettes, with thick descriptions, and through extended workshopping with a wider team of ethnographers. Materials were all coded and analyzed in Japanese, and then translated for publication.

The Key Ethnographic Themes: Navigating Osaka City Food Environments

Through this process, in considering each of the 16 interviews, we identified four consistent themes. Together these reflect core salient concerns Osakan adults have about engaging with and navigating food environments in the context of their contemporary, urban lives.

Theme 1: Men Are Most at Risk of Weight-Related Diseases, and Work Is Why

When people were asked whether women or men were at greater risk of developing diseases related to overweight and obesity, respondents overwhelmingly and without hesitation answered men. In talking about why, the answers were also consistent: stress of work, work requirements to engage in after-work eating and drinking, and odd meal times. Much of this concern focused on men who commuted to work in the city, so-called “company men” or “salarymen,” and what happens to them when they leave the home and their wife’s care. For instance, Hanako (38 years old) noted that men, including her husband, “have poor eating habits . . . especially lunchtime . . . They aren’t like women, who are thoughtful about what they eat.” Sixty-nine-year-old Tōru echoed this when he noted that “men are always overeating and overdrinking.” Fumie, 23 years old, repeated this idea. She introduced us to the word bīruppara, which combines two words – bīru (beer) and hara (stomach) – meaning “beer gut.” She went on to say that “men develop beer guts because they find drinking easy to do; they have to go out drinking for work reasons and then, when they go home, they drink more.” These company men are expected to follow strict etiquette rules in business settings and find it difficult to decline alcoholic drinks when going out to socialize with work colleagues and/or clients (Borovoy 2005; Christensen 2015).

Rika, 28 years old and newly married, described her salaryman husband’s health at the time of their marriage:

He was thin like a skeleton (in some places) although his stomach was large; he drank too much (alcohol). When his company did the annual health check-up his liver function was poor and his uric acid levels were quite high. The [doctor] told him his health was in danger.

Finally, 31-year-old Hitomi was quite specific; she said that she thought “the stress of a company job contributes to heart disease and impacts the flow of blood.” The stories that men and women told were not unique; men woke early in the mornings and left for work before others in their family were awake. They ate lunch at restaurants near to their company locations. All of the men we interviewed were highly conscious of the cost of eating out every day – part of the core responsibility of being a working man is to financially care for the family – and typically chose high-caloric low-cost foods (e.g., curry rice; noodles with sides of rice and pot-stickers; set meals of fried meats, large portions of rice, and soup). They returned home late at night after their (often long) commutes, eating dinner shortly before going to bed, a habit that was viewed as highly undesirable. As 50-year-old Masa noted,
Eating dinner late at night is not good. The ideal way is to eat breakfast at 7 a.m., lunch at 12 p.m., and then around 6 or 7 p.m. eat dinner. Then, it’s best to sleep about three hours after eating dinner. That is the best for the body.

Masa was not a salaryman; instead, he worked at a hotel. He began work around noon and worked an eight-hour shift; he typically ate dinner around 10 p.m. Masa considered his own health to be at risk, and he stated directly that he was obese (himan).

**Theme 2: The Increasing Diversity of Foods Is Both Good and Bad**

One of the questions asked of all the interviewees was whether or not the kinds of foods they currently ate were more diverse or less than in the past. Overwhelmingly the answer was “More diverse!” Sixty-one-year-old Chie and other women her age said that compared to when they were younger the kinds of ingredients available to them are far more diverse and affordable. Specifically, Chie explained that her own mother did not enjoy cooking, so Chie enrolled in cooking classes, learning to make European- and French-style foods because she wanted to eat foods in this style. Hanako, who was 38 years old and a mother of three children, connected the idea of an increase in food diversity to her children. She said that there are many “ethnic foods available now; I want to introduce these foods and flavors to my children.” Similarly, 32-year-old Hikari cited her children as a motivator of preparing and feeding her family many different kinds of foods. Specifically, she said that she “thinks about their [her children and her husband] health and tries to increase the vegetables” she serves. Later in the conversation she repeated this with regard to her husband specifically; she said that she “thinks about her husband and tries to serve healthy meals.”

Serving and consuming diverse foods appeared to be limited to family meals at home. It became clear through the interviews that unmarried people or those who did not eat frequently with family often engaged in eating habits that were described as “unhealthy” and “lacking in diversity.” For example, Hikari specifically noted that prior to having her children she would “serve rice and meat and that’s it or fried chicken and rice. But now I add miso soup and a vegetable salad to the meals.” When asked what she eats if she eats by herself, she says “Fried chicken only.” Megumi, who was 47 years old and whose children were in college, told a similar story about meal times:

If I am preparing dinner for my family [children and husband], I always try to make soup, rice, fish, and three kinds of vegetable dishes; but if I am by myself I am quite happy with beer in a can and some cheese.

Fumie, who recently graduated from university and is working full time, just moved out of her parents’ home and is living alone. She says clearly that the variety of food she eats has decreased. Her lunches with co-workers usually occur at restaurants that serve curry rice or other donburi dishes (rice bowls). For dinner, she tries to cook soup, rice, and one other side dish, as she believes that to be important to her health. But, she admits, living alone is not very conducive to healthy eating. Rika, who is recently married, talks about her meals as a high school student. Her mother worked every day, and the variety of foods served at dinner was limited. In fact, she says her mother “usually made Western-style meals consisting of a main meat dish and rice with a side vegetable.” During high school, they ended up moving in with her maternal grandmother, and the variety of foods served at dinner increased dramatically. She has recently brought her husband to live with her family, and she explained that he is much healthier now that he eats regular meals that are high in variety, including vegetables. Rika says that her “friends that live alone have no variety [side dishes] in their meals; in fact, they just eat out all of the time.”
Based on our interviews with women, the concerns about greater diversity of foods being consumed is about family nutritional health and needs. For home cooks this was understood as positive in terms of health, but for people who eat out frequently it was seen as a very risky part of their lives. Chie explained that when eating out at a restaurant people often choose foods they don’t cook at home, such as Italian or Spanish foods that can be “swimming in oil” and aren’t healthy at all.

**Theme 3: Too Much Rice Is the Problem**

Rice has long been considered a staple crop in Japan. The decline in rice consumption in Japan has been noted as a general cultural trend over the last 40–50 years, explained in terms of a rising class consciousness which eschews rice for the more modern bread (Cwiertka 2006; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). However, those we interviewed did not talk about avoiding or eating less rice because of social prestige or standing. Rather, it is to be avoided because it is fattening. In point of fact, many noted that they would rather indulge in alcohol than eat rice (or bread), at least at the evening meal, because the starches were more of an immediate health concern. For example, 69-year-old Tōru talked about how he doesn’t eat much rice these days at all; he eats bread for breakfast and noodles for lunch, and he drinks a beer with his salad and side dishes rather than eat rice. This was echoed by 32-year-old Hikari, who described swapping out rice at dinner for a glass of wine or sake. In contrast, growing children were understood to need to eat rice as a main means of energy intake. Indeed, 62-year-old Kaori states that, when her sons were younger, it was important to feed them rice so that they would have energy for sports and being active. She says that she remembers thinking “Where can I get cheap rice today?” when her sons were in high school; they ate this staple grain multiple times a day to fuel their bodies.

But adults describe themselves as not being in need of this much or kind of energy. Sachiko (39 years old) summed it up by stating that “rice will make you fat.” Hikari stated that she and her husband never eat rice at dinner anymore. Instead they eat side dishes like vegetables or meat and drink sake. Hikari had noted that her husband gets home late every night because of work; she feeds the children earlier in the evening and puts them to bed. Then she waits for her husband to come home to eat dinner. They often eat around 10 or 11 at night. I ask about whether they eat rice if he gets home early. She replies:

> Even if he gets home early, we don’t eat rice. You get fat from rice. As much as possible, we try not to eat carbohydrates at night . . . instead we have sake [alcohol]. The sugars of the rice concern us.

When asked what kind of alcohol they drink, she said “mugi shōchū [barley distilled spirits], which have much lower sugar content and do not produce as much purine [uric acid components].” In contrast, when asked about her children eating rice, she responded by saying that she “diligently feeds [shikari tabase]” her children rice. For growing bodies, rice is critical. For adult bodies, rice is dangerous.

Thirty-one-year-old Hitomi echoes the idea that rice can cause weight gain, but she said this from the point of view of desiring to gain weight. Hitomi started to eat more rice, as she felt she was too thin. Sitting in a small cafeteria at Hitomi’s workplace, she described growing up feeling very self-conscious of her long, thin arms and legs; in fact, people often made fun of her, telling her how skinny her arms were. For years, she purposely wore long-sleeved blouses and pants or skirts to hide her arms and legs. Finally, after graduating from college, she decided to try to gain weight. Hitomi noted that she felt she was “not eating a balanced diet,” nor was she “getting enough tanzuikabutsu [carbohydrates].” She described how she began to eat rice at breakfast and lunch in order to achieve a more healthful diet. Ultimately, she gained weight, although she also admitted that she now wonders if she is getting too many carbohydrates, but she doesn’t mention fear of weight gain.
Sixty-five-year-old Kentaro, who spent his first career as a hotel manager and now teaches courses on hospitality management at a local university, talks about enjoying a glass of wine rather than rice with his wife’s “delicious meals.” He considers himself atypical, stating that most people have “lost the art of eating as a hobby” and are satisfied “with eating gyūdon [seasoned beef served over rice] as their main meal.” And, in point of fact, this style of meal, donburi [rice bowl], was talked about over and over again as the most common among salarymen (company men). Aya, a 42-year-old mother of three married to a salaryman, told about her husband, who ate raisu karē (curry rice) for lunch most days. There was a curry-rice restaurant near his company, and the price was within their budget; in addition, curry rice is known to be quite filling. Breads too are recognized as filling and relatively inexpensive. However, people note that a drawback to bread is that it is particularly easy to eat; as Sachiko notes, “There are many different kinds of breads that are delicious; but before you know it you’ve eaten two or three pieces. It’s easy to eat several in one sitting.” Her comment gets to the heart of the problem – bread is easy to consume without being aware of the amount one has eaten.

**Theme 4: Married Women Are the Main Buffer against the Obesogenic City**

Across the interviews, married women and men consistently reported that they did not purchase prepared foods, nor did they eat dinner out very often. While none of our interviewees explicitly said that dining out was unhealthy, they made it clear that cooking at home was the best way to provide nutritious meals for their families. One way this was made clear was through descriptions of food sourcing, which was focused on either locally grown vegetables or vegetables shipped from distant relatives with home gardens. Another way was through discussions of food preparation – finding recipes online and then getting the raw ingredients to make the food at home for children and husbands. Mixed into both of these ideas was a further focus on variety and number of side dishes.

For instance, Hanako (38 years old) prides herself on her home cooking. She explains about the yogurt maker she recently purchased in order to make yogurt and amazake, a non-alcohol fermented rice drink considered very healthy among women for the probiotics it contains. (Chie, who is 61 years old, told us that amazake is really good for keeping the skin beautiful.) Hanako describes procuring various ingredients from here and there, sometimes making salted meats or fish dishes. Hanako specifically talks about getting her vegetables directly from where they are grown, explaining that she “is careful about the produce she buys and feeds her family.” Recently, Hanako has been reducing the family’s consumption of beef and increasing their fish intake along with “lots and lots of vegetables.” They receive shipments of rice from her grandfather’s small rice paddy in a neighboring prefecture; she notes that her family eats quite a bit of rice but admits they eat bread mostly at breakfast time. Hanako works part time as a pre-school teacher (30 hours a week), which keeps her busy. Nonetheless, she says that she makes dinners ahead of time or in the mornings, putting them in the freezer to keep until it is time to warm them up and serve them. She finishes the discussion on food by noting that, “no matter how busy” she is, even if she has “to get up at 5 in the morning,” she is committed to making home-cooked food for dinner for her family. As this narrative of home cooking, sourcing ingredients locally, and receiving rice straight from the paddy demonstrates, Hanako does not complain about high prices, nor does she condemn purchasing prepared foods or eating out; rather, she makes it clear that, regardless of how busy she is, making food for her family is critically important to her. It is an important part of who she is as a mother and a wife; and she manages it while also working six hours a day, five days a week.

Similarly, 42-year-old Aya talks about her commitment to cooking dinner nightly for her family; she notes this in contrast to when she was single. Aya says that “Before I got married I ate out frequently.” She had always eaten with her natal family, but once she was working she enjoyed going out to eat with her work friends; but, once she married and had children, she wanted to make food
herself and eat at home. Aya also works part time. Aya went on to explain how she looks at recipes on the internet or relies on her okaasan tachi no nettowāku (mothers’ network) to learn new menus and meal preparation techniques. She explains that when she was growing up her mother almost never prepared or served beef; fish was frequent. In contrast, Aya limits the amount of tsukemono (pickled vegetables) she keeps in the house and serves. Pickled vegetables are a hallmark of Japanese meals (see Cwiertka 2006); perhaps reacting to the look of surprise on Cindi’s face, Aya explained: “It’s not that I don’t like them; it’s the salt content. It’s too high. . . . and, o-tsukemono, once you start munching it, it is hard to stop.” She notes that her youngest son loves tsukemono to the extent that, if there is any left in the house, he will finish the portion in one sitting. She says, “He can’t control how much o-tsukemono he eats, so I don’t buy it.” Aya describes the kind of foods she makes for dinner – croquette, fried fish, pork cutlet. These are all labor-intensive foods to make, requiring quite a bit of time and preparation prior to actually cooking. It is surprising, therefore, when Aya confesses that she doesn’t like to cook. She says cooking is mendokusai (bothersome or troublesome); nonetheless, she does it – kokoro gakete shitemasu (does [it] to her best ability).

Discussion and Conclusion

Global urban health is shaped by food environments, and increasingly cityscapes can be characterized as highly obesogenic. An array of studies of food environments around the globe have identified the intersecting physical and economic factors that shape obesity risk, and propose structural solutions (like food taxes and subsidies). In the Japanese context, enacted through metabo laws, there is an explicit legal framework that emphasizes individual weight control as the solution to obesogenic urban lifeways, not control of food environments themselves.

These narratives from and about married women in particular provide an interesting backdrop against which to consider the urban health landscape in a bustling, food-centric city like Osaka. Our long-term participant observations in Japan attest to the amount of prepared foods sold daily in almost all supermarkets; moreover, we can observe long lines outside of restaurants at lunch and dinner hours, making clear that people go out to eat frequently. However, the married mothers took great care during their interviews to clarify and emphasize how they make dinner for their children and husbands, even if their husbands aren’t eating until late at night. This focus on homemade meals speaks, at least implicitly, to the importance of meals prepared from scratch and served to the family. It may not be telling us explicit messages of health, but it tells unambiguous stories of connection and care. Likewise, many interviewees told us about unattached others (friends, siblings, etc.) or times in the past when they themselves were single or unattached; these were stories of ill health – overeating, overdrinking, eating out, or consuming meals high in carbohydrates and salt and low in vegetables. But, in all, it was women who were the ones who were active in mitigating the risks that everyone is exposed to in these food-rich cityscapes.

Using an ethnographic approach, we show how citizen-consumers in Osaka, Japan also hold clear schemas that understand the causes and perils of the physical environment of food – easily accessed, sufficiently cheap, and everywhere. On a daily basis, they worry about what the food environment does to them and their families, and their own ability to resist them, as well as ways to balance competing health, economic, and social needs and constraints. They see that men (and singles, too) are especially at risk, and they see the care of home-based women (“housewives”) as the solution. As Edwards pointed out, “[Japanese] men need women to manage both their money and their domestic lives” (1989, p. 123), including their waistlines. In the cultural schema of Osakans, exposures to obesogenic food environments and the means to safely navigate them are tightly tied into well-defined gender and marital roles, and how those are enacted on a daily basis (through men’s commutes and jobs, and women’s role in the home and in food preparation, and single people’s struggle in the absence of a wife- or mother-protector). Importantly also, Osakans believe they individually are
responsible for creating solutions to the complex challenges these circumstances raise. The Osakan case also makes visible one way that deprivation can play into all this. Men especially are highly aware of the direct trade-offs they are making between economic and health concerns in how they navigate food environments each day. This view of food environments as complicated to manage because they are (over)filled with good and bad, and cheap and expensive, options fits well with the notion of “food jungles” rather than of the more often described “food swamps.”

These complex Asian urban food jungles, and how people navigate them, are not just shaped by food availability and patterned in terms of relative deprivation, although Osakans certainly recognize and struggle with complex economic decisions around what they buy versus what they cook, and understand this has weight consequences. But, also, as the Osakans identify and explain, the risks of negative exposures to food environments are unequal because of gender differences in commuting and work patterns, and this maps onto national statistics that show adult males as being at greater risk of excess weight gain relative to women. This further highlights that, in considering how to address the challenge of reducing the obesogenicity of cityscapes as a public health or policy issue, engaging with and explaining the perceptions of those who navigate these complex food environments provide a different set of informative evidence and new forms of hypotheses. Much of the prior literature on the health risks posed by obesogenic food environments has focused on poverty or deprivation as a major factor in shaping relative risk. In this case, based on our ethnographic analysis of Osakans’ stories, we can also suggest it may be potentially valuable to better test how – and why – gender interacts within urban food environments to differentially shape risks of weight gain over time.

Notes

1 According to the All Japan Curry Manufacturers Association, in 2016 domestic shipments of curry roux and powder totaled over 98,000 metric tons (www.curry.or.jp/reference/production.html, accessed September 6, 2018).
2 Our focus here is adult eating. Children’s lunchtime eating in schools is highly managed and often attempts to meet many of the washoku ideals.
3 The blog yummylicious captures the scene well (https://knycxjourneying.com/2017/08/20/yummylicious-osaka/).
4 Umeda station, located in Osaka and conjoined with Osaka station, was the fourth busiest in the world as measured by number of travelers who use the station on a daily basis (see https://japantoday.com/category/features/travel/the-51-busiest-train-stations-in-the-world-all-but-6-located-in-japan, accessed July 3, 2018).
5 All names are pseudonyms.
6 When kara (“stomach”) is attached at the end of the word biru (“beer”), the /h/ of kara undergoes both a phonological change (/h/ -> /p/) and gemination, becoming biruppara.
7 The word for ‘pickled vegetables’ is tsukemono; however, most people attach the beautification morpheme o~ to the word, rendering it o-tsukemono in everyday language. This happens with various foods including rice, fish, sake, and sushi.

References


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