

# Hesitant hands on changing tables : negotiating dining patterns in Diaspora food culture transfer

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# HESITANT HANDS ON CHANGING TABLES: NEGOTIATING DINING PATTERNS IN DIASPORA FOOD CULTURE TRANSFER

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## *Abstract*<sup>1</sup>

Food culture and dining patterns can, in any society, be read with regard to the history of food, social structures, economic choices, culinary techniques, food knowledge and even identities, habits and perception of comfortableness of its members and time. How then do migrants and diaspora communities translate the culinary practice into which they were socialized in their home communities into their new lifestyles and ways of eating? This article starts from the idea that autonomy over food is a major issue for migrants and their integration into new contexts. It is argued that through looking at the materially and culturally shaped body, at bodily practices of dining as well as at their becoming entangled in a new social and technical space, the preservation and/or transformation of habits may be studied and literally read as expressions of migrants' search for new identities and orientation. Food knowledge and culinary practice is revealed as the repertoire of migrants in their search of solutions for problems at different levels. In cases of asylum seeking and refuge, autonomy over food is a particularly sensitive issue which has not yet found much attention in anthropology of food nor in diaspora research.

## Introduction

In its No. 2 volume of the year 2006, the biannual Taiwanese Journal of Chinese Dietary Culture published an article entitled "East Asian Families and the Dining Table". It was written by Ishige Naomichi, professor emeritus and former director-general of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka from 1997 to 2003.<sup>2</sup> The background of "East Asian Families and the Dining Table" is a comparative research model. Major shifts in dining patterns have been identified

1 The author thanks Meltem Sancak and Andreas Isler for valuable comments and patient listening.

2 See ISHIGE, 2008: 76.

in this article as reflecting the character of the historical evolution of modern East Asian food cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Food and cuisine are central in what Fischler called “the sense of collective belonging” of humans. We operate with symbolic values of food because they are crucial for our “sense of identity”. “Cookery helps to give food and its eaters a place in the world, a meaning” (FISCHLER, 1988: 286). But cookery and food cultures differ. We distinguish “cultural rules for food use” as “group shared systems of ideas about organizing food items into dishes and meals that ultimately influence timing, order, and quantity of intake. [...] such ideas are constantly negotiated” (GOODE, 1989, ch. 5, Introduction). Food rules define particular, concrete settings for “collective belonging”. They shape the way in which we share or how we negotiate identity.

Dining patterns as well as the material culture of food consumption are an integral part of such cultural rules for food use. Throughout the *longue durée* transformation of food culture, such patterns reflected food techniques, economic and social change or systems of classification. Ishige illustrates this with a material aspect of Japanese food history, the shift from *zen* to *chabudai*:

Since ancient times food was served in single portions on small personal tables called *zen* while the consumer was seated on the floor. The order of the *zen* tables reflected the traditional ranks within the family hierarchy [...] In the first half of the modern period, the low but larger *chabudai* table that can be used by several people was introduced and spread [...] Yet the meals were still served in individual small bowls, preserving the pattern of single portions embodied in the *zen* tables. (ISHIGE, 2008: 86)

According to Ishige, only the modern era in Japan changed dining patterns away from the singularization of the individual eater towards the family dining together from a central plate. This transformation reveals a social and economic change from the individual and his or her status being marked through hier-

3 Starting with a period of prehistory (up to Jōmon period, about 14,000 BCE to 400 BCE), the establishment of a rice-based agricultural society since the Yayoi Period (from about 500 BCE to 300 CE) was followed by a formative period of Japanese food culture since the Kofun era (from about 250 to 538). A period of great fluctuation in food culture since 15th century up to the first half of 17th century, when social change was reflected in the ways of Japanese eating, was then followed by a period of the completion of traditional Japanese food cultures from the mid 17th century to the Meiji restoration (the 45-year reign of the Meiji Emperor from 23 October 1868 to 30 July 1912). Finally, according to Ishige Naomichi’s periodization, a modernization era of Japanese food culture since then has brought about dramatic changes in Japanese foodways (ISHIGE, 2008: 77–84).



archy-based individual servings towards a different coding of social hierarchies at the table in modern Japan.

Thus material and formal aspects like dining etiquette und utensils, serving methods, and dining formats are not merely casual elements of culinary systems. On the contrary: They are part of the socio-technical existence in which people construct and stage their identities, their judgment of correct habitus, their tastes, feeling of normality and comfortableness.

Dining patterns can also be looked at from a different angle, from an inner perspective of the human being concerned with food and eating. Body techniques of eating, meal patterns, tastes etc. are part of a kind of configuration, the basics of balance in everyday life. Dining patterns supply a whole repertoire of elements with which to distinguish oneself from another individual. Thus, it seems quite natural to apply a perspective on dining patterns such as the one Ishige proposes to the transfer of (food-)culture in diaspora contexts. The way in which such a transfer takes place seems, first of all, to be dependent on the degree of “autonomy over food choices and food procurement” (HARRIS, 2009: 1).

## Anthropological Research on Dining Patterns: Some Remarks

In anthropology, meal or dining patterns are not new topics, at least since Mary Douglas’ study on British working class meals entitled “Deciphering a Meal” published in 1972. Mary Douglas understood that “food is a code”:

[...] the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. (DOUGLAS, 1972a: 61)

Meals are for families, close friends, honoured guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance. (DOUGLAS, 1972a: 66)

Since then, abundant research has been effected in an anthropology of nutrition and food, focusing on biological as well as on social, economic and symbolic dimensions and heading towards deciphering structures of classification and meaning. However, with regard to examples like Ishige Naomichi’s interest in concrete bodily ways of eating, literature on anthropology of food is not really abundant in details. Some years ago, when I read Mary Douglas mentioning a “mouth entering utensil” as a structural element for understanding meals, without distinguishing related material culture of eating at all (DOUGLAS, 1972a:

66), I started wondering about blind spots in current research on social dining. The question is: Does the concrete shape of material food culture matter?

As Sophie Bouly de Lesdain has shown regarding people from Cameroon living in Paris, migrants and diaspora communities, in their relatedness to places, cultures and identities of origin and in their search for a new identity in diaspora, that is, for their new “social space”, develop strategies of defining alimentary practices of their own. For them, eating may—at least in initial phases of diaspora or in re-traditionalization movements—be a question of nostalgia, of memorizing, of relating to tastes and food values into which they have been socialized, of negotiating tastes and conditions for feeling comfortable in a new, yet unfamiliar setting. When the migrants’ body finds him- or herself placed into a new physical environment, with new, different, maybe even alien foodstuff and food-related manners, food familiarity may become an important issue. He or she acts according to the food and meal knowledge brought along. Appropriate food in an appropriate environment gives comfort, supports identity and a feeling of home, and fosters solidarity in a diaspora community. Material culture plays a role in such processes. Tools such as chopsticks, a rice cooker, a falafel former, a cutting knife, or a noodle bar, have the potential of becoming, within the new social space, icons of the place of origin. Thus, a simple tool turns into the crutch, the handle, the identifier which allows the hand, the body to implement embodied food practice in an entirely different environment. Touching such an icon reassures the user of his or her identity.

Even those refugees who cannot carry along a single thing when they flee abroad, embody in their hands and gestures an automatic action on foods, and a socio-technical knowledge which implies their specific material culture and identity expressed through food and meal, represented in memory and speech about food.

In the December 2010 issue of the French online journal *Anthropology of Food* (<<http://aof.revues.org/>>), an issue entitled “Migrations, pratiques alimentaires et rapports sociaux”, the authors of the introduction start with a “triple hypothesis”: they suggest 1. giving up the idea of migrants as clinging to “nutritional practices of a first socialization”; 2. having a closer look at issues related to the adoption of alimentary practices of the receiving community in terms of creatively reshaping social space rather than in terms of discontinuity; 3. taking into account the “regime d’altérité”,

l’ensemble des critères d’inclusion et d’exclusion—donc les normes alimentaires—qu’un Etat et les membres d’une société se donnent, à un moment historique donné, pour délimiter



le “Nous” national, ce qui incite à tracer des frontières (alimentaires) avec ceux qui sont imaginés comme (partiellement) exogènes y compris parfois plusieurs générations après la migration. (CRENN et al., 2010: 6).

Entangled in multiple bodies and materialities as migrants are, they go through processes of defining new food identities. The majority culture hosting them reacts to their foodways by constructing alimentary markers (“marqueurs alimentaires”, CRENN et al., 2010: 6), which may include or exclude foodstuff, ways of eating, even bodily gestures at the table into their imaginations of successful immigration. Indeed, the bodily and the material side of meals and ways of eating in diaspora matters and deserves to be examined more closely.

In the following section, I shall show the interest of introducing the materially and culturally configured body into questions of mechanisms of food culture transfer in diaspora societies. I will start with the example of Ishige Naomichi’s matrix of dining patterns.

## Types of Dining Patterns and a Matrix of Dining Formats

Japanese scholars like Ishige Naomichi have reflected upon the systematics of “meal patterns”, “model ways of eating”, “attitude and utensils”. According to Hans Dieter Ölschleger, he “attempts to consider changes in familial relationships through the examination of daily consumption habits at the dining table in Chinese, Korean and Japanese families” (ÖLSCHLEGER, 2008: 2–3).

The following elements have been identified by Ishige as part of a matrix of dining formats of regular meals. With regard to attitudes and utensils, Ishige distinguishes:

- A. floors and chairs, related to “sit-down eating” or “seated dining”. Mary Douglas (DOUGLAS, 1972a: 66) interestingly related sitting in her British working-class centered research to “a table, a seating order, restriction on movement and on alternative occupations” as part of a meal;
- B. eating utensils, Douglas’ “mouth entering utensils” (DOUGLAS, 1972a: 66), are distinguished as another element of a meal: 40% of the world’s population in the 1970s ate “with their hands”, approximately 30% used chopsticks, and 30% fork, knife and spoon.<sup>4</sup> With regard to China, Japan,

4 For a cultural history of the fork in Europe, see SPODE, 1994.

and Korea, chopsticks in combination with spoons originated in 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE China and were taken over as a combination of chopsticks and spoon by Koreans in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. In Japan, chopsticks have become common since the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Types of table setting / meal formats, subsumed by Douglas (DOUGLAS, 1972a: 66) under “the rules which control the internal ordering of a meal itself”, are distinguished by Ishige according to:

- I. table setting methods like the “spatial development” with all components of a meal laid out at once, and the “sequential order dining” with meals or courses following one after the other;
- II. a second difference identified as individual servings in opposition to communality practice.

Ishige then establishes a matrix of dining formats and shows that the following combinations are possible:

	Sit-down dining	Seated dining
Hands	A	B
Chopsticks (spoon)	C	D
Knives, forks, and spoons	E	F

	Individual	Communal
Spatial development	1	2
Sequential dining	3	4

There are, thus 24 possible types of dining patterns:

	A Sit down, with hands	B Seated, with hands	C Sit down, with chop- sticks	D Seated, with chop-sticks	E Sit down, with knife, fork, and spoon	F Seated, with knife, fork, and spoon
1 Spatial, individual	A1	B1	C1	D1	E1	F1
2 Spatial, communal	A2	B2	C2	D2	E2	F2
3 Sequential, individual	A3	B3	C3	D3	E3	F3
4 Sequential, communal	A4	B4	C4	D4	E4	F4

### Taking Ishige's Models of Dining Patterns as a Starting Point

While today there exists abundant specialized literature on identity and nutrition in national as well as in diaspora communities, most focus on recipes and dishes, foodstuff and ritual.<sup>5</sup> Recently, British researchers complained that “the complex, and multidimensional, relationship between food and migration remains both under researched and under theorised.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Ishige's model and way of reading European food and meal history, European societies underwent a shift from type B2 (seated dining using hands with communal dining in spatial development) to type F3 (seated dining using knife, fork and spoon, individual dining in spatial development). Japanese society, throughout its history, underwent a shift from type A2 (sit down dining,

5 See ROMANEK, 2008.

6 Workshop: Food and Migration, London, Brunei Gallery, 2–3 February 2009, organized by Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies, SOAS, University of London; Food Studies Centre, SOAS, University of London; Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, convened by Monica Janowski (Sussex) and Parvathi Raman (SOAS). See <<http://www.soas.ac.uk/events/event43594.html>> (last accessed 25 May 2010).



eating with hands, with the communal serving practice and spatial development model), to Kofun-era C1 (sit down dining, use of chopsticks and spoons, individual serving, spatial development) under Chinese influence, to first-half-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century D1, i.e. using western style seating for meals, and using chopsticks with a sequential way of serving individual sets of dishes.

What may be the impact of “sit-down eating” or “seated dining” on floors and chairs respectively? They imply different spatial hierarchies, and at this point Ishige’s model is slightly insufficient: spatial hierarchies at the dining table might reflect social hierarchies. It might matter where in patriarchal systems the senior, in matriarchal societies the senior woman sits, and where the guests, the newly married, and the women have their places. Ways of seating furthermore reflect different body techniques, body terminologies and senses of body comfort, as well as different ways of spatial orientation, different perceptions of horizon and angles, different ways of organizing social and gender hierarchies in space, and a material culture that in many ways shows sensitive differences.

With regard to eating utensils, which must be seen in relation to seating techniques, eating “with their hands” vs. using chopsticks, vs. using fork, knife and spoon, generally implies different material cultures of eating and histories of such cultures and tools; different eating techniques and table / meal etiquette. Bodies may be dextrally or bimanually bound; eating with hands as well as utensils may be classified with regard to gender, eating taboos, binary categories like clean and unclean, and the like. Usually, it takes a long time until new utensils and related techniques are fully accepted. Intermediary forms, even fashions, mark these *longue durée* processes of an adaptation of etiquette to tool and vice versa. The history of the acceptance of chopsticks in different areas in East Asia took more than several hundred years. Such processes, in fact, reflect ways of enculturation and integration, of embodiment, of appropriating or adapting a utensil, of establishing or maintaining ties of kinship, gender, society, culture in accord with own socio-technical everyday systems (FLITSCH, 2006; 2007).

In transnational and diaspora contexts, the preservation of model body techniques and meal patterns may become a marker of either nostalgia and backward orientation, or of ways of bringing the old, the well-known and well-felt in accordance with the new way of being. Here the repertoire character of embodied knowledge becomes particularly evident. With regard to how types of table setting / meal formats reflect society, Ishige’s distinction between “spatial” and “sequential” ways of table setting is revealing. Table setting methods like the “spatial development”, i.e. laying out all components of a meal at once, point to societies in which the meal is a set of modular arrangements in space in

accordance with a fixed placement of the participant in everyday life cycle and time order as well as hierarchical space use at meals. The “sequential order dining” with meals or courses following one after the other would imply gender or class differentiation, with family members or servants being excluded from the meal due to the task of sequential preparation.

Finally Ishige distinguishes individual servings in opposition to communality practice. This differentiation allows a whole repertoire of ways of expressing social distance, hierarchy, concepts of purity and impurity or social closeness and equality through ways of serving. According to Ishige, a shift from A2 (sit down dining, eating with hands, with the communal serving practice and spatial development model) to C1 (sit down dining, use of chopsticks and spoons, individual serving, spatial development) to D1, i.e. combining western style seating for meals with chopsticks and a sequential way of serving individual sets of dishes, developed over a long time span. However, solving the problem of what this means with regard to Japanese food history is, unfortunately, not the task of this contribution.

## Dining Formats in Diaspora Food Culture Transfer

All the elements identified by Ishige as crucial components of dining patterns are part of the repertoire which, in diaspora contexts, is referred to, transformed, kept, developed further, or even given up and made impossible. They may be cherished in initial enculturation phases, receive entirely new meanings and connotations in times when diaspora communities search for distance to their homeland, and finally merge into new and syncretic alimentary practices.

I would like to stress the repertoire character of dining patterns. Of course, there is no need to assume fixed or uniform dining patterns as being part of rule systems of meals. We ought rather think of repertoires, of alternatives, of options of reinforcing or dissolving the cohesion of domestic or kin units through eating together, through meals (GOODE, 1989). Depending on the type of migration, from economic migration to refugee and political asylum seeking, and depending on the relatedness to places and communities of origin, diaspora communities have at their disposition dining patterns and symbolic structures from which they choose on occasion.

The idea is that templates of sitting and eating practiced in a home context are in a way detached from this original context and transferred to a new setting



in which they are re-implemented according to new conditions. Thus, the structure of dining patterns which the migrants bring along, and the truly evolving dining formats of migrants in diaspora may be phenotypically similar but structurally entirely different.

Let me take up an issue I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: The way in which food culture is transferred in diaspora contexts depends on the degree of “autonomy over food choices and food procurement” (HARRIS, 2009: 1). Why autonomy? Taste and disgust are consequences of what Fischler in 1988 called the resolution of the “omnivore’s paradox”, “the tension, the oscillation between the two poles of neophobia (prudence, fear of the unknown, resistance to change) and neophilia (the tendency to explore, the need for change, novelty, variety)” (FISCHLER, 1988: 278). Man “eats, so to speak, within a culture, and this culture orders the world in a way that is specific to itself” (FISCHLER, 1988: 281). Thus, the degree of incompatibility with food customs and tastes of the community or country receiving the migrant, the diaspora community, or the asylum seeker, will have its impact on the degree of getting accustomed to its ways of eating.

Autonomy over food is, often enough, challenged by host communities, which under conditions of hostility or reluctant reception tend to claim adaptation. French anthropologists of food have questioned the dynamics of an incarnation of constructed “national cuisines” during processes of integration (HUBERT, 2000). They dismantle the idea of “national cuisines” or “ethnic foodways” as being constructed to classify migrants rather than as to correspond to the multifaceted alimentary practices of people in their places of origin. There has been, and still is, an assimilationist paradigm in political debates and polemics in Europe as in other majority communities, according to which migration should imply a clear rupture with the place of origin, viewing commitment to host community alimentary practices as markers of successful or failed integration. One conclusion is that nowadays it is highly important

*de mesurer à quel point le politique, tout en faisant de la mobilité une valeur cardinale, sait utiliser l’altérité alimentaire pour marquer (dans un sens comme dans l’autre) les frontières gustatives de manière hiérarchisée et de les présenter comme des sortes de frontières “nationales” inaliénables (CRENN et al., 2010: 3f.).*

If we return to the elements of dining patterns identified by Ishige it becomes obvious that his approach allows for the concretization of our topic. To take but one example: Uzbek farmers in Uzbekistan eat sitting on the floor, with a long



piece of cloth in front of them on which the meal is distributed spatially in a communal way. The hierarchies of sitting and the sequence of serving identify social quality, rank and position. The hand with which the rice is eaten identifies the quality of food intake.

While transferring from eating on the ground to seated eating in, e.g., an urban context of a modern city, the horizontal spatial template of sitting may be preserved but elevated—a dimension which may add to the perceived modernity of the whole context. In one way or another, the social hierarchy expressed in sitting positions may also be preserved in sensitive adaptation and response to the concrete structure of the society or group that applies it. Eating with a knife and fork would alter the haptic sensitivity for food intake with the hand or even make it obsolete, leaving the hand as a mere handle for the tool.<sup>7</sup> Thus shifts in dining patterns may imply a more or less radical re-orientation of the body within the new social space of dining.

### Dining Patterns under Lack of Autonomy over Food Choices

What happens when appropriate food cannot be procured, when adequate dining patterns cannot be guaranteed? What happens when autonomy over food choices is disturbed or lost? Anne Harris from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London has observed an increasing importance of social capital in organizing and channeling limited food resources through systems of reciprocity. Here “syncretic behavior” (HARRIS, 2009: 7) tends to develop as a result of trans-group reciprocity.

A particular form of crisis is destitution, not to mention falling into destitution, under diaspora conditions. This is a critical issue in the topic of the transfer of food culture. News on refugees and asylum seekers refusing food vouchers to be used in a restricted number of shops for purchasing cheap foodstuff is a current issue in the life of asylum seekers. Recent cases of asylum seekers in Bavaria in southern Germany, going on strike against a “food box system” are another example. They were supposed to fill in forms, one week in advance, for food which arrived once a week in a box, furnishing them with food incompatible with what they were used to eating, with what they perceived as eatable at all.<sup>8</sup> Such systems, justified as administrative necessities and efficiency, might

7 Information given by Meltem Sancak, 1 June 2010.

8 See, e.g. JACOB, 2010.

leave the impression that they even aim at discouraging people from feeling welcome. All this reminds us of the degree to which embodied knowledge and practice of meal and dining patterns matter. In destitution and lack of food autonomy, orders are disrupted, identity is disturbed, and feelings of insecurity and disorientation may easily develop into serious illness and dislocation.

### Hesitant Hands on Changing Tables

While diaspora communities may appear to have successfully adapted to the ways of everyday living in the host context, the bodies of the migrants often tell a different story, one of an incessant translation of gesture, body, material culture, and everyday practical knowledge. The title “Hesitant Hands on Changing Tables” refers to exactly this.

Follow an Uzbek woman returning to her village after 20 years in Switzerland: at the moment of taking her seat on the floor besides her mother, she reactivates her childhood floor dweller socialization. Her hand may hesitate for a moment before she automatically reconfigures and alters her movements and actions at the tablecloth covering the carpet in front of her. Following the horizontal hierarchies of food distribution among the kin people around her, she shares a meal welcoming her back, welcoming her back also into her former bodily existence. Such bodily translation processes are what links diasporas to home communities.

The second diaspora generation often stands between enculturation and integration of their parents' generation. They are faced with the consequences of a dual socialization. Often enough, this is configured on tastes and the food culture of both—host and parents' home cultures—and their particular skill is the ability to stand in between, both to master and to challenge tastes and dining patterns on both sides. They transgress limits of disgust and eventually even choose or develop their own syncretic style. Challenges are represented through different mediums—films, interviews, literature—and on web pages, i.e. on virtual public spaces in which the second generation discusses issues of diaspora everyday life. In such virtual public spaces, food has become a recurring theme. With regard to body socialization and dining patterns it is interesting to note that discussions in internet forums concentrate on ethnic identity and difference:



Das Wechselspiel von kultureller Identität und Differenz prägt den Diskurs der Forenteilnehmer, wobei Differenz nicht nur zu “den Deutschen”, sondern auch innerhalb der ethnischen Öffentlichkeit hergestellt wird. (ANDROUTSOPOULOS, 2005: 7)

Participants in such forums consciously reflect on the stereotyping of ethnic lifestyles. They take an attitude towards the area of origin of their diaspora community. They discuss issues of symbolic values of food, of their attitude to festive meals, with irony. And they critically reflect upon bodily particularities, like Indian ways of prescribing the right hand for eating (ANDROUTSOPOULOS, 2005: 7–8).

## Conclusions

A closer look at the hesitant hand and body confronted with changing social and material spaces in diaspora everyday life, at the changing tables in diaspora, allows us to understand where a diaspora community stands, how far refugees, migrants and diaspora members have stayed close to, or become removed from, their places of origin. Under conditions of lack of autonomy over food, of destitution, of no table to hesitate with one’s hand on, respect for the bodily configuration in their places of origin may procure solutions to regain balance. Thus, it seems worthwhile to take a closer look at the back-and-forth translation and reconfiguration of the bodies and the material cultures in diaspora cultural transfer processes. Dining patterns appear to be an adequate first step in this direction.

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## Biography

Mareile Flitsch is Chair of Social Anthropology and Director of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich. She studied sinology and anthropology in Münster, Paris, Shenyang (PR China), and Berlin and received her Ph.D. as well as her habilitation from the Freie Universität Berlin in 1990 resp. in 2001. Specializing in Chinese anthropology as well as in the anthropology of technology, she has published extensively on issues of skilled practice in everyday China, for example her monograph *Der Kang: eine Studie zur materiellen Alltagskultur bäuerlicher Gehöfte in der Manjurei* (2004).