

***Comparison of Dietary Behaviors and Acculturation of
Korean International and Japanese Students in Japan***

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The Asian Conference on Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study compared the awareness and health behavior of Korean foreign nationals with those of the Japanese, focusing on differences in the food cultures. The study also explored the social function of food in different cultures, particularly the link between cross-cultural adjustment and food. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 Japanese students and 14 international students from Korea, which has a food culture and dietary behaviors that are similar to those of Japan. Participants were asked about changes in their lives, with a focus on their diet in Japan, and the social aspect of eating. The results showed that both groups were aware of the importance of a healthy diet, although the difficulty in this regard was implementation of healthy eating behaviors. Moreover, due to busy lifestyles, both subgroups self-catered to a lesser extent, compared to their initial intentions. They also ate out and purchased convenient foods more. Korean students enjoyed Japanese food, and increased their intake of sweet foods and alcohol. They also associated food with socializing, unlike Japanese students. This study identified a need for Japanese food education to be provided to foreign nationals, to enhance their dietary habits and, ultimately, cross-cultural adjustment.

Keywords: Cross-cultural dietary education, international Korean students in Japan, Japanese university students, dietary behavior, health consciousness

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Introduction

The number of international students who are staying in Japan is reported as 208,379 (JASSO, 2015). Although health is an important key to success when studying abroad, Japanese universities show little interest in educating foreign students about food (Takahama & Tanaka, 2013). Food is considered a personal habit, while education on language and professional knowledge is diligently provided. However, in health psychology, eating behavior is known to have a significant impact on health, as a basic habit, and on health promotion; it is also a primary target of health promotion measures and contributes towards lifestyle-related diseases (Shimai, 1997). Dietary education is widely provided to the Japanese population, to promote healthy eating habits. However, this is not done for international students, due to the lack of cross-cultural elements in the dietary education that would specifically target them.

In a foreign country with a different environment, it is difficult for one to maintain the diet from one's home country; one is then also faced with the issue of cultural adjustment to the food. However, adaptation does not always lead to good health; there are negative aspects to cross-cultural adaptation. For example, a survey on Thai people who stayed in the United States (US) showed that they acquired American eating habits, which differed from those of their home country; American food had increased fat content, dairy products, and snacks (Sukalakamala & Brittin, 2006). Arab students also adopted the eating habits of, and led an American lifestyle, ultimately gaining body weight (Brittin & Obeidat, 2011).

In contrast, a Japanese diet is regarded as healthy worldwide; Japanese food is also registered as a World Heritage Site. If foreign students familiarize themselves with Japanese food, studying in Japan could provide an opportunity for them to receive food education. In addition to the physiological function of nutrition, food has a social function. "Co-eating" behavior is effective for enhancing cohesion in a given population (Nakajima & Imada, 1996). Food may be useful in facilitating adjustment, demonstrating the link between food and cross-cultural adjustment. Food from different cultures is an interesting phenomenon in health and cross-cultural psychology. International students' dietary habits and the extent to which they eat Japanese food remain unknown. It is also unclear as to whether Japanese food education informs their eating habits. There is a need for empirical research on the eating habits of foreign nationals and the problems associated with food in Japan. Understanding these would enable the provision of an appropriate food education program for each country. International students would also be able to adjust their diets through education, to enhance their own health. Previous exploratory research has shown that Chinese students in Japan account for 90% of international students in Japan (Hatanaka & Tanaka, 2015). These students are less likely to take up eating behavior aimed at maintaining their health, and factors such as stress and being busy tend to disrupt their diets. Based on these findings, the introduction of health education was deemed necessary, so as to raise awareness regarding the function and management of food. This study focused on Korean students, whose population comes second only to Chinese students in Japan. South Korea is culturally similar to Japan; however, there is heterogeneity in food culture.

According to Tominaga, Taguchi, and Cao (2007), both South Korean and Japanese college students who are aware of the benefits of a healthy diet show good mental health. The mental health of Japanese students who downplay eating habits was found to be lower than that of other participants (Takano, Nonaka, Takano, Kojima, & Sato, 2009). Evidently, there is an association between health and students' food choices. Food forms part of student life in Japan; if it is one of the problems that are experienced by international students, then it is

important to gain a thorough understanding thereof in this context. It is also important to understand the characteristics of Japanese students' diet. This study aimed to explore the various functions of food, with specific reference to the food consumed by Korean and Japanese students. Given the success of food education, as provided to Japanese students, food education provision to foreign Korean students, so as to promote healthy eating behavior, would in turn promote both their health and cross-cultural adjustment in Japan.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 14 Korean students (7 men, 7 women), with a mean age of 23.4 years ($SD = 2.64$), attending X University in medium-sized regional cities of Japan. Their mean duration of residence in Japan was 17 months ($SD = 17.77$; range: 3–60 months). They lived in dormitories or boarding houses, and their level of proficiency in Japanese exceeded the conversational level.

Thirteen (7 men, 6 women) Japanese students, also from X university, also participated in the study. The mean age was 20.86 years ($SD = 1.55$). They had all experienced a stay in a boarding house. The average stay there was 28 months ($SD = 19.01$; range: 4–67 months). The survey period was June to December, in 2012 for Korean students, and June 2012 to January 2013, for Japanese students. The interviews took place in quiet rooms in public facilities.

Procedures

Semi-structured interviews spanning approximately one hour were conducted. Following their consent, interviews with the participants were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed. Korean participants were asked about changes in their physical states, body weight in relation to meals or food behavior, body weight, meals, and lifestyles after their arrival in Japan. Japanese students were asked about these factors following their admission to university. Participants were specifically asked what they ate, what they preferred, difficulties, what had changed, and their thoughts in this regard.

Results

Below is a summary of the narratives. Underlined, are the points of interest related to ① health awareness and concerns regarding health, ② awareness of unhealthy behaviors, ③ and the social function of food. Interesting narratives are also included below.

Korean Students (Age in Years, Gender)

KA (22, M): Typically self-caters, ① but worries too much about health, which is stressful. When busy; for example, with tests, ② his diet is disrupted. ③ Sometimes “I eat while socializing with friends.” ① “If I really like the food, I continue eating *ramen* for four days.” ② “(When stressed) I drink alcohol.”

KB (29, M): Loves cooking and self-caters. ③ Likes socializing over Korean food. ① He successfully lost weight, but relapsed and will try again. ① “The best dietary habit for me is to cook something that I like or enjoy.” ① “I eat meat often, but am trying to balance my diet.” ③ “There are opportunities to learn Japanese, and I meet people there. Then, we talk and go for a drink together.”

KC (25, F): ③ Eats food with a friend in dormitory or with Japanese friends. Thinks that Japanese food is delicious, ② but increased the intake of sweet desserts, and gained weight. ① Went on a diet. ② “I ate four ice-creams in one day, and two cakes or so. I eat candy or dessert every day.” “Everyone became fat; the girls, mostly, because of liquor or desserts.”

KD (19, F): Thinks that the eating environment is important. ② Stays alone and overcomes the loneliness by eating desserts. Low intake of meat and vegetables. Not good at cooking. “After admission, I ate to eliminate stress.”

KE (25, M): Used to self-cater, but not now, because ② of being currently very busy with a part-time job and studies. ③ Likes socializing and cooking, and invites friends and they eat together. ② “My diet becomes imbalanced and irregular; I feel bad about my physical state.” ① “I eat vegetables and breakfast.”

KF (21, M): No self-catering in the dormitory. Self-catered in the beginning, after moving to the boarding house, but ② it is too inconvenient. ① Worries about own health. ③ I do not eat breakfast because no one takes care of me.

KG (24, F): Wants to do self-catering, but is too busy with school. ② No alternative to eating out. ② Likes fruit, but it is too expensive in Japan. ③ Likes to party with Koreans and enjoys it, but ② gets too drunk.

KH (21, F): Eating out is expensive, so, ① self-caters more. ② However, enjoys Japanese dessert and drinking Japanese alcohol. ② Enjoys Japanese food, rather than looking after own health. ① “Eating out is much more expensive than in South Korea, so, I try to eat at home.” ② “I really love delicious Japanese sake.”

KI (25, M): Not confident about cooking, and eats out. ② Favorite food is meat and fried foods. ② Saves money, and it is difficult to eat vegetables and fruits. There is no delivery service in the middle of the night and not enough spicy foods in Japan.

KJ (27, F): Loves cooking and preparing Japanese food. Since Japan’s summer is hot, she no longer cooks. ① Eats a lot of favorite vegetables. ② Alcohol intake increased.

KK (21, F): Likes to cook, but is currently busy studying. ② Eats out often. She knows it is not proper nutrition for the body. ② Eats cake and bread often, instead of meals. “I drink more than I did in South Korea.” ③ “(In Korea) Everyone eats together; it is a common practice.” “Here, we eat together, sometimes with foreigners, such as the Taiwanese.”

KL (24, F): Saves money and ① always self-caters. ① Cares about nutrition, but ends up cooking the same thing every day. ② Consumes packaged and sterilized food often. ③ Has many Japanese friends and prepares food for them. ① “I am mindful of food and exercise.” “I worry when I get sick in a foreign country.” ③ “I made a *kimuchi-chijimi* for my friends, and I become happy when everyone says it is delicious.”

KM (24, M): Immediately after coming to Japan, ate out every day, but now, ① tries to self-cater, which is cheaper. Not good at cooking, so, ② eats the same food often. Since living in a foreign country, ① does not eat food products that are bad for own body, such as instant foods.

KN (21, M): Does not know how to cook, but ① cares about nutrition. ② Eats out for half of the meals. ③ Eats what roommate cooked or dines on *kimchi*, which had been sent from the home country. “(In the home country) I did not cook often, so, I had no confidence at all.”

Japanese Students

JA (21, F): When she has free time, she does self-catering, but eats out often. ② When busy, she sometimes does not eat. She feels terrible about her nutrition; she makes adjustments, but the food is dependent on her financial situation. ② If she does not have an appetite, she eats sweet dessert, instead. ② There was a time when she consumed too much of sweet food because of stress.

JB (24, M): Simply self-catered at some point, but recently got too busy and eats out or buys at convenience stores. ② Tended to miss dinner. ① Cares about health a little bit, ② but eat whatever she wants. ① “I try to eat breakfast.” “I eat few vegetables and have irregular meal times.” ③ “(When eating with someone) call someone, who already knows.”

JC (22, M): Likes cooking and always self-caters. ① Cares about a balanced diet. If it becomes too busy at the part-time job, eats the food provided at work and reduces self-catering. ② Consumed less food, and nutritional balance worsened, compared to when he was at home. ① “Self-catering is cheaper; I like to cook.” ② “The percentage of fish intake has decreased.” ③ “Initially, I would have a meal with a good friend.”

JD (21, F): Self-caters, but recently got busy and use of convenience stores increased. Cares about nutritional balance and eats ① vegetables at each meal. ② Since she buys cheap vegetables only, nutritional balance is not good. ③ Made friends at a drinking party. “If I become busy with studies, I do not have time to cook.”

JE (20, M): No motivation for self-catering. Only eats out and has home meals. Uses the student cafeteria every day. ② Ate only what he wanted to eat, but could feel his physical condition deteriorate and ① kept vegetable intake in mind. ③ Has dinner with friends, and holds many pot parties. ① “There was a time when I felt sick because of the meal.”

JF (19, M): Self-caters; if not busy, mostly self-caters; eats home-made meals, and the food provided at the part-time job. ① Worried about the frequent intake of meat, ① Drinks vegetable juice, to make up for this. ② Gained weight upon changing diet and not exercising. ① “(My weight increased) wholly due to my eating habits.”

JG (23, M): Self-caters, but is not good at cooking. ② Nutrition is biased towards carbohydrates. Recently had a severe illness and it was because of his diet. ③ It is easy to talk a lot and make friends over a meal or at a party. “(Self-catering) saved money and was cheaper; also for me.” ② “Probably less intake of vegetables.”

JH (19, F): Finds self-catering economical and likes cooking. During the examination period, ② skipped meals or ate bread. ① Tries to consume vegetables for nutrition. ③ Friends gathered often and we held pot parties. “I would disproportionately eat my favorite meals at boarding.” “It is fun to eat with my friends.” ③ “A drinking party is informal for everyone and has a good atmosphere.”

JJ (21, F): Finds self-catering cumbersome; eats frozen food and also eats out. At first, ② only ate what she liked and caught a cold. Then, she became aware of ① the importance of the intake of vegetables and fish. ② Does not eat breakfast because cannot wake up in the morning.

JJ (21, F): Self-caters; it is cheaper and one can eat the next day if there is no part-time job and no classes. ① Aware of too little nutrition, but ② its balance is not good. ③ Makes friends at mealtimes or drinking parties.

JK (21, F): Self-caters three or four times a week. Lacks the time to self-cater or finds it cumbersome; eats out or buys takeaways. ② Intake of vegetables and fish is small, but the diet is not bad, because of self-catering. ③ Becomes friends with the same group that she eats with or holds drinking parties with.

JL (22, M): Rarely self-caters; eats out and consumes home-made meals. Uses the student cafeteria once a day. ② Nutritional balance is bad. “If buying food at a convenience store is eating out, I think that I only ever eat out.”

JM (18, M): Although self-catered during the first half of being at the boarding house, ② did not eat, sometimes, because it is cumbersome. ② Nutritional balance is not good, but does not think that it could be improved. “At first, I was motivated, and then it became tough to do every day.”

Discussion

Dietary Life of Korean and Japanese University Students

In the narrative, there is awareness of and concern regarding “being healthy,” “being unhealthy,” and unhealthy behavior, as well as reference to food preparation as having a social function and connecting people. Both Korean and Japanese students initially chose to prepare their own food at admission to university. However, their lives changed, as they

adjusted to college life. The basic problem and circumstances are similar across the two groups. Initially, they self-catered, due to economic reasons and preferences, but this was difficult to sustain, as it required cooking experience and time. Once they became busy with part-time work or studies, they skipped meals, bought food at convenient stores, and then ate at home, or out with friends. There are many handy convenience stores in Japan. Mealtimes and meal frequency became irregular, and they became aware of the interference with their nutritional balance. For example, there was a lack of vegetable and fish intake, coupled with consumption of favorite food only, and a decrease in the number of food items consumed. Participants were then faced with an unhealthy condition or gained weight, and linked these to the consumption of unhealthy food and dietary disruptions.

Some students were aware of the need to improve their eating habits. They understood a healthy diet to mean, for example, having breakfast, eating three meals per day, eating vegetables, not being biased towards meat consumption, not consuming too much of one's favorite food, eating out less often, and eating less processed foods. However, they felt that they did not have nutritional balance. It could be assumed that the participants had some knowledge of the extent of item intake or quantity. The idea that a regular, nutritionally balanced meal is desired is consistent with Takano et al.'s (2009) results on Japanese university students. Compared to the study on Chinese students, who did not talk about their knowledge of nutrition (Hatanaka & Tanaka, 2015), the results of this research demonstrate high health awareness.

Korean students showed neglect of their health, based on attraction to food from different cultures. Affordable luxury desserts are one of the attractive foods in Japanese culture. Cross-cultural difficulties emerged, but Japanese food proved to be attractive to foreign nationals. More narratives have shown that international students eat to deal with stress or the economic constraints related to food. Studying abroad has been known to increase cross-cultural stress in an unfamiliar environment or one with an unfamiliar language (Tanaka, 2005). As shown, food prices in Japan are high, compared to the international students' home country; this compelled them to save, and their suppression of food intake seems to have strengthened. Japanese college students have basic knowledge of diet (Otake & Ishikawa, 2010). It could be assumed that the Japanese students in this study regretted their dietary behaviors, as they recalled the food education that they had received until secondary education.

The social functions of food were observed in both groups, but the content thereof was somewhat different. Koreans prefer to dine with people. They communicate through food and drink and their culture is to value human relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014). Koreans often cook at home for friends. In other cultures, other than among Koreans, cooking and hosting are considered social skills. Food functions as cultural exchange tools to nurture friendships. "Co-eating" has also been observed among Japanese students; however, emphasis herein is to enjoy or strengthen the camaraderie or comfort associated with the ingroup. Although there were no narratives on cultural adjustment, it is precisely because of that that Japanese students had fewer experiences of cultural exchange (Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama, Minami, & Fujihara, 1994), as compared to Korean students.

Implications for Intercultural Dietary Education

Contemporary Japanese food culture, as opposed to the traditional and healthy food culture of Japan, was incorporated into Korean students' lives. There is an increasing prevalence of

high-calorie, processed Western foods, despite Japanese food drawing attention from other countries, as making up a healthy diet. A study by the Cabinet Office Food Education Promotion Office (2009) on Japanese university students found the frequency of eating out to be high. Eating out is convenient and satiating; one can either eat out or buy food at a convenience stores. However, it makes it difficult to maintain nutritional balance and one's health. It could be suggested that cross-cultural adaptation to food is a necessary, proactive choice in building healthy behavior and is not simply habituation to the socio-cultural environment. Adaptation to food from a different culture is probably a unique process through which one becomes aware of the social issues in the host country.

Food education immediately after arrival in Japan, coupled with early implementation thereof, is expected of international students (Takahama & Tanaka, 2013). The international students in this study showed that provision of information regarding proper eating behavior is useful for one's health and in self-catering. Such education would teach those who tend to eat out about ways of selecting food and the use thereof. Otake and Ishikawa (2010) suggested that places such as convenience stores and student cafeterias would play an important role in supporting students' daily diet. This would be facilitated by, for example, the fact that the teaching provided is in relation to maintaining nutritional balance, how to save perishable food such as vegetables, and easy recipes with many vegetables that can be found in Japan.

Since their understanding of food was very similar to that of Japanese students, Korean international students have less difficulty with dietary education in Japan. It would be useful to deliver reliable information that summarizes "elements that are required for the realization of a healthy diet"; nutritional balance would be maintained, provided that students are interested in food education. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (2016) recommended nutrients that are necessary for young people, as shown in the "Food Guide" in Figure 1.



Figure1: Balanced guide of nutrition

This is a guideline on Japanese food, referring to daily dietary requirements, regardless of self-catering or eating out. The guide is composed of five items such as main food, side dishes, main dishes, milk, dairy products, and fruit. A combination of these nutrients would result in sustained nutritional balance. However, in order to take advantage of the food culture in Japan, despite recognizing the benefits of health awareness or improvement in diet, appropriate dietary behavior or information regarding nutritional balance would still be difficult for individuals to understand. Therefore, it is important that the contents of Figure 1 be translated into Korean, to offer Korean students support in selecting food that suits their taste and diet.

However, ethnic eating habits hold spiritual meaning or significance. Full transition to Japanese food is unrealistic. It is necessary to cope with a different menu structure and adjust ethnic cuisine in view of Japanese guidelines. It is unclear as to how adjustment to common behaviors and gaining a sense of cross-cultural food are attained. It is essential to confirm whether educating foreign nationals is a means of providing a reference fit. It would also be necessary to carefully interpret and understand individual and environmental elements. Unlike in traditional food education, it is important to take advantage of the social aspect of food. Food can prompt the width and depth of cross-cultural interpersonal exchange. If food can strengthen human relations, then it can positively influence cross-cultural adjustment. Moreover, foreign nationals have the opportunity to receive information regarding diet and nutrition, as well as cultural knowledge, based on the constructed relationship.

Based on the above, cross-cultural adjustment and food are interlinked. In summary, cross-cultural food education can be understood as a two-factor model that consists of, for example, “response to heterogeneity” and “nutrition education.” The response to the heterogeneity may involve the resolution of problems occurring through discontinuity in the environment (negative aspect) and taking advantage of cultural differences (positive aspects). The satisfaction derived from eating has deep emotional implications, and eating behavior alludes to fun and stress and anxiety relief (Shimai, 1997). However, inappropriate eating behaviors may inhibit health. For example, in the excessive consumption of sweet foods and disturbance of dietary habits, education on food would encourage the setting of goals relating to eating habits. In previous food education in Japan, focus on the problem solving of these individuals has been addressed. Health maintenance in a foreign country would be possible, if the management of dietary behavior formed part of cross-cultural adjustment. Suitable adjustment to the environment can facilitate learning from a heterogeneous environment, position heterogeneity as a new value, or enhance cross-cultural adjustment. The step from “co-eating” behavior to the adoption of a healthy diet and life is expected to proceed further.

Acknowledgments

This work was funded by the JSPS KAKENHI Grant (No.16K13485) and by the Sanyo Broadcasting Foundation. In the present study, we reconstructed the data obtained from Hirona Nagai’s graduate students at Okayama University, and gratefully acknowledge her work.

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