

Lafcadio Hearn and the Problem of Japanese Food

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Japanese cuisine has recently been receiving the acclaim of many Western medical professionals and nutritionists, who hail it as one of the healthiest national diets in the world: lots of fish, rice, pickles, and vegetables, washed down with nourishing hot soup or green tea; in other words, low in fat and cholesterol but high in protein and other health-giving substances.¹ Foods like tofu, sushi, and miso are no longer strangers to the Western palate. In fact, they are considered not only good-tasting but also superbly good for the health, and people who have little interest in Japan or the Japanese are eating in Japanese restaurants and purchasing Japanese cookbooks. The healthiness of the diet seems to be confirmed by the fact that the longevity of the Japanese people is currently among the highest in the world.

But just over a century ago, when Lafcadio Hearn took up residence in Japan, the reputation of Japanese food was quite different, and even one so devoted to Japan as Hearn, so positively prejudiced in favor of its people and culture, could not, despite his best efforts, sustain himself for more than ten months on a Japanese diet, even one supplemented by as many as eight eggs a day. Hearn's failure, however, was no disgrace for a Westerner in Meiji era Japan. Indeed, the "problem" of Japanese food was one of the most frequently discussed topics among resident and visiting Westerners at that time. In her 1878 travel book, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, Isabella Bird provides a valuable measure of the difficulty of Hearn's undertaking:

The "Food Question" is said to be the most important one for all travelers, and it is discussed continually with startling earnestness.... Foreign ministers, professors, missionaries, merchants--all discuss it with becoming gravity as a question of life and death, which by many it is supposed to be. The fact is that, except at a few hotels in popular resorts which are got up for foreigners, bread, butter, milk, meat, poultry, coffee, wine, and

beer, are unattainable, that fresh fish is rare, and that unless one can live on rice, tea, and eggs, with the addition now and then of some tasteless fresh vegetables, [supplementary] food must be taken, as the fishy and vegetable abominations known as "Japanese food" can only be swallowed and digested by a few, and that after long practice.²

While Bird emphasized the food's unpalatability, denouncing the vegetables as "tasteless" and Japanese cuisine in general as just so many "fishy and vegetable abominations," others bemoaned the effects on the Western metabolism and digestive system. Eating unappetizing food was one thing, but eating food that was ultimately unhealthy (for foreigners) was another. Not that Japanese food was thought to be tainted or unhygienic in any way; it was just that European and American bodies could not seem to run properly on it, at least not for very long.

Nearly thirty years after Bird's book, the general American and European opinion regarding Japanese food had hardly changed. Pointing to Hearn's life as an example of the devastating effects of a too-Japanese life-style, Edwin Emerson, a prominent American resident of Tokyo, emphatically warned his relative against trying to live and work in Japan:

Not a few foreigners have come here and miserably failed in health. Young men in business lines; teachers in the Schools & University; Missionaries, male & female. They find the climate, or the conditions of life, unsuitable, and often contract some chronic disorder, or die prematurely. Japanese food does not agree with Europeans or Americans. No, ourselves, would not dream of living permanently in a Japanese house, nor endeavor to subsist on Japanese food.... There have been some instances of foreign men or women, who have come here and married Japanese; and have endeavored to live as the natives; (a conspicuous example was the late Lafcadio Hearn, the Author, & Professor in the University); it always turns out very badly. They have a miserable life; and die rather early.³

Of course, it is highly debatable whether Hearn's nearly one year of Japanese food or his partly Japanese life-style might have shortened his life. It is possible that the extra eggs he took to supplement his protein intake while in Matsue contributed to the heart attack that killed him, but it also must not be forgotten that he had been an avid meat eater, drinker, and smoker for most of his adult life, which began well before he ever set foot in Japan and continued long after he had abandoned his experiment with a

largely Japanese diet. But apart from this question, given the well-known antipathy of most Westerners to Japanese cuisine and the long list of failed attempts to survive on it, why did Hearn undertake to maintain a strictly Japanese diet? By examining his motivation and the rather complex relationship that grew up between Hearn and Japanese food, we can gain a deeper sense of him as a thinker and as a man.

One reason Hearn determined to live on strictly Japanese fare was simply that he wished to distinguish himself from the numerous resident Westerners who could not--the type of Westerner who smugly assumed the superiority of their own culture and quickly relegated to inferior status the unfamiliar or uncomfortable. This role was not new to him. He had long been a non-conformist who loved to challenge prevailing attitudes of cultural snobbery and assumptions of social, moral, racial, or intellectual superiority. In Cincinnati, when most of his contemporaries were striving to marry up the social ladder, Hearn went against all convention by proudly marrying down it, to a woman who was not only a mulatto but near the bottom of the social scale as well. In Japan, too, Hearn surely welcomed the chance to show that he was not a typical condescending Westerner.

Part and parcel of this desire to be different from the Westerners was the desire to be like the Japanese. The psychology of this is well illustrated by Hearn himself in a grisly scene from "Of Ghosts and Goblins." In that sketch from *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, a beautiful young woman digs up a grave, opens the coffin, rips an arm off of the decaying child's body, and starts to eat it with great relish. Then throwing a chunk over to the male suitor she has brought with her, she shouts: "Eat, if thou lovest me! This is what I eat!" If he can, he will win her heart and her hand in marriage. There is an analogy between this episode and Hearn's own relation to Japan suggesting another aspect of his motivation: he tried so hard to eat what the Japanese ate, no matter how unappetizing or unhealthy, because, like the suitor, he had fallen in love with the place. The self-imposed regimen of purely Japanese fare was an attempt to show his sincerity and to make his mind, if not his body, resemble more closely the object of his desire. He ate like the Japanese because, at the beginning of his stay at least, he genuinely

wanted to be like them and to earn their acceptance.

In addition to the social and psychological motivation, there was also a much more practical one: as a literary ethnologist, Hearn knew he must first "learn the culture" by immersing himself in it as deeply and fully as possible, for to write well about a people, one must first understand them, and to understand them one must eat like them and try to live as they do. As he wrote to his old "dad," Henry Watkin: "to see into the heart of this mysterious people... I have to blend with them and become part of them; it's not easy."⁴ If he *could* manage to "blend with them," this would eventually serve his own literary interests, for the author who could boast of actually living like the Japanese would possess superior bona fides to enhance his legitimacy as a cultural interpreter. Liking the food had very little to do with it. The longer he could live on it, the better for his reputation.

The other motivating factor, perhaps inextricable from the others, was Hearn's sense of personal challenge. Wherever he had gone in his days as a reporter, he always prided himself on his ability to adjust to the unfamiliar, to live with and like the natives, and Japan was no exception. Hearn wanted desperately to be one of those "few" who, Bird said, had managed to swallow and digest Japanese food. But Hearn wanted even more: he wanted to live on it *exclusively*, exactly as a Japanese in so far as that were possible. He was proud that where he lived, in Matsue, Western food was hard to come by: "There is no canned milk here; but there are scarcely any articles of European diet. I have been wicked enough to discourage the local manufacture of bread, by absolutely refusing to buy it, to the extreme astonishment of the baker."⁵

Here another facet of Hearn's motivation is implied. His gleeful refusal to buy bread from the town's only Western-style baker was not so much because it would make him "less Japanese"; it was because promoting bread's popularity would make Matsue, and by extension Japan, less Japanese. To Hearn in Matsue, bread and other articles of Western diet were insidious foreign pollutants threatening the cultural health. He took on the self-appointed role of cultural defender, fighting the encroachment of the West with his stomach.

This was a moral cause he believed in so deeply that he tried for a while to ignore the danger signals that his body was sending him. But a week or so

after his boast, he admitted to B. H. Chamberlain that he had finally cracked. The tone of mock shame cannot disguise the pain of his disappointment at having a digestive system that could not be Japanized:

--I am horribly ashamed to confess my weakness; but the truth must be told! After having lived for ten months exclusively upon Japanese fare, I was obliged to return (for a couple of days only!!!!) to the flesh-pots of Egypt. Having become sick, I could not recuperate upon Japanese eating--even when re-enforced with eggs. I devoured enormous quantities of beef, fowl, and sausage, and fried solid stuffs, and absorbed terrific quantities of beer--having had the good luck to find one foreign cook in Matsue. I am very much ashamed! But the fault is neither mine nor that of the Japanese; it is the fault of my ancestors-- the ferocious, wolfish hereditary instincts and tendencies of boreal mankind. The sins of the father, etc.⁶

In this "confessional," Hearn deftly appropriates the terminology of religion, professing guilt for a multitude of "sins" which include a violation of abstinence, a failure to repudiate pagan ways, and the eating of forbidden food. His rather modern excuse is that his genes made him do it. He labels his meat-eating ancestors, whose genes he has unfortunately inherited, as "ferocious" and "wolfish," implying his desire to become a member of the gentler races. But it was not to be. Within the next few weeks he reluctantly began to give up the illusion that his culinary "sins" had been temporary: "I find that I cannot go back to Japanese diet as a steady thing; and the 'solemn question of food' comes up again."⁷

After moving to Kumamoto a few months later, the dietary experiment was quietly and permanently ended. Though his feelings against the invasion of Westernization were stronger than ever, he was faced with the reality of the crushing contradiction that in order for him to write and work to keep Japan "Japanese," he would need the energy that only a largely Western diet could provide him. This realization brought about two changes. First, he changed his mind about himself as a cultural "sinner" and decided to treat his dietary defeat not as proof of weakness but of strength. He began to take pride in having lasted as long as he had:

The fact is I lived for one year exclusively on Japanese food, which Europeans, among others Mr. Chamberlain, consider almost impossible. I must confess, however, that it broke me down.⁸

Resigning himself to his non-Japanese genes, he wrote unrepentantly to Page Baker from Kumamoto in June of 1892, "I now eat Japanese food only once a day; and morning and evening indulge in beefsteak, bread, and Bass's Ale."⁹ His relief is almost palpable. Taking advantage of the abundant supply of Western food in that larger city, he began to eat Japanese food at lunch only. The change in diet had an immediate effect on his physical well-being, and he boasted of being fatter and feeling better and stronger than he had felt in years.¹⁰

The second change was in his basic cross-cultural thinking. He began to voice the opinion that Westerners' bodies and Japanese food were simply incompatible, a fundamentally unnatural combination. In a speech delivered at the Fifth Higher School in Kumamoto, Hearn was unapologetically frank: "Just as you cannot feed a hawk on rice or a wolf on straw, you cannot keep Western men alive upon Oriental food."¹¹

Not as an exclusive diet, perhaps, but in smaller doses he thought Japanese food was fine. Though in Matsue he found that he could not recuperate on Japanese food, he still considered it healthy for Westerners if taken on a short-term basis. One reason was because of its weight-reducing benefits. Consider this excerpt from a letter to Ellwood Hendrick in 1896, several years after giving up his strictly Japanese menu:

When I last heard from you I was in Izumo. There I became very strong by constant swimming and starving--Japanese diet takes all the loose flesh from a man in short order. My lungs got quite sound, and my miserable eye nearly well.¹²

The implication is that eating Japanese food is a form of "starving" the body, a Spartan regimen superb for losing weight, but not as a permanent thing. He also recommended it in the summer as being lighter and more pleasant than the heavier Western fare. While he sometimes described Japanese cuisine as "dainty" and "elegant" and did develop a true liking for certain items such as Japanese tea, confectionery, sake, and pickled radish, he never expressed much enthusiasm for Japanese food in general. Suggesting a kind of gastronomic monotony, he dismisses it in a mere two or three sentences:

You know Japanese food is raw fish and fresh fish, rice, bean-curd (they look like custard), seaweed, dried cuttle-fish--rarely chicken or eggs. In short, of five hundred Japanese dishes, the basis is rice, fish, beans, lotus, various vegetables, including bamboo shoots, and seaweed.... I now eat Japanese food only once a day; and morning and evening indulge in beef-steak, bread, and Bass's Ale.¹³

Although Hearn reached a relatively simple conclusion on the issue of Japanese food for Westerners, that of Japanese food for the Japanese was far more complex. He was of two minds about it. In some ways it was perfectly adequate, even superior to Western food; in other ways it was woefully inadequate. The Japanese soldier, he marveled, can march "over 50 miles a day without pain" because he has perfect feet and "a stomach whose chemistry can extract ample nourishment from food on which no European could live; and a constitution that scorns heat, cold, and damp, alike."¹⁴ In the addendum to the revised version of "Jiujutsu" he extols the economic benefits as well:

For the Oriental has proved his ability to study and to master the results of our science upon a diet of rice, and on as simple a diet can learn to manufacture and to utilize our most complicated inventions. But the Occidental cannot even live except at a cost sufficient for the maintenance of twenty Oriental lives. In our very superiority lies the secret of our fatal weakness. Our physical machinery requires a fuel too costly to pay for the running of it in a perfectly conceivable future period of race-competition and pressure of population.¹⁵

Borrowing from the recently published work of Dr. Karl Pearson, Hearn reiterated this idea in simpler language in a speech to a Japanese audience:

The human body is, after all, an engine;--the fuel by which it runs, is food. We have seen that all progress is caused by the question of food. The difficulty of living,--of getting something to eat,--is the cause of all effort. Well, the Western body may be compared to an engine of a certain power; and the Eastern body to another. If you imagine them able to do exactly the same amount of work,--their relative value must be determined by the cost of their fuel.¹⁶

It is remarkable that Hearn predicted Japan's future economic success in terms of more miles to the gallon, long before the first Japanese automobile ever reached the shores of the United States.

But Hearn also saw serious inadequacies in the Japanese diet--even for the

Japanese. Physically, Japanese soldiers and workers seemed able to function perfectly well on their low-cost "fuel"; but for mental effort, the nourishment was inadequate. From Kumamoto he explained to his friend and colleague, Sentaro Nishida, why many of his Japanese students at the higher levels did not perform well academically: "The students attempt to do on rice and gruel what foreign students can only do on beef, eggs, puddings, heavy nutritious diet. The student of today is not sufficiently strong and sufficiently nourished to bear the tremendous strain put upon him at the higher schools."¹⁷ Applying the philosophy of Herbert Spencer to his own observations, he makes the extraordinary suggestion that the ability to grasp Western ideas requires the mental power which only a Western diet can provide.

...the modern knowledge which the modern Izumo student must acquire upon a diet of boiled rice and bean-curd was discovered, developed, and synthesized [sic] by minds strengthened upon a costly diet of flesh.... The thoughts that have shaken the world were never framed upon bread and water: they were created by beefsteak and mutton-chops, by ham and eggs, by pork and puddings, and were stimulated by generous wines, strong ales, and strong coffee. And science also teaches us that the growing child or youth requires an even more nutritious diet than the adult; and that the student especially needs strong nourishment to repair the physical waste involved by brain-exertion.¹⁸

Why is it, then, that the Japanese soldier, nourished on Japanese food, can admirably perform extremely arduous, physical tasks, but the Japanese student cannot bear the strain of his studies and sometimes dies? One reason, he suggested, was that the soldiers were generally better fed than the students. But "better" meant more animal protein, and this implied that perhaps a heavier, more Western diet was preferable for the Japanese after all. By the time he wrote *Kokoro*, the thinking which made him refuse to purchase bread in order to discourage its consumption had reversed; now he seemed to be encouraging exactly that:

Physically, I think the Japanese will become before the close of the next century much superior to what they are now.... Japanese of the cities are taking to a richer diet--a flesh diet; and... a more nutritive food must have physiological results favoring growth. Immense numbers of little restaurants are everywhere springing up, in which "Western Cooking" is furnished almost as cheaply as Japanese food.¹⁹

Hearn was exaggerating. The facts were that good Western food still cost considerably more than most Japanese food, and that the number of restaurants serving it, though increasing, was still rather small and confined almost exclusively to larger cities. But even if Western food was becoming almost as cheap as Japanese food, and if Japanese people could thrive on it, then what of Hearn's prediction of economic victory based on the advantages of the Oriental stomach's ability to work on cheaper food? It is an argument he seems to have abandoned, for he never writes of it again. He accepted the fact that although Europeans and Americans were unable to survive on Oriental food, the reverse was clearly not true. As Hearn predicted, within the next one hundred years the physical size of the average Japanese would steadily grow in conjunction with the increasing intake of Western food.

The power of the West was symbolized for Hearn in the weight and nutritive force of its diet. In some ways that power was attractive to him, especially in so far as it produced "large thoughts," but it was also repellent, for it destroyed his private myth of the superiority of fairyland over the rapidly industrializing outside world, of Lilliput over Brobdingnag.²⁰ The future might still belong to Japan, but it would be a very Westernized Japan, a travesty of Hearn's ideal, Japan in name only.

It was this same food issue that caused him perhaps the deepest indignity he had ever suffered in Japan. He had continued taking a basically Western-style diet up until his death, as Setsu's grocery lists confirm,²¹ feeling that he needed the extra mental energy it provided to keep up his literary output while maintaining his commitment to high-quality teaching. He had become a Japanese citizen, but he was still being employed as a foreigner, at a far higher salary than his Japanese colleagues, for Westerners were supposed to need extra money for their increased food and housing costs. When a new university president took over, however, Hearn was told that since he was a citizen of Japan, he would have to go on the Japanese pay scale. He questioned their logic and refused the terms. Their reply was an insult that haunted him: "They told me that I ought to be satisfied to live on rice, like a Japanese," he later wrote to Bisland, still smarting from the wound.²² Perhaps what hurt him most was that he, of all foreigners, had tried to do just that. He had

wanted to become Japanese so much that he had nearly destroyed his health trying to “live on rice”; he had even refused to buy bread or to eat meat in order to keep Japan Japanese. And now for having taken Japanese citizenship he was not only being financially punished, he was also being mocked. The remark touched a sensitive place in Hearn’s psyche, with wider implications for the issue of cultural identity. What, after all, did it mean to be a Japanese, or any nationality or race, for that matter? Could someone be “Japanese” if he could not live on Japanese food? To what degree was one’s cultural or national identity located in, of all places, the stomach? Indeed, for Lafcadio Hearn, “the solemn question of food” had come up once again, this time with disturbing implications for his sense of self and for the significance of all that he had thought and done and struggled for in his adopted country.

Notes

- 1 The traditional Japanese diet, however, has been undergoing Westernization for some time, and now includes a much greater proportion of animal protein and fat due to the increased consumption of meat and dairy products.
- 2 Isabella Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, reprinted 1973, p. 19.
- 3 Edwin Emerson, Letter to Raff Emerson, 1/26/1905, from the Emerson Family Papers, unpublished material made available to me by the New York Public Library.
- 4 *Letters from the Raven*, p. 91.
- 5 *Works*, XV, 330. Letter to Chamberlain, 5/22/91.
- 6 *Works*, XIV, 133-34. Letter to Chamberlain, 6/1/91.
- 7 Unpublished letter to Chamberlain, 7/17/91, in the C. Waller Barrett Collection, University of Virginia Library (Item 47).
- 8 *Works*, XIV, 197. Letter to Page Baker, 6/1892.
- 9 *Works*, XIV, 197.
- 10 “I have become very strong, and weigh about twenty pounds more than I did last summer.... Perhaps it is because I am eating three full meals a day instead of two.” Also: “As for me, I have become stronger than I have been for years.... My lungs are sound as a bell; I never cough at all.” Letters to Sentaro Nishida, November/December 1891. *Works*, XIV, 171, 178.
- 11 “The Future of the Far East,” in *Some New Letters and Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by Sanki Ichikawa, Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1925, p. 398.
- 12 *Works*, XV, 36. Letter to Ellwood Hendrick, 1896.
- 13 *Works*, XIV, 197. For a fuller discussion of Hearn’s appreciation of the taste of Japanese cuisine, see my article, “‘Inordinately Fond of Good Food’: Hearn as Gourmet,” in *Memoirs of the Faculty of General Education*, 1996, pp. 75-77.

- 14 *Works*, VII, 285. *Kokoro*, "Japanese, Civilization." Quoted in Dennis Fox's "A Jingoist in Japan," *Lafcadio Hearn Journal*, Volume 4, 1994, p. 6.
- 15 *Works*, VII, 184-85. *Out of the East*, "Jiu-jutsu."
- 16 "The Future of the Far East," in Ichikawa, ed., p. 397.
- 17 Unpublished letter to Nishida Sentaro, 1/15/93 in the C. Waller Barrett Collection, University of Virginia Library (Item 64).
- 18 *Works*, VI, 128-29. *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, "From the Diary of an English Teacher."
- 19 *Works*, VII, 374-75. *Kokoro*, "A Glimpse of Tendencies."
- 20 *Works*, XVI, 114-17. Letter to Chamberlain, 2/2/94.
- 21 Unpublished manuscripts (in Japanese) from the C. Waller Barrett Collection, University of Virginia Library. According to Yozo Kakuta's article, "Haan no Shoku Seikatsu" (Hearn's Eating Habits), in *Lafcadio Hearn*, No. 29, (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 1992), Hearn, like other British and Americans, had no concept of "main dish" (staple food) and "side dish" (secondary food).
- 22 *Works*, XV, 237. Letter to Mrs. Wetmore, 1903.