

Food Fight: Eating and Identity in Japan during the Second World War

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Abstract: Who we are is inextricably linked to what we eat, and this paper addresses how Japan dealt with this situation during World War II. Citizens, members of the military, and the Japanese government all faced varying levels of food shortages and scarcity. Solutions to declining farm yields and reduced imports from the United States often came with unexpected consequences. Sacrifice as a nation, for the good of the empire, was a common theme; though often abided by, many were resentful of the low standard of living imposed during the war years. Examples of escapism, reliance upon illusions, and artificial memories are three ways that combating hunger manifested itself during the Second World War.

Keywords: Japan, food, World War II, identity

Introduction

“Japan stands on the pivot of the world. We have opportunities given by heaven, advantages given by nature, and national unity.”

- From a Japanese army pamphlet printed before the war

Escapism, illusions, and the fickleness of memory all shaped the culinary landscape of Japan during the Second World War. This plagued both the Japanese populace as well as the Japanese government and effected how rations were distributed and consumed; how people adapted to wartime dietary changes; Japanese government viewed the Japanese populace; how people viewed the war as a whole. Substitutes, especially dietary ones, influenced the psyche and shattered the original illusions that Japan relied upon even as new dietary illusions were propagated during the war and postwar years. People retreated into the idea that their struggles were universal and were for a noble cause, and to some extent, the entire country felt the plight. But these ideas came with consequences that would not fully be realized until the postwar period.

The war in Japan meant changes in the Japanese people’s outlook on the food supply of the future as well as the past. Wartime increased the preponderance of inconsistencies in Japan’s available food supply and people’s access to food, and was exacerbated by an equally inconsistent reporting of the food supply situation by the media. Dietary changes were underway before WWII, and people were turning to substitutes in the 1930s to supplement their diets. Price controls and rice rationing meant that all members of society had equal access to rice, even if they could not afford it. The scientific and mass catering movement that built up during the interwar years reached its peak and fed millions of conscript soldiers based on the principles of efficient mass catering. The Japanese government campaign of a unified Japan with one spirit was a fallacy both on the home front and with Japanese soldiers stationed overseas; there were many soldiers and even more civilians who wanted the war to end.

Escapism, Illusion, and the Fickleness of Memory

Japan's economic sector increased exponentially between 1920 and 1929; real wages increased during this time and some areas saw growth of over one thousand percent. But by 1931, that growth had halted and over half of the empire's total factories were idle. It can be no coincidence then, that September 18, 1931, was the date of the invasion of Manchuria.¹ It was during these earlier Japanese conflicts with occupied China, the mood was positive. This was all despite a depression, the Manchurian Incident, and increased militarism. Mikiso Hane argues that this was all just escapism.

The escapism of the early 1930s spilled over into people's ideas about food and influenced the way people viewed rations. Rations meant that rice was theoretically available to the whole country, but in practice, it was still the wealthy or well-connected who fared best during the war. Sometimes the only way to buy food was on the black market, where government price controls made no difference on the cost of consumables.

The late 1930s was a dark time in the history of the Japanese psyche. Regional cuisine had been fading for decades and was replaced by a national diet of substitute fare and rationed goods. People were forced to rely upon substitutes, for food, clothing, and other necessities as material goods went to the Japanese armed forces. For example, white rice was needed to send to the Japanese army and navy. Instead of the substituting with brown rice or a similar grain, the government suggested sweet potatoes (*satsuma imo*) and wheat noodles (*udon*). Synthetic fibers replaced cotton, bamboo utensils replaced metal ones, and buses burned charcoal instead of gasoline.² Navy foods, like *kanpan*, or ship's biscuit, were introduced to the civilian population after full-scale war with China broke out in 1937.³ People could no longer turn to escapism once substitutes took the place of nearly all everyday goods.

The Japanese government retreated into the idea that Japan would continue to fight to the last man, woman, and child. By 1940, all pretense of lightheartedness was abandoned. The Japanese government quelled diversions and entertainment by law by banning dance halls and restricting the number of movies playing in theaters. The only real ceremonies could hardly be called that as streets were filled with events sending people off to war, or with the somber return of cremated remains in little white boxes.⁴

The concept of 'one spirit' or 'one heart' that unified Japan was only partially true. Japan had a long history of warring and feuding among the *daimyo*, or feudal lords, for centuries; it was only when facing the west that Japan appeared to be united. Unity, and campaigns to promote to it,

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1. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 207; J. M. Roberts, *The New History of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 916, 217; Rana Mitter, "A Slow Remembering: China's Memory of the War against Japan," IIAS Newsletter, No. 38, September 2005, 14.
 2. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 287-288.
 3. Kaczynska J. Cwiertka, "Western Food and the Making of the Japanese Nation-state," in *The Politics of Food*, ed. Marianne Elisabeth Lien and Brigitte Nerlich (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 132. Ship's biscuits are firm, small, square, crunchy, and do not resemble rice at all. They were meant to be a caloric and nutritional substitute, and not as an ingredient substitute in a recipe.
 4. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 287-288.

was also just an illusion. Cohesion as a country was one of the goals of the Japanese government, but there were discrepancies that undermined these efforts.

On the radio, the Dai Nippon Physical Culture Society prescribed body-warming calisthenics that would be a substitute for proper heating, bedding, and food. As normal food and heating fuel was no longer available due to shortages, the Japanese instructed people to keep their strength through other means. The concept that the spirit does not rely upon storage of energy and is the most important in victory, was stressed as the crucial way to win battles and thus, the war. The spirit could continue and could strengthen the body even without adequate nutrition, rest, or warmth.⁵ These broadcasts and others like it were also sent out to the civilian Japanese population. Historian Thomas Havens argues that “after Pearl Harbor true deprivations in food, clothing, and shelter probably made these moralistic exhortations from the spiritual-mobilization movement seem gratuitous and silly.”⁶

The consumption of the substitute foodstuffs, in conjunction with the use of substitute materials, meant that all aspects of civilian life were subjected to using sub-par goods. It was not western or western-influenced fare itself that was so difficult to bear. It was substitute cuisine that was so hard to digest, figuratively and literally, for the Japanese. The government encouraged people to use substitutes during the war in order to send regular materials to soldiers, or to allow regular materials to be used for wartime production. The government tried to present the reliance upon substitute cuisine as a struggle with the west, with Allied powers, with foreigners. For the day-to-day life of the average Japanese person, though, substitute cuisine was more indicative of the material struggle to survive and the psychological struggle for identity.

The Japanese populace turned to substitute foods to survive during the war, but did so with the idea that it was only temporary. Patriotic eating and sacrifice were beneficial to the nation, but there was very little real choice in the matter: they were subjects, not citizens, and regular, high-status, or desirable goods were hard to come by. There was an idea that once the conflict was over, the Japanese would return to their preferred native foods.

All of the Japanese government’s food or price control measures never actually ensured that people had access to adequate amounts of foods. Bad weather, pests, less fertilizer, and a reduced number of farmers increased the odds for low crop yields nationwide. Crop failures in one area during one season meant that particular area faced real hardship for a while. The Japanese rail system was not expansive during the war years, so that meant some of these areas were somewhat isolated. Allied bombing of train lines hindered shipments over land, and underwater land mines meant that what ships were not commandeered for war use, had extreme

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5. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1946), 24-25. Robert T. Bellaire, “Prices in Japan Reported Soaring,” *New York Times*, 27 Jul 1942. People were only permitted to use fuel to heat their homes two months per year, but even then there were many who could not afford to heat their homes at all. As severe as this sounds, it could be an example of overzealous reporting; those who lived near woods could forage for firewood to heat their homes and Southern Japan has a mild to tropical climate that might not have required heating fuel at all.
 6. Thomas R. H. Havens, “Women and War in Japan, 1937-45,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Oct., 1975): 931.

difficulty navigating the waters around Japan. Prefectures or regions with high yields may not have even been able to send food to areas that needed help.

Historian Donna Gabaccia asks, “If we are what we eat, who are we?”⁷ This is especially poignant during wartime because who you are, and maybe more importantly, who you are not, defines with whom an individual or group sympathizes during a conflict. In many instances people’s previous diet changed because of the war. Native foods, especially rice, were an important link to who people were, but adoption of wartime cuisine was also seen as a way to support the Japanese cause. As engagement in war was seen as a temporary state that will end once a nation claims victory, so too is wartime cuisine. It was never designed to replace peacetime habits, nor was it designed to be sustained indefinitely.

Wartime cuisine called for heightened austerity and discipline, and utilization of previously unknown ingredients and cooking methods. When the war ended, many of these foods continued to be eaten by the Japanese because of the economic and culinary distress of the nation. Most could not afford to resume their pre-war eating styles as soon as the war ended. Indeed for many, food became even more scarce after the war. Substitution was psychologically difficult when the replacements were so different from the original, both in terms of quality and the item itself. These substitute foods were not completely foreign to the Japanese, nor were they devoid of nutritional value. But they represented another step in decades of changes for the Japanese diet.

Aoyama wrote “only when there is no such hope for the future and no affectionate memory of the past... does having to skip meals become something deeply resented.”⁸ The idea that history can change just by altering the way history is remembered might seem counterintuitive to history itself, but people shape and reshape the past according to what they want to remember. The memory of food is precarious, and like other forms of memory, can evolve, change, and be shaped by current events. What people actually ate during the pre-war years, and their memories of idealized eating were not the same things, but it was the idealized version that people remembered. In the case of Japan, it was a diet of abundance with white rice at the center of each meal. The postwar/post-occupation diet was the most homogenous the Japanese diet had ever been, yet the ‘memory’ of the pre-1900 diet was one that was also homogenous.

Japanese Agriculture and Fisheries

Economist Fred H. Sanderson posits that Japan was self-sufficient in food until the early 1900s. This is not necessarily an accurate portrayal of the Japanese food situation. Self-sufficiency, did not equate abundance or nutritional balance, and an ever-growing population strained the nation’s edible resources. Nutritional inadequacy was a problem for most of the population, and this spurred on intensive farming with heavy use of fertilizers. High production was dependent

7. Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

8. Aoyama, *Reading Food*, 79.

upon human intervention through labor, fertilizer, tilling, weeding, multiple cropping, and irrigation.⁹

According to the *Report on Japanese Natural Resources*, Japan as a whole did not produce enough food for either total calories or protein requirements for optimal health in the pre-war years. In the mid-1930s over 50 percent of the Japanese population worked in agriculture or forestry.¹⁰ World War II caused additional setbacks in farm yields, and by 1947, this production was even less, despite intensive farming. These statistics do not take into account that Japan was importing food from the territories they controlled, or the fact that even before the war, Japan often imported food from other Asian nations. Agricultural factors were not the sole cause of shortages, as a contributing factor was a population increase of 10 million people between 1931 and 1945.¹¹

Between 1910 and 1929 the total population of Japan increased from 50.6 million to 61 million, and food production increased proportionally. Food production managed to stay just above population growth. Per capita caloric intake from 1926-1936 was stable at 2,300 calories per day. However, a 1934 crop failure in northern Japan reduced people there to eating grass and tree roots.¹²

Reporter Brooks Atkinson interviewed a Japanese man living in China, and according to the interviewee, Japan's farms and industries suffered because of the war effort, with conscription resulting in a shortage of farm labor, and a lack of fertilizer, with chemicals going directly to munitions factories. Sugar was used almost entirely for alcohol production, and very little of it could be found for human consumption. Fish was also scarce; Japanese might have only been able to eat it once every two weeks because it was needed for the production of glycerine.¹³ Even as far away as China, Japanese people understood that their fellow countrymen were struggling.

Transition to a wartime economy was beneficial for Japan's balance of trade, as 1935 exports exceeded imports for the first time since WWI. This did not equate to a universal benefit for all members of society, just as government intervention changed the diet in unanticipated ways. In villages and rural areas especially, the wartime economy created hardships as men were diverted to either military or factory work. Women, children, and the elderly were left to tend to farms. Chemical fertilizers were in short supply, as was heavy equipment, because they were utilized for war. Because both urban food needs and armed forces food needs increased, the government regulated prices and sales of rice.¹⁴

Access to raw materials was not Japan's only wartime problem. Inefficient distribution of manpower at home was also problematic. The utilization of Japan's most abundant resource—its

9. SCAP, *Japanese Natural Resources*, 5, 29, 34.

10. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 363. This is due to both an increase in the total rice yield as well as a change in the Japanese diet that is less rice-centered.

11. Sanderson, *Food Prospects and Policies*, 5, 94; SCAP, *Japanese Natural Resources*, 127.

12. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 207, 241.

13. Brooks Atkinson, "Waning Confidence Reported in Japan," *New York Times*, 21 May 1943.

14. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 270-271.

populace—fell to inefficient levels during the course of the war. The military initially did not conscript all men; those in scientific fields, those who worked in war production facilities, and those who worked on farms were not called up for battle immediately. But by 1944, more and more men were drafted, which left gaps on the homefront. There were no exceptions, and skilled laborers were called up, and women, children, students, and Korean laborers took the place of those drafted.¹⁵

In a nation never more than 150 kilometers from the sea, fish consumption was a major part of the Japanese diet and considered a second staple, after rice, in many areas. Fish and the seafood industry were integral parts to the Japanese economy, the political climate, and international relations. Yet seafood was rarely available in cities; the government redirected both fishermen and fishing boats to support the war effort.¹⁶ Fish and sea vegetables were used not only for human consumption, but as fertilizer and animal and livestock feed. Northern waters between Japan and Russia, waters between the Korean peninsula and China, and those waters south of the Ryukyus supplemented the marine yields from closer to Japan.¹⁷

Military First

The army diet actually underwent reform shortly after World War I. Food served to soldiers had to be healthy, inexpensive, and still taste good. Educational programs, advances in kitchen technology, and shelf-stable food products all contributed to consistency and nutritional improvements in Japanese military cuisine. Saeki Tadasu (1876-1959) was instrumental in establishing the Imperial Government Institute for Nutrition in 1920. He earned a PhD in dietetics from Yale University, and worked to make scientific nutritional knowledge applicable and relevant to the general public. To this aim, menus were published daily that were models of a healthy and inexpensive diet. Further changes in 1929 resulted in permanent kitchen staff for the military and provisions directly delivered from the military. Army catering came to equal efficient mass catering.¹⁸

The Japanese army and navy had the first priority on consumable goods, including food, clothing, fuel, and metals. However, pre-war food symbolism was not a consideration as the government made their consumption decisions. From battle rations in tin cans to military mass

15. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 332.

16. "War Comes Home to Japan," *New York Times*, 21 Feb 1944; Alexander S. Lispett, "Japan's Manpower Held Low," *New York Times*, 09 Nov 1944; "Soviet Renews Fisheries Accord with Japan in Far Eastern Waters," *New York Times*, 26 Mar 1943; Bestor, *Tsukiji*, 32-33. Russia and Japan signed a yearly pact in 1943 that allowed Japan continued fishing rights in far-eastern Russian waters. Japanese companies were required to pay 4-5 percent more than the previous year, and were to be paid in gold. The Japanese food supply depended upon these fishing waters. Signing the treaty was not viewed as collaboration or friendliness between nations, though not renewing the treaty would have indicated hostility.

17. SCAP, *Japanese Natural Resources*, 442; Oiso, "History," 43-44; Bestor, *Tsukiji*, 26, 29. Seafood has been a part of the diet since the earliest time in Japanese history. Archaeological evidence from the Jōmon period (10,000 BCE – 300 BCE) in the form of seashell mounds and fish bones supports this. Whaling and bonito fishing were large-scale operations and salted whale meat was enjoyed even in the inland mountain regions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

18. Cwiertka, "Western Food," 131; Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, "Militarization of nutrition in wartime Japan," *IJAS Newsletter* 38 (September 2005): 15.

catering, from military bases in China and Manchuria to island foxholes in the South Pacific, altering one's prior dietary habits was not a choice for those in the Japanese armed forces. While civilians on the Japanese main islands rationed for the good of the nation, those in the army and navy had no choice but to eat rations. Unlike American soldiers who typically gained weight as a result of their enlistment, Japanese soldiers were typically fed a limited diet, and towards the end of the war, had to supplement their rations with foraging and home gardening.¹⁹

Historian Katarzyna Cwiertka argues that nutritional modernity relies on science, technology, adventurous eating, and widespread consumption of foreign foods. One can then posit that whether military men intended to be so forward-thinking in their eating habits, they helped to usher in modern dietary trends. The Japanese army and navy adopted Chinese and Western dishes because they enabled them to meet nutritional aims and stay within the military budget. After World War I, this trend especially took hold. The military concept of caloric efficiency spread to the civilian population during the late 1930s.²⁰

The Japanese military tried to make sure soldiers had a proper diet to prevent malnutrition. However, government designed region-neutral nutritious meals and home front sacrifices did not ensure an adequate diet for all soldiers. Food in the Japanese armed forces differed depending on rank, area of duty, and current wartime conditions. Tension between the enlisted soldiers and officers during wartime sometimes resulted in malnutrition and neglect. Many soldiers suffered “the hell of starvation” by their superior officers.²¹

On the home front, Japanese subjects were forced to rely on substitutes so that soldiers on the fighting front could continue to have the real thing. This was the case for food, fuel, clothing, and other supplies. While some substitutes were adequate, many were inferior. And in many instances, it was not just a matter of substituting a favored original for a less desirable substitute, but actually going without altogether. Despite all of the home front sacrifice, soldiers in war did not fare much better. There was unequal treatment of men based upon military rank and where soldiers were stationed also determined the quality and quantity of food and other supplies. For example, Japanese soldiers in China wore heavy shoes and boots, soldiers in Swatow wore proper cotton uniforms, and they were well-fed.²²

Private Akiyoshi Hasamoto led his regiment to surrender because of the dream of “hot food, tobacco and relief from the unending shelling.” He was part of the 224th Japanese Regiment, one of the veteran regiments cited by the Emperor for their work in the Malayan campaign, as well as the first group of Japanese soldiers who surrendered to American troops on Guadalcanal. Private Hasamoto was inspired to surrender when he knew that his outfit would not get out alive; they

19. Barry S Foley, “Menu for SCRTC Chow Hounds,” *Signal Corps Message*, Aug 5, 1942, 8. At Fort Monmouth, NJ, the average WWII recruit gained between nine and twelve pounds in the first six weeks stationed there.

20. Cwiertka, “Western Food,” 129; Cwiertka, “Eating the World,” 92

21. John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York, NY: WW Norton Co, 1999), 58-59; Cwiertka, “Western Food,” 131.

22. Henry C. Wolfe, “Japan Gambles on Materials and Manpower,” *New York Times*, 04 Jan 1942. German military officers and civilians visited Japan to advise on economic mobilization and capitalize on loot from China.

would either starve to death or be shot. Hasamoto, through an interpreter, said “Our officers promised us shiploads of reinforcements, hundreds of planes that would drive the Americans out of the sky, and an abundance of food... Our food was reduced to three-tenths of a pint of rice and some soybean meal each day, and every ten days we each received a small can of vegetables.” He spoke of two separate 200-man units that suffered over 80 percent casualties; one had 30 men left, the other had 26 remaining.²³

Another New York Times article by Chungking correspondent Brooks Atkinson described the conditions of Japanese military life in China. Japanese soldiers had gone from eating Japanese rice, to Formosan rice, to local Chinese rice. Others subsisted on potato vines and other insufficient provisions. Despite this, in winter of 1944, it was still easier to buy consumables in China than in Japan. Many soldiers’ families would send their sons money through intermediaries in China to prevent detachment commanders from interfering. When Japanese soldiers returned home, they tried to acquire as many supplies as they could to bring with them. These were mostly items like cotton, cloth, soap, and other sundries.²⁴

Morale was extremely low for the Japanese stationed in China at this time. Many soldiers deserted, and others intentionally wounded themselves to be sent home, away from the fighting. The initial reports that the war with China would only last a few years was no longer the case, and common Japanese soldier also reported not knowing whether Japan was winning or losing the war in February 1944.²⁵

Even those Japanese troops who aimed at self-sufficiency despite isolation were not immune to their own food shortages. On Bourgainville, soldiers cut off from supplies used truck beds as gardens for food. American Air Forces in the Solomon Islands sprayed liquid concrete on the crops in an effort to get the Japanese forces there to surrender. The Japanese were a formidable opponent for American forces in the Philippines, and despite no replenishment of supplies, the Japanese continued to fight. Facing starvation was not a reason for the Japanese to surrender and many soldiers starved to death in their isolated island locations. American casualties mounted to 8,140 dead; Japanese death toll was 250,000. The Americans on Guadalcanal had meager rations, but they had far better fare than what the Japanese had. They had canned C-rations, dehydrated meats and vegetables, and stolen Japanese rice. Japanese soldiers sometimes had to resort to eating coconuts, moss, and tree roots. Most food came from cans, and fruit, fresh or canned, was often completely unattainable.²⁶

Food in Japanese Occupied Territories

"With the cooperation of Japan, China, and Manchukuo, the world can be in peace."

– Caption printed on a propaganda poster with Japan leading other Asian nations in peace.

23. “Guadalcanal Foes Quitting in Disgust,” *New York Times*, 04 February 1943. “Private Hasamoto,” *New York Times*, 05 Feb 1943. The surrender date was January 16, 1943.

24. Brooks Atkinson, “Japanese in China Grumble at Food,” *New York Times*, 20 Feb 1944.

25. Brooks Atkinson, “Japanese in China Grumble at Food,” *New York Times*, 20 Feb 1944.

26. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 329; “Allies’ Bombs Ruin Crops of Japanese,” *New York Times*, 19 Jun 1944; Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (Norwalk, Conn.: Easton Press, 1989), 197, 385.

Just as civilians and common people in Japan were struggling to survive, so too were the people in Japanese-controlled areas. These places suffered from their own shortages of food and clothing at the hands of the Japanese military. Japan's crop failure in 1940 meant that China's population suffered, as the Japanese government exported 80,000 tons of rice to Japan in exchange for the ever-devaluing Yen. Over 100 Chinese dollars were needed to buy a standard 152-pound sack of rice in Northern China, whereas before the war, this same amount of rice cost just 12 Chinese dollars.²⁷

Japan received 320,000 tons of food conquered areas between the outset of war in the Pacific, and April 1942. Colonel Okada of the Japanese War Ministry declared that 4,000 tons was corn, 100,000 tons was sugar, and the remaining 216,000 tons of food was rice. Most was shipped from French Indo-China, Thailand, Formosa, and Burma²⁸

Japan invaded Korea in 1905, and officially annexed it in 1910. The Japanese occupation of Korea was extremely detrimental to Koreans. Japan progressively reduced the amount of food available to the Korean populace during the decades of occupation. Half of the Korean rice crop was shipped to Japan between 1912 and 1933, thus dramatically reducing Korean consumption by 47 percent. Rice consumption was 220 pounds per person annually in 1912, but dropped to 133 pounds per person annually by 1933. The Koreans compensated for this by importing millet from Manchuria.²⁹

Broadcasts from Saigon and Tokyo on May 14, 1944, revealed that Japan looted food, clothing, and medical supplies from Vichy controlled Indo-China. There was a trading balance of 500 million yen in Indo-China; this glut of currency was of little use to a nation who was deprived of raw materials and received no finished products in return. Before the war, Indo-China exported rice, fish, cattle, coal, and other natural resources. These were all traded on the international market for cotton, silk, metal goods, kerosene, and cars. Indo-China received none of these finished products because their raw materials were siphoned off by the Japanese military. For 1944, 40 percent of Indo-China's rice crop went to Japan, amounting to tens of thousands of tons of rice.³⁰

Japanese military advances into Hunan, China, were a grave concern for both the Chinese and for their American allies. This was considered the 'rice bowl' of China and millions of Chinese would have faced starvation had this area fallen to the Japanese. Moreover, American military aid would have been almost impossible in this area because of the cost and volume of airplane fuel needed to replenish food supplies.³¹

Food For the Japanese Home Front

“Remember the front with gratitude when eating this rice”

27. Hallett Abend, “High Prices Cause China Food Riots,” *New York Times*, 21 Feb 1940.

28. “Tokyo Troopships Return with Food,” *New York Times*, 07 Apr 1942.

29. Geraldine T. Finch, “Koreans Claim a Role in War,” *New York Times*, 15 Mar 1942; Hane, *Modern Japan*, 206.

30. “Indo-China's Food is Taken by Japan,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1944.

31. Sidney Shallet, “China, Despite Reverses, is Sure to Stay in War,” *New York Times*, 02 Jul 1944.

- Printed on a wartime *ekiben*³²

As more and more food was siphoned away from the civilian population to feed the Japanese army and navy, food control and rationing became more important. The wartime Japanese diet was inconsistent. Rationing gave the entire population the potential to eat high status foods, like rice, at a reasonable cost. Price controls discouraged farmers from sending their goods to markets through legal channels, and they instead sold them on the black market. Rationing also broke down regional food differences because all people were allotted the same amount of rations. For the first time in Japanese history, it actually made sense for rice farmers to keep the crops for themselves. Those in rural areas had better access to food even if they were peasants, because those who earned high salaries in urban areas still had to travel far and sometimes take off of work just to get staple goods.

While no actual battles were fought on the Japanese mainland, the war and occupation were times of great upheaval for the Japanese. They were faced with food shortages and an inconsistent food supply, faced with subpar and substitute foods. The Japanese state officially became involved in non-military national nutrition in 1937. Government sought a scientific approach to food production and distribution, and later on food shortages. The Army Provisions Depot and *Ryoyukai* ('Provisions Friends Society;' not officially part of the military, but based in the Army Provisions home office in Tokyo) shaped the home front efforts of eating in Japan. A monthly magazine, *Ryoyu* ('Provisions Friend'), was published for national distribution, and a school furthered the initiatives of an empire at war.³³

During the course of the war, the government encouraged those on the home front to ration supplies, and later asked people to completely alter their own traditional eating habits, to allow soldiers to continue eating what had become customary during deployment. As the war progressed, rice reverted once again to a luxury item, and the virtues of inexpensive foods that contained more calories extolled. Food related propaganda took the form of pamphlets encouraging consumption of sweet potatoes and squash instead of rice, and extolled the virtues of home vegetable gardens and home brewing soy sauce out of fish bones.³⁴

As much as people looked to familiar foods during wartime—for comfort, for ideological reasons, for convenience—they also expanded their culinary repertoire. They included Japanized foods, foreign foods, substitute foods, and famine foods. Japanese ate some new foods out of necessity, some in the name of patriotism; but regardless of the reason, people altered their eating habits. The government deliberately added some foods as a result of Japan's involvement in the First World War. Thus, many foods were already familiar parts of the national diet by the time Japan entered World War II.

32. An *ekiben* is a type of boxed lunch sold at train stations for consumption during train travel. It literally means 'station box lunch' and is a combination of the Japanese words *eki*, station, and *bentō*, box lunch.

33. Cwiertka, "Militarization," 15. Cwiertka's article largely contrast with Oiso's about when the Japanese government became involved with the day-to-day concerns of the national diet. Cwiertka argues government involvement was much earlier than Oiso does.

34. Cwiertka, "Militarization," 15.

Michael Ashkenazi argued “rice is the purest and most desirable of foods.”³⁵ According to Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, “Rice represents the Japanese self while that self has undergone various historical changes.”³⁶ Michael Ashkenazi and Jeanne Jacob in *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine* and Katarzyna Cwiertka in *Modern Japanese Cuisine* both emphasize the changing nature of the Japanese diet over the course of the first half of the 20th century. Each shows how the Japanese sought modernity and expressed it through food. What is lacking in these narratives is the element of escapism, both in diet and in Japanese life. One example of this is when the Japanese government turned to science to solve dietary problems. Scientific food solutions may have ensured that people consumed an adequate number of calories, but they did so with sometimes foreign or undesirable foods. The Japanese people and the government escaped into the illusion that science would solve the nation’s dietary problems.

Changes of any kind, but especially changes in cuisine, are often met with hesitation; this is a timeless worldwide phenomenon. Gabaccia’s discussed the concept of “culinary conservatism;” a term that describes how people cling to foods associated with who they are. Food is an integral part of religious ceremonies, rites of passage, diets, myths, and lore. Very often, a culture is associated with its cuisine.³⁷ Culture, according to Jennifer Robertson, can be understood as a “space-time manifold...every bit as much an ongoing production as it is a constantly transforming product. Tradition is a relationship of prior to present representations, which is symbolically mediated and not naturally given.”³⁸

The native, or indigenous, foods were not necessarily more nutritious. Substitute fare often provided a greater number of calories at a lower retail cost, in addition to more extensive availability. High-status native foods, like rice, were still favored when available, though the potential to acquire them was often inconsistent, and sometimes only available through purchase on the black market. It was what native foods represented, as much as the foods themselves, that was elevated during the war: sacrifice for soldiers and the good of the nation, with a return to prosperous times after the war.

Illusions and the Rising Sun Lunch Box

Japan depended on the Anglo-American economic sphere for over two thirds of the nation’s imports, including over 80 percent of Japan’s oil that came from the United States. A blockade would immobilize Japan without even having to engage in war. In 1939, in response to Japan’s entry into French Indochina, the United States ended all exports to Japan, save for food and cotton.³⁹

The Food Management Law was enacted in 1942 and instituted a national food rationing system. Wheat, barley, pearl barley, rice, sweet potatoes, and white potatoes were all listed as staple

35. Ashkenazi et al, *Essence of Japanese Cuisine*, 153.

36. Ohnuki-Tierney, “Structure,” 233.

37. Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 8.

38. Jennifer Robertson, “It Takes a Village: Internationalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan,” *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 111.

39. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 297.

foods. Rationed items included sugar, fats, oils, soy sauce, and even salt. The Japanese government invested in and encouraged subjects to use substitutes for usual items as consumer goods became scarce. The Department of Commerce requested both industry and the general public find alternatives for food, fuel, clothing, metals, and leather.⁴⁰

Japanese war involvement in the 1930s picked up momentum and national nutrition was swept up in the war movement. It was important on the fighting front, and seen as a powerful weapon on the home front as well. Eating healthily, inexpensively, and simply was elevated to a national security concern. What began as a Monday school lunch in a Hiroshima girls' school evolved into a national war support meal. The 'Rising Sun Lunch Box,' *hinomaru bentō*, consisted of a pickled plum (*umeboshi*) in the center of a bed of cooked white rice. Served in a square bento box, this resembled the 'Rising Sun' flag. It rose in popularity and by 1939 was eaten as a school lunch throughout the country. Anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney wrote that "Japan's victory promised a return to good times with plenty of domestic white rice."⁴¹

The *hinomaru bentō* was a problematic dish from a logistical as well as from an ideological standpoint. It countered the scientific nutritional advice put forth by the government, at the same time that it went against the idea of eating substitutes for rice. It called for those eating it to be ever mindful of the soldiers fighting for Japan, which was counter to the traditional view that when eating any type of *o-bentō*, it is the person that made it for you who should be remembered. In the case of school children, it would be their mother who prepared and packed the lunch. Despite the mixed messages associated with it, the *hinomaru bentō* was not an anomaly, but rather the prime example of Japanese wartime culinary inconsistency.⁴²

Bentō, the boxes themselves as well as the fillings, suffered from wartime shortages. Even *ekiben*, the boxed lunches sold at train stations changed their typical offerings. While not as old as some types of Japanese cuisine, the earliest *ekiben* were attributed to rice balls sold at Utsunimiya Station in 1885. They place emphasis on fresh seasonal foodstuffs, to "combine the best of time and place."⁴³ Because of rations and shortages, the emphasis was no longer solely on rice, and included *satsuma imo* (sweet potato) or *udon* (thick wheat noodles). During the war, slogans and the Japanese flag often appeared on the *ekiben* packaging. "One million, one heart" and "Remember the front with gratitude when eating this rice" were the most common phrases.⁴⁴

40. "Japan Spurs Substitutes," *New York Times*, 15 July 1939; Cwiertka, "Western Food," 133.

41. Ohnuki-Tierney, "Structure," 232; Cwiertka, "Militarization," 15; Cwiertka, "Western Food," 132. The Japanese 'Rising Sun' flag is simply known as the *hinomaru*.

42. Anne Allison, "Japanese Mothers and Obentōs: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 64, no. 4 (October 1991): 205. Anne Allison argues that the ritual of food making and presenting it in an *obentō* is not only an important ritual for Japanese mothers, but the *obentō* is appropriated to represent Japanese culture and feminine identity. The presentation of food and how it is arranged within the *obentō* is just as important to feminine identity and sexuality as the overall taste.

43. Paul Noguchi, "Savor Slowly: Ekiben: The Fast Food of High-Speed Japan," *Ethnology*, Vol 33, No 4 (Autumn 1994): 322.

44. Noguchi, "Savor Slowly," 317, 319-320, 321. Postwar food shortages caused a drastic price hike in the station box lunches; some rose from ¥5 in 1946 to ¥20 in October of 1947.

Impact of Inconsistency

The concern of the average Japanese in late 1939 was intermittent scarcity and the rising prices of necessities, as “food, fuel, clothing, and lighting in cities had risen 91% since the war in China began.”⁴⁵ There were also inconsistencies in the day-to-day availability of foodstuffs. Some Japanese soldiers worried about their families back home. The Japanese army bought 80,000 bushels of rice and these were shipped from China to Japan to allay fears. This rice was distributed among rural areas where hardships were the worst. Most of the nation experienced high earnings and long working days.

A rice shortage in 1940 spurred the Japanese government to ration rice starting in February 1941. However, the details supporting this are inconsistent, and do not take into account the differences between rural and urban access to rice. For example, Joseph Newmann wrote the book *Goodbye Japan* during his tenure as a reporter through mid-October 1941. He gave detailed accounts of food shortages and the daily life in Tokyo. He claimed that the Japanese were accustomed to an austere diet, and that most complaints about food shortages actually come from foreigners, and not the Japanese themselves.⁴⁶

In an apparent effort to boost morale mid-1942, Tokyo markets were flooded with food from Japanese warlords for the first time in a year. This did not last long, however, and people resumed the pre-bounty dietary habits. Strict rationing and lack of availability of products resulted in declining health for some of the Japanese population. Shortages were blamed on lack of fertilizers for over-cropped soil and failure on behalf of the Japanese to store emergency supplies.⁴⁷ This is another example of inconsistency and extremism in reporting. Justifications for shortages did not take into account the potential to buy goods on the black market, or other legal forms of ingenuity in acquiring necessary goods. Rural areas that had favorable growing seasons also meant that the entire country was not affected. Many homes, even in big cities like Tokyo, had small kitchen gardens which helped to insulate them from periodic shortages.

The most important part of feeding a nation is consistency, not the amount of food that people have access to. A steady rate of available foodstuffs, no matter how meager, is far better than fluctuations, even when more food can be provided. Margaret Mead argued that “a good meal or an adequate supply of food in the shops one week serves only to highlight a bad meal or a failure of supply in the shops the following week.”⁴⁸ Confidence could only be instilled in a nation by reliability and a steady amount of food, even if it was not much.⁴⁹

45. Hugh Byas, “Japanese Worried by Rice Shortage,” *New York Times*, 04 Dec 1939.

46. Associated Press, “Japan Announces Rationing of Rice,” *New York Times*, 02 Feb 1941.

47. Robert T. Bellaire, “Prices in Japan Reported Soaring,” *New York Times*, 27 Jul 1942. This article did not discern whether it was individual Japanese people or the Japanese government that was at fault for not having an emergency food store.

48. Mead, “Food and Feeding,” 618, 625. Mead is specifically referring to occupied nations, but this pattern is paralleled in any nation where there is top-down control over the available food supply.

49. SCAP, *Japanese Natural Resources*, 619-620.

Industry and Food Distribution

In Japan, rice riots broke out in cities like Fukuoka when taxes levied were so high that there was not enough rice left for the farmers. Vegetable distribution was also a problem because it was impossible to prevent them from being sold on the black market and disrupting the Japanese government's price control structure. Distribution of perishable foodstuffs was a problem from a geographical standpoint, as well. Those who lived in suburbs or on the outskirts of cities had better access to farms than those who lived in the center of cities. While it was technically illegal to buy goods directly from farmers, it was very common. Laws also prohibited farmers from sending food to friends or family members in cities.⁵⁰

Reports from Japan indicated that funds for civilian needs decreased from 19.5 billion yen in 1941 to 11.5 billion yen in early 1944. The exodus of urban dwellers to the rural areas to buy food resulted in another blow to industry. Absenteeism to purchase food was a chronic problem. At one time it was estimated that the rate of absenteeism in one Mitsubishi factory was 20 per cent as workers left early to buy food. Rice was rationed according to people's occupations, and war workers who reached production quotas received additional rations. The German press disclosed that Japanese industries were able to entice workers because of the promise of "proper feeding and clothing of their staffs."⁵¹ Sake, sugar, beverages, and textiles were almost impossible to obtain through legal channels unless they were provided by one's employer. Rations for Japanese consisted of nine ounces of rice and a small amount of salted vegetables per day, with monthly rations of two ounces of meat, three ounces of sugar, and three eggs.

Women would often be responsible for picking up their family's rations. They would fight with the rice distribution clerks if their ration was incorrect by even one hundred grams. Some would arrive at the distribution areas days early asking for help to tide them over. One of the favorite responses by employees at rice distribution centers was to tell the women they 'looked pregnant.' This increased their allotment because the government allowed a seventy gram rice supplement for pregnant women and those nursing.⁵²

Not all who worked in factories were well-fed, or properly clothed, however. One example is from a young Japanese woman, Nakamoto Hiroko. Her school shut down in fall of 1943, and she went to work in an airplane factory, which was unheated because it lacked heating fuel. For lunch, the factory workers ate a bowl of broth with a few noodles. At a factory lodging house in Tokyo, the house mother, Urabe Takeyo, complained that everything was covered in grime from the oil burned in the factory, including the girls' uniforms. They were made from *sufu* and were so flimsy that they tore too easily to wash. Both clothes and bedding could not withstand washing or else they fell apart.⁵³

Import bans on raw materials may have actually bolstered the Japanese military in the short term during the early 1940s. As factories and plants closed down due to lack of supplies, the men

50. Brooks Atkinson, "Waning Confidence Reported in Japan," *New York Times*, 21 May 1943.

51. Brooks Atkinson, "Waning Confidence Reported in Japan," *New York Times*, 21 May 1943.

52. Havens, "Women and War," 932.

53. Havens, "Women and War," 924.

previously working from these businesses were able to make up a reserve force.⁵⁴ However, Hane argues that Japan's military defeat resulted from non-military occurrences. It was not battlefield strategy, nor too many casualties that caused Japan's military defeat, it was the economic breakdown and near failure of the Japanese economy as a whole. In a nation where the majority of raw materials needed to be imported, it was impossible for Japan to continue fighting with depleted stockpiles and supply lines cut off.⁵⁵

Perspective from the American Press

The American perspective of Japanese food programs assured that civilian rations were more readily available than they actually were. Reports about what was occurring in Japan, what people were consuming, and how people were acquiring foodstuffs and other necessities was inaccurate and inconsistent. Even well-respected news outlets like the *New York Times* printed articles that were skewed.

Accounts of Japan in the *New York Times* reported that Japan was beginning to suffer economically in its quest to rule China and maintain control of other mainland territories. For example, May 1939, reporter Hugh Byas wrote about the scarcity of consumer goods and rising prices in Japan, as well as concerns about the food supply. He stated that the nation already had a low standard of living, and inflation would soon "force Japan into slow economic strangulation."⁵⁶

The message in the *New York Times* was not always consistent about Japan's ability to maintain war. An example of this appeared in an article from August 1941. By this time in Japan, wages were falling and prices for rice were going up, but reporter Otto D. Tolischus wrote that Japan was not under any real hardship or exhaustion, just that oil supplies were being used up far more rapidly than they could be replenished. Peacetime and consumption industries lagged, but wartime industries were booming. While many necessary goods must be bought on the black market if they are to be had at all, those who wanted them could pay high prices and secure them from the black market. Regulated prices prevented farmers and store owners from raising prices, and in rural areas, food was especially inexpensive. He argues that the people that are hardest hit are farmers and fishermen as fixed prices and high fuel costs took their toll on the rural population.⁵⁷

American reporters in Japan did not seem to think that Japanese morale or the will to fight was decreasing by December 1943. This was not an indication that there were no hardships, though. One writer contributes:

“Despite the fact the Japanese have acquired a rich empire and have had time to develop it, however, it has not resulted in any betterment in the living standards in the homeland

54. Henry C. Wolfe, "Japan Gambles on Materials and Manpower," *New York Times*, 04 Jan 1942.

55. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 331.

56. Hugh Byas, "Japan is Feeling Economic Strain," *New York Times*, 14 May 1939.

57. "Order of Hunger," *New York Times*, 09 Aug 1941; Otto D. Tolischus, "The New Order in Old Japan," *New York Times*, 06 Apr 1941; Otto D. Tolischus, "Hard Facts Restrain the Japanese," *New York Times*, 12 Oct 1941.

or elsewhere.... Food rationing there is stricter than it was a year ago and the only available clothing is made from artificial material derived from wood pulp.”

While the Japanese army continued to fight, those on the home front faced yet another year of scraping by.⁵⁸

Even with difficulties in battle, dwindling natural resources, and an already low standard of living, foreign traders and economists reported in July 1944 that Japan actually managed to increase its munitions output. This was all absorbed by the civilian population, who in turn had reached bare subsistence levels for food, clothing, and fuel. The rice ration dropped to approximately half of what it was in 1943. In addition, textiles and clothing became even more scarce because additional factories were converted from commercial to wartime production. Milk, rice, meat, clothing, shoes, soap, paper products, matches, and soap were all extremely hard to come by in 1944. This was exacerbated by intensive bombing campaigns.⁵⁹

The Foreign Economic Administration said that even severe food shortages would not curtail the Japanese war machine because there was still enough industry and raw materials to continue the fight for years. Japan's elder statesmen met on July 12, 1945 to try to solve the nation's food crisis. American air and sea blockades forced them to increase domestic rice planting by 50 percent and decrease rice rations by 10 percent. Knowing the significance of food shortages, American and British forces targeted the food supplies of tens of millions of Japanese people during late July 1945, dropping petroleum jelly incendiary bombs on Choshi, one of the nation's food production centers, and train lines carrying food. Sugar was extremely scarce after Americans blocked shipping from Taiwan. By 1945, per capita consumption was down to three pounds, from a pre-war amount of 30 pounds per year.⁶⁰

The Impending American Occupation

Farms were hardest hit during the war: They were faced with two problems: the practice of mass conscription, and the loss of labor to factories, thus women, children, and the elderly were the main farm workers during the war years. By the end of the war, food consumption dropped to an average of 1,782 calories per person per day. In 1944 and 1945, there was also a dramatic decrease in the amount of rice imported from Japanese territories. There was bad weather in 1944, which caused rice yields to be down from 32 percent from the prewar yields. The fishing industry brought in only 40 percent of the prewar catch, due to lack of vessels and the restrictions on available fishing waters. Prewar imports from Japan's territories, including Korea, Taiwan,

58. Bernard Covit, "Japs Expect Germans To Lose, Writer Says: Repatriates from Japan, China and Philippines Say Japs Believe Allies Will Split," *The Signal Corps Message*, Dec 3, 1943 (Vol. 2, No. 37): 6. Bernard Covit was a United Press staff correspondent in Shanghai and Manila, and was interned in three Japanese prison camps for almost 18 months. He was among the repatriates who arrived in the United States one day prior to this article's publication.

59. "Traders Say Japan Increases Output," *New York Times*, 12 Jul 1944.

60. "Japan Held Capable of Long War; Many of Industries are Still Intact," *New York Times*, 27 May 1945. "Japanese Confer on Food Shortage," *New York Times*, 13 Jul 1945; "Record B-29 Assault on Japan Hits Fishing Port, 4 Other Cities; Third Fleet's Movements Veiled," *New York Times*, 20 Jul 1945; Hane, *Modern Japan*, 333. Choshi handled one-eighth of Japan's entire fish catch.

and China, accounted for a large percentage of the total food consumed. This ended when Japan was defeated, and the vacuum was eventually replaced by basic staples from America.⁶¹

As more and more food was siphoned away from the civilian population to feed the Japanese army and navy, food control and rationing became more important. However, there were limits to how much control the government could impose from above, especially if a nation was vacillating from near starvation to flooded markets, at the same time the government inadvertently wreaked havoc on the actual cost and availability of goods.

The wartime Japanese diet was inconsistent and government intervention caused more problems than it solved as rationing and price controls combined to change the diet in unanticipated ways. Rationing gave the entire population the potential to eat high status foods, like rice, at a reasonable cost. Price controls discouraged farmers from sending their goods to markets through legal channels, and instead sold them on the black market. Rationing also broke down regional food differences because all people, from all parts of Japan, were allotted the same amount of rations. For the first time in Japanese history, it actually made sense for rice farmers to keep the crops for themselves. Those in rural areas had better access to food even if they were peasants because those who earned high salaries in urban areas had to travel far and sometimes take off of work just to get staple goods.

All of the Japanese government's food or price control measures never actually ensured that people had access to adequate amounts of foods. Bad weather, pests, less fertilizer, and a reduced number of farmers increased the odds for low crop yields nationwide. Crop failures in one area during one season meant that particular area faced real hardship for a while. The Japanese rail system was not expansive during the war years, so that meant some of these areas were somewhat isolated. Allied bombing of train lines hindered shipments over land, and underwater land mines meant that what ships were not commandeered for war use had extreme difficulty navigating the waters around Japan. Prefectures or regions with high yields may not have even been able to send food to areas that needed help.

Getting food from Japan-controlled territories back to Japan only became more difficult as the war dragged on. Manchuria, Korea, China, Formosa, and Indochina were at the mercy of the Japanese forces, and as conquered territories, were responsible for feeding the Japanese troops, and sometimes the Japanese islands. Shipments of food from the Asian mainland bound for Japan sometimes circled for days trying to get to a port that was not guarded by Allied land mines.

Japan was a shell of its former self by the end of the war, and the Japanese people did not fare much better. What little resources Japan had before the war went to fighting it. Farmland needed rehabilitation, cities needed rebuilding, and the Japanese people still needed to eat. Japanese soldiers were repatriated and millions returned to the Japanese home islands. Soldiers ate what they were given during their tours of duty, and this food was often very different from

61. Hane, *Modern Japan*, 332-333, 342-343. In addition, protein consumption dropped to 58 grams per day. This is compared to the prewar amount of 2,300 calories per person per day, and the nutritional minimums of 2,165 calories per day and 76 grams of protein.

what they ate before their time in the military. Even with hardships and intermittent famine conditions, urban incomes rose, the legal market price of foods was low, and people had the potential to eat rice on a daily basis.

The homogenization of the Japanese diet was not accidental, but was a deliberate attempt on behalf of the government to control and modernize eating habits. World War II cemented these changes. Foreign dishes and military cooking helped to precipitate the modern diet, as did the change in preferences for different foods and years of austere eating. The memory of an ideal diet centered around rice, even if it was not what people really ate also impacted modern Japanese cuisine.⁶²

The search for regional identity expressed through food broke down during the war, and was substituted with a national culinary identity instead. Regional and class differences in eating habits blurred as rations and shortages dictated that people eat what was available, not necessarily what was specific to their prefecture, or to their social or political status. WWII cemented changes made by the government during the interwar years to homogenize the Japanese diet based on scientific principles. A national diet that centered around rice emerged. This was as symbolic as it was scientific, and did not take into account the price or availability of rice.

Hugh Byas wrote, “Japan is not a nation of individuals but a hive of bees working, buzzing, fighting collectively in defense of the hive.”⁶³ The wartime slogans like “100 million, one heart” certainly could be used to support his idea. And for a time during the early war years, maybe the Japanese population was swept up in the ideal of a unified spirit. It was the message the Japanese government promoted, and possibly even a message that the Japanese people believed. American troops felt this ideology would continue despite surrender, but it was not a postwar reality for the Japanese. Phrases like “One-hundred million, one heart” were easier to believe when food that you identified with as uniting you to millions of others was actually on the table.

62. Cwiertka, “Eating the World,” 115.

63. Byas, *The Japanese Enemy*, vii-viii.

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Japan established a new identity of anti-militarism, aversion to nuclear weapons and a focus on economic development that ultimately produced the high-speed miracle years of the 1960s. Image copyright AFP. Image caption One of the results of Japan's defeat was a focus on economic and industrial development. While past Japanese prime ministers have acknowledged the suffering that Japan caused its neighbours during the Pacific War and expressed their "remorse", there are some conservative voices in Japan who identify with the sentiment embodied in Hirohito's August 1945 statement. Image copyright AFP. Image caption The US has asked Mr Abe to avoid inflaming historical tensions. Before the Second World War started Britain imported about 55 million tons of food a year from other countries. After war was declared in September 1939, the British government had to cut down on the amount of food it brought in from abroad as German submarines started attacking British supply ships. There was a worry that this would lead to shortages of food supplies in the shops so the British government decided to introduce a system of rationing. Rationing made sure that people got an equal amount of food every week. The government was worried that as food became scarcer, prices would rise