
Introductory Essay for Special Theme

Food as an Intersection of Culture and Body: From the Earth to Tongue

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This special theme investigates the continuity and discontinuity between culture as a collective representation and personal bodily sensations in relation to food as a site where culture and body intersect. It is composed of four papers that focus on self-sufficient and commercialization/industrialization, major distribution systems and individualization, dietary culture under conditions of transcultural communication, and the intersection of culture and body.

The writers for this special issue were both members of the research project “Food as an intersection of culture and body: cultural endemism, industrialization, and cross-industrial network” (delegate: Mari Kazato), which received a research grant for the humanities and social sciences from Suntory Foundation in 2018.
Although Ozaki and Kazato, the authors, have been investigating the formation of and changes in the economic and social life of Mongolian pastoralists, we recognize differences among the Mongolian society that each of us pictures. We acknowledge that the physical existence of the researchers’ bodies greatly affects them, and both of us employ an ecological anthropological approach and quantitative data collected from empirical field research equally. We call this effect features of the sensor, making an analogy to measuring instruments used in the natural sciences.

To explore this problem in the context of studying dietary culture, the members of research project experimentally had meals together after several workshops. Then, we verbalized this experience. Then we shared meals and considered their meaning. We acknowledged that the choice of vocabulary used in verbalizing could be affected by the individual’s life history and that it was difficult to share and write about each person’s bodily sensations in an objective way.

This experience led to the viewpoint of this special theme being set to construct a common understanding of the relationship between culture, which implies a group affinity for substance and the action of food and drink, and bodily sensation, including one’s life history and taste.

Cultural anthropology plays an important role in food studies. However, most cultural anthropology concerned with food conducted by Japanese researchers deals with dietary cultures at a collective level of representation, such as that of an ethnic group. Collective representation is composed of an accumulation of individual cases. However, once it is created, phenomena like the actual experience of eating, in which diversity can be easily imagined, becomes treated as impediments, partly because recording such experience itself is difficult. The authors share a concern that this
trend will lead to the limits of possibility of cultural anthropology’s contribution to food studies.

It is true that a culture defines what should and should not be eaten. However, human beings cannot survive without eating. Therefore, cultural definitions can be ignored and bypassed. This poses the problem of recognition (or logos) or of sensation (or hunger). As can be seen in the above-mentioned experiments of sharing meals after workshops, it is impossible for individuals to escape the influence of their own sensations, among which the sense of taste is strongly influential.

However, it also remains true that there is a reason why discussing an individual’s body is difficult. That is, carrying a planned empirical study that targets liminal or deviant cases is not easy.

Following the authors’ research approach, which employs empirical research based collected from original sources, this special issue places an emphasis on feasibility. In other words, we seek neither a pursuit of cases that are difficult to obtain nor any metaphysical philosophy. However, choosing investigation objects that have high feasibility does not imply a preference for easily obtainable objects. In addition, being able to derive a discordant relationship between culture and the body from so-called ordinary cases should be highlighted.

Our contribution to the discussion will concern minor subsistence. In discussion on this topic, physicality must be emphasized. Therefore, dietary culture is an effective field for further discussion of the balance between industry and subsistence.