**Securing Fish for the Nation: Food Security and Governmentality in Japan**

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**Abstract**

Concerns about supplies of food have been a feature of Japanese politics since Japan started modernizing in the second half of the 1800s. It has remained a prominent political issue even after Japan cemented its status as a wealthy country in the 1980s, with the Japanese government continuing to protect domestic food production from international competition. Protectionism is a curious policy for a country so dependent on world trade, including for food. Protectionist practices have led to entrenched interests in some sections of government and industry. Protectionist ideas are used in nationalist arguments against food imports. The protection of domestic food production, however, resonates positively well beyond the groups benefiting economically from protection and those that indulge in chauvinist notions about the dangers of “foreign” food. The issue, therefore, is broader than interest-group capture or xenophobia. We find it is deeply embedded in Japanese policies relating to food domestically and internationally, and goes beyond government policy as such, involving ways of thinking about protection of national culture, and social and environmental responsibility. Michel Foucault’s notion of governmentality helps explain this approach to food security, accounting for the juggle between free trade and protection as well as the pervasiveness of this rationality beyond government as such.

**Keywords**: Japan; food security; governmentality; free trade; market intervention; fisheries; whaling

Concerns about supplies of food have long been a feature of Japanese politics. The need to secure access to food, along with other resources, was one of the factors behind Japan’s colonial expansion in the first half of the twentieth century and military aggression leading to the Pacific War. After the war and the loss of its colonial sources of food Japan’s approach to food security has involved a heavy reliance on world trade for food imports and government support for domestic food industries. The justification for this has been that it was needed to ensure some measure of protection from problems in world food markets, although clearly domestic political considerations were also at play. The Liberal Democratic Party, in power continuously from the 1950s to the 1990s, relied on support from rural electorates in exchange for a range of economic benefits including protection of food production. Since the 1980s Japan has faced opprobrium from food exporting countries objecting to government protection of domestic production, notably for the iconic foodstuff of rice, but also for beef and fruit.

Japan’s food security policies have also resulted in international disputes in fisheries sectors. For example, food security is one of the ways in which Japan seeks to legitimize its whaling practices (see Epstein, 2008, pp. 231-36).[[2]](#footnote-2) Japan has also been at the forefront of an on-going disagreement in the Doha round of trade talks over the legitimacy of fisheries subsidies in the context of a global free trade regime. A group of World Trade Organisation (WTO) member countries calling themselves the Friends of Fish[[3]](#footnote-3) argue that subsidies to the fisheries sector, making up as much as 20 per cent of revenues or USD25 billion annually, have led to overfishing (Sumaila et al, 2010; WTO, c.2010) and thus should be removed for both free trade and environmental protection reasons. Resisting the push to completely disallow fisheries subsidies are lower income countries needing to encourage fisheries development and also three big fishing countries that make up the bulk of the global total of fisheries subsidies, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. These countries dispute the connection between fisheries subsidies and overfishing (arguing that inadequate resource management is the problem). Japan for its part asserts that fisheries subsidies are necessary for its food security.

At first glance it seems curious that a country as wealthy as Japan should be concerned about food security at all. Food security first emerged as a problem of global governance in the wake of the Second World War and the destruction of the food supplies it had wrought; yielding the creation of the Food and Agricultural Organization in 1945. Today, however, food security is generally presumed to be a concern of developing countries. By the definition of the 1996 World Food Summit, food security exists when “all people at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy and active life” (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). The global free-trade regime that was shaped over the decades following World War II was seen by its advocates as the solution to the problem of access. By this logic unfettered trade enables the free flow of foods from producers to consumers, without having to produce all foods domestically. Japan’s competitive advantage in the world economy, founded on high added-value industries, should place it in a good position to this end. Moreover, as an advanced industrialised economy with scant primary resources, Japan has been highly dependent on trade both for export of its manufactures and import of raw materials, particularly in food, whereby Japan is the world’s largest net importer of food (WTO, 2009b). Consequently, Japan has been a strong supporter of international free trade regimes, notably the WTO. For example, Japan strongly opposed the erection of trade barriers in the form of rice export bans by Southeast Asian countries to shore up domestic food supplies in the 2008 food crisis (WTO, 2009a, p. 10; MoFA, 2009).

Yet Japan parts ways with the WTO on its understanding of food security. In Japan, discussions of food security are always about food self-sufficiency. In defining food security the WTO starts from the World Food Summit definition, but then adds a sentence: “‘Food security’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ are not the same and a key debate is whether policies aiming for self-sufficiency help or hinder food security” (WTO, n.d.). Differences in definitions of food security reflect different policy positions. Japan laid a strong claim to framing the food security question when, in the lead-up to the World Food Summit held in the FAO’s headquarters in Rome, it hosted, in collaboration with the FAO, the International Conference on the Sustainable Contribution of Fisheries to Food Security. With over five hundred participants the conference yielded the Kyoto Declaration and Plan of Action On the Sustainable Contribution of Fisheries to Food Security (Fisheries Agency, 1995), which gave prominence to the understanding of food security as self-sufficiency, by means of the concept of sustainability.[[4]](#footnote-4)

How does a traditional proponent and beneficiary of free trade regimes, which is highly dependent on world trade, arrive at a position where trade protection is defensible policy? In this paper we show how Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality offers a conceptual framework for accounting for this singular combination of being open to world markets while also protecting domestic industries that characterises Japan’s food security policies, particularly in the area of fisheries. Foucault (2007) coined the concept in his 1977-1978 Lecture at the College de France as a counterpart to “sovereignty”, in order to capture the new forms of state-market relationships in which the modern state was increasingly involved. “Governmentality” is a broadly writ concept for the wide range of modes of thought and practices permeating late capitalist societies that are that are primarily geared towards enhancing the population’s productive capacities, as a key resource in the capitalist production system.

In the first part of the paper we theorise food security within the terms of Michel Foucault’s conceptual framework. We illustrate how, more than similar policies designed to support national competitiveness on the world scale, food security represents the archetypal governmental objective of the modern state. In the second part of the paper we trace a history of food security in Japan in the fisheries sector, particularly the role of state support of domestic production, using governmentality as an explanatory framework. We find there are entrenched interests in government and industry for government support for Japanese fisheries and consider whether the politics of these interest groups is a sufficient explanation for Japan’s approach to food security. We find that the Japanese approach to food security extends beyond the national government, being visible in public opinion on issues as varied as the protection of national culture, rural social stability and coastal environmental stewardship. We also find the approach articulated in Japan’s international relations beyond its food trade policy, in its official development assistance (ODA) and other forms of diplomacy.

**Between Sovereignty and Governmentality: Framing Food Security**

Michel Foucault coined the concept of governmentality in his 1977-1978 Lecture at the College de France *Security, Territory Population* (2007). He takes as a starting point for his historical enquiry the state’s obligation to secure a territory for its population. The provision of security, Foucault finds, is the founding obligation of sovereignty, still defined by way of its two attributes, possession of a territory and a population. This security obligation set the terms within which “sovereignty” has been theorised by Machiavelli onwards since its emergence in the Renaissance. It is to break beyond the limits of “sovereignty” thus conceived that Foucault coined the concept of governmentality, finding that there was much more to the contemporary neoliberal state taking shape in the late twentieth century (the backdrop against which Foucault was theorizing) than was encapsulated in theories of sovereignty. He thus offered the concept of “governmentality” as counterpart to “sovereignty” to bring to light the expanding range of domains and new forms of power in which the contemporary state had become increasingly involved, and that were largely obscured by a focus on sovereignty alone.

It is noteworthy that in developing his concept Foucault identified markets for food as a key site for the development of the modern state and liberal capitalism (Foucault, 2007, especially pp. 51-71, 443-55). Revolutions in Europe made rulers aware of the political importance of riots caused by high prices for grain. Moreover, during the mercantilist era food markets were seen as important because low grain prices enabled low wages, facilitating the export of manufactures and imports of gold. Then both mercantilism and attempts to control supplies of grain were discredited by political economists who found that markets operated according to underlying principles that tended to set food prices at the right level for increasing national wealth as long as state attempts to control markets did not block the operation of these principles. The freedom of trade between countries thus entered government rationalities. Another important realisation was that low prices were not necessarily in the national interest, because alongside urban consumers, rural producers also needed to be kept content and productive. Letting the markets unfold, it was soon realised, shifted the price to the optimum level for the good of both urban and rural populations. Governments therefore reoriented their policies from controlling markets to enabling them.

Governmentality thus captures a trajectory of the modern state, which, as European territorial boundaries were increasingly settled, began to reach beyond the traditional remit of sovereignty (the securing of a territory and a population), and into the very fabric of society itself. The term captures the state’s progressive penetration into the economy at large, and the new forms of knowledge that developed accordingly (notably political economy). Hence “governmentality” evokes a historical process characteristic of the modern era that has yielded the contemporary neoliberal state, a state intimately bound up with markets. Michel Foucault thus posed sovereignty and governmentality as the conceptual poles framing the range of the neoliberal state’s activities.

The advantage of Foucault’s conceptualisation lies in the way he continues to foreground the centrality of sovereignty and the associated themes of security and territory in the operation of the neoliberal governmental state.[[5]](#footnote-5) There is a large body of work devoted to the topic of openness in world trade. Ever since it has been recognised, in the wake of Karl Polyani’s (1944) *The* *Great Transformation,* that economic activity is always socially embedded, International Political Economy (IPE) scholarship has analysed the multiple and varied accommodations that states have made with markets in different contexts; whether in the embedded liberalism strand (Ruggie, 1982), the literature on the competition state (Cerny, 1997), economic nationalism (Clift and Woll, 2012), the cultural political economy approach (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008), regulation theory (Boyer, 2005), the varieties of capitalism approach (Hall and Soskice, 2001), and, in the case of Japan specifically, the developmentalist state literature (Johnson, 1995). We find, however, that governmentality lends itself to theorising food security more aptly than other approaches that have examined how states negotiate the contradictory pulls between opening their economies to and protecting them from world markets. Food security mobilises both sovereignty and governmentality. Towards the sovereignty pole, it accounts for the framing of the issue area in terms of security, because it illuminates a state that continues to cater to its traditional sovereignty obligations to secure a population against, in this case, insufficient food supplies within the territory. Towards the governmentality pole, food as an area of governmental intervention constitutes both a productive sector of the economy in its own right, and one that hails more fundamentally the chief purpose of governmentality, enhancing the population’s productive capacities.

More than other areas of state intervention, food security policies go to the heart of the governmental state and the new form of politics it set in motion, *biopolitics*, that is, where the entire orientation of state activity (including policy making) is dedicated to enabling life and its productive capacities. Food security exemplifies governmentality as a mode of rule that, to use Aihwa Ong’s words “harnesses and extracts life forces” according to “principles of discipline, efficiency and competitiveness” (Ong, 2006, pp. 4, 13) insofar as its target enables life itself. Being central to the population’s vitality, food security is closely bound up with *biopower*, the power to enhance life, the specific modality of power associated with governmentality.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Governmentality as an approach to the study of society has also significantly broadened the question of “who governs”. By encompassing everything from the dispositions and outlooks of the governed to the regulatory and institutional mechanisms through which they are governed, governmentality calls into question public-private and state-market binaries. As Tim Luke underlines:

The notion of governmentality invites social theorists (…) not to reduce the complicated ensemble of modernising developments to the actions of “the state” [but instead] to investigate the “governmentalisation” of the economy and society (Luke, 1995, p. 27; see also Ferguson [1994]).

Governmentality draws out a series of continua rather than breaks between state and non-state practices, public and private institutions. This part of the concept is particularly useful in explaining Japanese approaches to food security in fisheries.

**The Role of Fish in the Modernisation of Japan: The Rise of Japanese Fisheries**

As a densely populated island country, Japan has historically turned to the sea as a key source of protein. The eating of four-legged animals was banned by the government from 675 CE, largely for religious reasons. Although the ban was lifted in the 1860s, cultural patterns and the economics of raising animals for food meant consumption of animals other than chicken or fish remained low for another century. Japanese fisheries were thus an integral part of plans for the modernisation and industrialisation of Japan, for eliminating the famines that occurred in some areas and for coping with problems caused by accompanying urbanisation, particularly preventing the impoverishment of rural communities. In the late 1800s the Japanese government responded to this problem with a policy of redistribution to rural areas of wealth generated by industrialisation in urban areas (Francks, 2006); a policy that has continued ever since (Mulgan, 2000). In this context domestic fisheries were important for building food supplies, and for providing income for rural communities. As urbanisation, industrialisation and population growth increased the demand for food, however, domestic fisheries were soon insufficient.

In the decades preceding World War II various countries, including Japan, saw autarky in resources as necessary for their security. The Japanese government was not content to leave the supply of resources up to world markets, but actively guided and supported its resource industries to promote production and supply. Japanese fishing companies were encouraged by government to innovate technologically so as to increase production, and were also encouraged to expand their operations outside Japan (“distant water” fisheries). Japanese fisheries companies moved into fishing grounds in neighbouring countries and eventually down into Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands region as part of the strategy for supplying the empire with resources.[[7]](#footnote-7) The legislative framework was the Meiji-era Fisheries Promotion Act (1897). Early initiatives included the financial support for technological developments in ship-building, such as installing engines (1903), refrigeration equipment (1907), and radios (1918) (Fujinami, 1987).

Japanese government support of industries has mostly taken place through a layer of affiliated organisations (*gaikaku dantai*) that sit between ministries and the industries they govern. Bureaucrats, who are very powerful relative to politicians in the Japanese government (Mulgan, 2002), direct government intervention in the economy, including through “administrative guidance” (Amyx, 2003). Administrative guidance and the funnelling of public funds to industry are conducted through the *gaikaku dantai* organisations. These may be special, public, and chartered corporations that engage in public works or financial services for particular sectors, or may indeed be industry associations. The organisations are directly managed and subsidised by ministries in relation to the sectors under their portfolio. There are thousands of these types of organisations in Japan and vast amounts of public money flows through them (Carpenter, 2003).

In fisheries the key *gaikaku dantai* have included bodies such as the Japan Fisheries Association (established 1882) and the Fisheries Cooperative Associations (their forerunner was given fishing rights to allocate to industry under the Fisheries Law in 1901). Rather than being managed and run by industry people, in the *gaikaku dantai* system industry organisations were established by government, have been funded by government, and their senior positions have been filled by former bureaucrats, politicians and members of the imperial family. The functions of these organisations have included activities that might in other countries be done by government, such as regulation of fisheries.[[8]](#footnote-8) They have also included functions that might normally be done by the private sector, such as human resources and payroll services for fishing companies, and acting as agents for distant water vessels in foreign ports, and as such they constitute a form of subsidy. Other kinds of subsidised services provided to fisheries through *gaikaku dantai* included pension funds, insurance against vessel damage/loss and poor catches, and various kinds of financial services from basic banking to high risk venture capital.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The fisheries *gaikaku dantai* system continued to develop after Japan’s defeat in 1945. When the Allied forces occupied Japan they were confronted with an economy devastated by war. There were severe food shortages for several years. Not only was Japan’s domestic food production and distribution system in disarray, the colonial food production Japan had been relying on for several decades was gone. Considering the limited supply of arable land, fisheries were key to fulfilling Japan’s protein needs. Japan’s fishing fleet had played a strategic role in Japan’s military expansion, thus in the initial post-war period the Allied forces banned Japanese fishing interests from venturing outside Japan. But as it became clear that Japanese coastal fisheries production would not produce enough to meet the country’s dietary needs, and as Japan’s position in the Cold War became more important, the US-led Allied occupation administration reversed this policy. Indeed the US came to have the same view as the pre-war Japanese leaders; that self-sufficiency was important for Japan’s food security, and that government support for the industry, including support for its operation outside Japanese waters, was necessary to achieve this goal (Smith, 2008). General MacArthur thus encouraged the re-establishment of a national whaling industry, funded with US capital (Epstein, 2008). When the Allied occupation ended in 1952 Japanese leaders continued policies of administrative guidance and support for the sector, along similar lines to the pre-war period. With the recovery of the Japanese economy and government encouragement, fisheries production grew to a peak in 1964 when Japanese production exceeded domestic seafood consumption (Hayes, 2010).

As well as domestic production and Japanese distant water fisheries, the Japanese government has also sought to achieve food security through diversifying supplies from overseas. Since the post-war era much of this project has been conducted through the provision of fisheries aid and technical assistance to developing countries (Tarte, 1998). One main source of government support for developing overseas sources of supply has been the Overseas Fishery Cooperation Foundation (OFCF), a *gaikaku dantai* run by the Fisheries Agency of the MAFF. The OFCF funds technical experts to go out and work in seafood production outside Japan, including in developing countries, and sponsors people working in fisheries and fisheries management to come to Japan for training. It also offers low interest loans for the development of overseas seafood industries and in this endeavour has supported Japanese companies to develop food-producing ventures. For example, seafood giant Maruha was involved from the early 1970s to 2000 in a skipjack fishing and processing venture Solomon Taiyo in the Solomon Islands. This company was majority owned by the Solomon Islands government, but was also a part of Maruha’s overseas operations branch, and was an important source of product for Maruha in fulfilling its trading contracts with UK buyers such as Sainsbury’s. It also constituted one of the main imported sources of *katsuobushi*[[10]](#footnote-10) for the Japanese market. OFCF provided several millions of dollars (US) worth of low interest loans to Maruha for developing the Solomon Taiyo factory in the early 1990s (Barclay, 2008). OFCF assistance thus encouraged overseas production to supply the Japanese market, both by foreign companies and by Japanese seafood companies operating transnationally.

From the 1970s Japanese fisheries encountered problems to do with oil price rises, the beginning of territorial enclosure of the seas through the declaration of 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zones under the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea, and competitiveness problems against cheaper production locations (Barclay, forthcoming). Various forms of subsidy were put in place to try to halt the decline of Japanese fisheries (Campbell and Nicholl, 1994; Fujinami, 1987; Bergin and Haward, 1996; Kagoshima Prefecture Skipjack and Tuna Fisheries Association, 2000). Nevertheless Japanese fisheries production has continued to decline, especially since the 1990s. Compounding the lack of competitiveness against imports from cheaper production locations, as Japan’s wealth has grown, the Japanese workforce has chosen not to enter physically demanding, low-status fields such as fishing. In the absence of an immigrant community willing to step into the breach there is a severe workforce shortage (Hori, 1996; Government of Japan, c.2003; Hayes, 2010). From 1972-1988 Japan was the world’s largest fisheries producer by volume. Since the 1990s China and Peru have exceeded Japanese fisheries output (Government of Japan, c.2003). Japanese production continues to fall and many see Japanese fisheries as being in a “terminal decline” (Biggs, Matsuyama and Balfour, 2011).

With the reduction in domestic production, Japan has come to rely more heavily on seafood imports. In 2002 Japan was the leading importer of fishery commodities, importing to the value of USD13.6 billion (thousand million). In that year the next biggest importer was the USA with about USD10 billion and the next biggest was Spain with around USD3.8 billion (WTO, 2005). Japan’s fishery product imports have decreased slightly in volume since then, and in 2005 China overtook Japan as the world’s largest importer of fishery products (FAO Fishstat data cited in Government of Japan, 2010, p. 11).

In the 2010 White Paper on Fisheries increasing Japan’s self-sufficiency in seafood is listed as one of the top policies, and concerns about supplies of fishery products are raised several times throughout the document (Government of Japan, 2010). The Japanese government enacted The Basic Law of *Shokuiku* (Food Education) in 2005. The rationales for the law and the policies flowing from it targeting agricultural and fisheries production include “over-dependency on food from abroad” (MAFF, c.2005). Masayuki Komatsu, a prominent fisheries commentator and former senior bureaucrat in MAFF who has led Japan’s country delegations to the International Whaling Commission and the international bodies that manage tuna resources globally, says:

Japan cannot continue simply relying on imported food. Can we afford as a country to be dependent on others, such as the United States or Australia, for our basic foods? Will we always have enough precious dollars to import what we need? It is the answer to these questions that should tell you why I firmly believe that we need to become more self-sufficient for reasons of our national health and at the most basic level, to guarantee the supply of food to our people (Smith, 2004).

These concerns with both self-sufficiency and production have been compounded by the recent effects of the tsunami and radiation contamination from the Fukushima power plant in 2011. The Pacific coast north of Tokyo is the location of many of Japan’s fisheries, such as the port of Kesennuma, one of the ten largest fishing ports in Japan. Vessels, ports, market areas and processing plants were all ravaged by the tsunami. Kesennuma’s fish market was planning to partially re-open in June 2011 but according to the local Fisheries Cooperative Association and local politicians, central government assistance is necessary for long term reconstruction, and that reconstruction is necessary to prevent a large-scale outflux of workers (Biggs, Matsuyama and Balfour, 2011). Fisheries *gaikaku dantai* have been assisting fishing ports like Kesennuma ever since the disaster struck, at first with food and medical supplies, but they also aim to continue to support the industry to rebuild (OPRT, 2011). This devastation has reinforced the Japanese government’s commitment to its long-term policy of supporting rural food producing communities. It has already proposed the start of a series of aid packages for the regions most affected by the earthquake, and the fishing industry will be one of the beneficiaries (Biggs, Matsuyama and Balfour, 2011). This catastrophic natural disaster brings out in the starkest fashion that, in addition to the organisational dimension of the governmental state regarding markets, the modern state’s biopolitical imperative is to sustain life.

Whether the policies Japan has pursued in the fisheries sector have successfully secured the maximum amount of fish for the nation; or whether this might have been better achieved through a different policy mix (including more openness to international trade), is an important empirical question, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper’s concern is with the underlying rationale with which Japan has framed, justified, and garnered support for its food security policies.

**Government Support for Domestic Fisheries Production: Just Institutional Capture?**

The modern Japanese state is well known for intervening in the economy. The first wave of literature accounting for the Japanese state’s extensive involvement in markets emphasised the role of bureaucrats motivated by national interest (Johnson, 1995). A more recent strand of analysis, however, has pointed to evidence that bureaucrats have been motivated by personal gain or the gain of their group within government, and for the economic development of some groups ahead of others rather than for the nation as a whole (Mulgan, 2005; Hein, 1994). It should be asked, therefore, whether the Japanese government position on support for domestic fish production in the name of food security is in fact a manifestation of Japanese governmentality for the national good, or is instead a case of institutional capture of the national government agenda on food security by those with vested interests in continued government support for fisheries. Institutional capture usually refers to the capture of government institutions by an interest group outside government. As we have seen, however, in Japan interests come to be aligned between industries and the parts of government with jurisdiction over them. In this case, therefore, the interest group is made up of both government and industry actors.

The *gaikaku dantai* system outlined above clearly contains much scope for pursuing personal and group interests in the name of the national interest. Most fisheries are based in rural areas, and it has been well documented that the Liberal Democratic Party (which was in power continuously from 1955-1993 and 1994-2009) made use of public spending in rural areas to shore up its electoral base (Mulgan, 2000; DeWit and Yamazaki, 2004).[[11]](#footnote-11) Aurelia George Mulgan (2005) has argued convincingly that bureaucrats overseeing food production under MAFF have acted to protect their sphere of influence in industry and the size of budget they control through the *gaikaku dantai.* They thus engage in intervention in the economy specifically to maximise and defend the order that benefits them collectively (as a ministry, and as agencies within the ministry) and individually. A study in a similar vein explains Japan’s whaling policy by Fisheries Agency bureaucrats building and guarding their “turf” in terms of sphere of influence and budgetary allocation for the scientific whaling program (Ishii and Okubo, 2007). MAFF officials have been involved in several scandals about the misuse of government money and taxpayer-funded initiatives for personal gain (Amyx and Drysdale, 2003; Mulgan, 2003, pp. 171-74).

As might be expected, industry interests are closely tied to the status quo of government support for fisheries. For example, many of the distant water tuna fishing companies in Japan receive heavily subsidised loans through the *gaikaku dantai*, and thus feel unable to speak out against policies with which they disagree (Hori, 1996). Also, industry groups are managed by former bureaucrats (Barclay and Koh, 2008). Businesses who disagree with their industry groups fear retribution both from the ministry (for example, withholding of licenses) and from the group (for example, a boycott by other group members) (Carpenter, 2003). The *gaikaku dantai* system has thus served to very strongly entrench particular sectoral interests in the established system of government support of food producing industries.

Institutional capture is indeed at work here. It is undeniable that ideas on food security have been used by sectoral interests to justify policies that benefit themselves. We argue, however, that this is only a partial explanation for the Japanese position on food security. The population at large generally agrees with MAFF’s conception of food security. A government opinion poll found that in 2010 86 per cent of people surveyed were anxious about being able to import food in the future and 91 per cent felt food self-sufficiency should be increased (MAFF, 2010).[[12]](#footnote-12) This perception is reflected in consumer movements from across the political spectrum. Members of non-government organisation Consumers Japan (*Shōdanren*), whose Secretary General Ms Hisa Anan openly advocates abandoning the lethal scientific whaling program, feel the prevailing level of food self-sufficiency of around 40 per cent is too low, and that a rate of 80 per cent or higher would be more appropriate.[[13]](#footnote-13) Food self-sufficiency is a central concern of the Consumers Union of Japan (*Nishōren*), a participant in the World Social Forum.[[14]](#footnote-14) From a more nationalist perspective the consumer group Women’s Forum for Fish (WFF) was started by pro-whaling activist Yuriko Shiraishi in 1993 because she felt Japan was vulnerable due to its low self-sufficiency in seafood (Shiraishi, 1999). While MAFF communication strategies to promote its protectionist policies have no doubt played a role in this broad consensus, there are also other reasons so many Japanese people feel as they do about food security.

Dependence on imports is a common media discourse in Japan. It is both expressive of food security concerns amongst the public and helps to reproduce them (Bestor, 1999, p. 167). The rise of the governmental state and the history of food security in Japan during the twentieth century help explain the general consensus that self-sufficiency in food is an important goal for government, and that consumers should side with producers in a joint effort working towards this goal. This has meant that consumers have been willing to pay much higher than the world price for rice (MAFF, 2010), and are happy for their taxes to be used to support Japanese producers (Maclachlan, 2004).

Japanese whaling policy also illustrates the limits of the institutional capture explanation. A narrow focus on bureaucratic interests underplays the extent of the cost of pursuing national whaling policies, both financially and in terms of damage to Japan’s international reputation. The persistent pursuit of whaling policies notwithstanding such costs is instead the expression of a much wider consensus, both amongst the government and the population over a long period of time; explicitly in terms of “food security”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Entwined with the concern about access to food and doubt that world markets can be relied on to deliver this, is a concern about cultural preferences in food, and whether globalisation will destroy local food cultures. Food is a prominent part of culture at all levels in Japanese society. It is used as a marker of cultural identity, and government support for fisheries is widely seen as legitimate because of the need to preserve cultural heritage in certain food production areas (Bestor, 2004; 1999, Epstein, 2003). “Fish food culture” – the arts of fishing, preparing and consuming fish – is seen by many as an essential part of being Japanese. One way this identity is performed is through representing Japan as having a fish food culture as opposed to the “meat food culture” of the West (Bestor, 1999; Hirata, 2004). The sense that the West opposes Japanese fish food culture is bolstered by representations of Japan “guzzling” excessive amounts of endangered species of fish (Renton, 2005), and recurrent depictions in the widespread and well entrenched anti-whaling discourse of Japanese practices of whaling and dolphin fishing as barbaric (see Epstein, 2008).[[16]](#footnote-16)

In the wake of the rise of the global sustainable development discourse in the 1990s, the Japanese government’s support for fisheries production is increasingly bound up with notions of social and environmental sustainability in rural coastal areas. Foucauldian scholars have analysed extensively the ways in which concepts of sustainability and environmental issues more broadly directly mobilise the biopolitical functions of the governmental state, in that they go to the heart of its life-enabling imperative.[[17]](#footnote-17) That is, in terms of both the well-being of its population and everything that sustains it, including biological and ecosystemic capacity (Darier, 1999; Luke, 1999; 1995). Even though MAFF polices have exacerbated overfishing (such as allowing the Japanese fleet to over catch southern bluefin tuna for many years), and MAFF use of the term sustainability may be viewed cynically as an attempt to legitimise practices protecting sectoral and/or national interests, the way MAFF frames this taps into a deeper governmentality rationale. This is visible in the way MAFF addresses the issue of on-going support for fishing and other food producing communities. For example, the driving concept of the 2010 White Paper on Fisheries is a holistic notion of sustainability, including environmental conservation as well as social and cultural reproduction. A brief exposition of the idea is followed by a diagram “compiled by the Fisheries Agency based on a report by the Science Council of Japan” showing a piece of land from mountains in the background down to coast in the foreground, with farming land, residential areas, factories and fisheries (Government of Japan, 2010, p. 7). The landscape is dotted with labels showing the functions of human activities as well as those of the natural landscape. For example, tidelands and seaweed beds are labelled “water purification” and “eco-system services”. A fishing vessel is labelled “providing opportunities for exchanges”, “inheriting traditional culture, including traditional fishing methods”, “fishing to complement nitrogen and phosphate cycles” and “marine salvage, border surveillance, disaster relief, marine environmental monitoring”. This framing of fishing communities puts fishing activities, as well as the other activities in which fishing people engage in their localities, as being important not only in terms of food production for the nation, but also as important for culinary cultural heritage, the maintenance of rural communities, and conservation of the environment. The support of rural communities is also a central motivation for the continuance of whaling (Epstein, 2008). These arguments as to why Japanese people should want fishing communities to thrive have proven persuasive. A survey run by MAFF in 2009 found the public felt the top four roles of fisheries included “supply of food to people” (95.2 per cent), “eco-system conservation” (66.9 per cent), “inheritance of traditional culture, including traditional fishing methods” (55.9 per cent), and “water purification and marine environment conservation” (47.7 per cent) (Government of Japan, 2010). Other arguments about the positive sustainability effects of local production relate to the problem of carbon emissions and the “food miles” in imports (Mashimo, 2009; Hasegawa, c.2010).

This alignment of norms about government support for food production across government and society, a key characteristic of governmentality, has been actively promoted by interested stakeholders. In a report on a MAFF-sponsored symposium on world food security held in 2009 participants (a mix of industry, non-profit and non-government organisations, government and *gaikaku dantai* organisations, academia and the media) agreed that it was important for the Japanese public to “have a sense of crisis on their vulnerability” regarding the food situation (MAFF, 2009). The Fisheries Agency has engaged in a public communication strategy to promote the idea that whaling is in the national interest, at first through a discourse that whaling was important nutritionally (food security). Later, as the economy recovered and the level of consumption of whale meat fell to a tiny proportion of people’s daily diet (most Japanese people do not eat whale from one year to the next), the strategy has been to show that the international ban on whaling constitutes cultural imperialism on the part of the Western non-whale-eating powers and is thus an attack on the cultural traditions of Japan. International disputes about whaling have since come to be understood in these terms by the Japanese public (Ishii and Okubo, 2007; Hirata, 2004).

The fact that the Japanese approach to food security extends beyond MAFF, therefore, does not disprove the existence of institutional capture because MAFF has spread these ideas through communication campaigns. Nevertheless, it would be too deterministic to say these campaigns are the only reason the approach is so pervasive. The concern to protect domestic production is credible enough, in the context of Japanese governmentality, to resonate throughout society. Japan is exposed to world food markets, and empirically these markets fail from time to time. Japan has had food shortages within living memory. Rural communities are in crisis, and coastal environments are degraded (in part due to fishing activities). Japanese food culture has been subject to cultural imperialism by some Western anti-whaling commentators. Without denying the play of institutional capture, we therefore argue that more is at stake in Japan’s approach to food security, and here the concept of governmentality sheds some useful light. This is relevant for questions of policy-reform broached by the literature on institutional capture. If it were just institutional capture then restructuring MAFF and its use of public money through *gaikaku dantai* would be the way to deal with it. If, as we argue, it is governmentality, then the approach permeates more deeply into a range of institutions, and change would require broad scale shifts in understandings about the role of government in the economy, the reliability of markets in providing public goods, national food culture, and how best to govern rural coastal areas, not only within government but throughout society.

**Japan’s Approach to Food Security in the International Sphere**

The Japanese approach to food security – understood as requiring government support for domestic producers to ensure some measure of self-sufficiency – is deeply entrenched in Japanese governmentality. In the international sphere, however, prevailing governmentalities, sustained by organisations like the WTO, posit free trade as the best way to secure food supplies. Furthermore, in the international sphere food security is usually understood as a problem for low income and developing countries rather than wealthy countries like Japan. In this section we consider the diplomatic dimension of the Japanese governmental state’s strategies to promote its approach to food security in the international sphere.

Japan has taken a leadership role in convening international meetings on food security, and thus helped shape the international debate in ways that promote Japanese perspectives on food security. Fisheries are a key source of protein for many of the world’s poorest communities. With declining productivity in many of the world’s fisheries due to overfishing and other human effects on the marine environment, fisheries are at the centre of concerns about food security. In addition to the internationally-important issues addressed by Japanese diplomacy, however, the ways some of these issues are framed also promote the Japanese national approach to food security. One is the prominence of the word “sustainable” in the title of the Declaration and Plan of Action On the Sustainable Contribution of Fisheries to Food Security. That fisheries should be pursued sustainably is an unarguable point. However, in Japanese discourse, “sustainability” is explicitly bound up with food self-sufficiency, as we have seen.

The understanding of food production as more than just an economic activity but one that must be considered in conjunction with its social, political and environmental outcomes was followed up in the Japanese address to the World Food Summit in 1996 by the then Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Takao Fujimoto:

[T]he promotion of domestic production will facilitate the full deployment of the multiple functions of agriculture other than food production… we believe that in order to achieve food security, it is particularly important for each country to produce domestically at least its basic food and to pursue sustainable agriculture and rural development (WFS, 2006).

The Japanese government has continued to give prominence to the ideal of sustainable production in pronouncements on food security for developing countries. In 2009 Japan hosted an international roundtable on Promoting Responsible International Investment in Agriculture, in conjunction with the FAO and several other prominent intergovernmental organisations. At this meeting food production was described by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) as something involving “political stability, social cohesion, human security, sustainable food production, household food security, and environmental protection”. It was hoped the workshop would “promote responsible investment in agriculture that will achieve sustainable and inclusive agricultural development” (MoFA, 2009). In the same year MAFF held a domestic symposium on world food security, in which the Senior Vice-Minister spoke about the importance of “sustainable agriculture and the improvement of the food production in developing countries” (MAFF, 2009).

In addition to speaking up on how food security is defined internationally, Japan has also furthered its approach to food security through its Official Development Assistance (ODA) program. Supporting food production in overseas countries, including developing ones, has been one of the key strategies of Japan’s handling of international sources of food supply since the demise of its empire. For example, as a result of Japan’s experience of the 1973 US soybean export embargo, Japan sought to diversify its soybean supplies, including through its ODA. One of the areas it focussed on was soybean production in the Cerrado region of Brazil, which significantly increased production (MoFA, 2009), giving Japan another stable source of supply for this staple. In his address to the World Food Summit in 1996 Fujimoto noted the contributions Japan makes to food security through its ODA (WFS, 2006). Comparatively Japan has not had a large percentage of GDP devoted to aid, but because the size of its economy has been so large since the 1980s it has in absolute terms been one of the largest aid donors over the past few decades. At the time of the World Food Summit Japan was the largest ODA donor country. Japan has long been a big fisheries aid donor. As well as the Overseas Fishery Cooperation Foundation (OFCF) initiatives noted earlier, which are deployed worldwide to support fisheries production that may supply the Japanese market, the Japanese government has also been a long-time sponsor of small-scale coastal subsistence and livelihood fisheries in low income and developing countries. In the Pacific Islands region Japan has since the 1970s provided on-going support for coastal fisheries supplying local markets in terms of ice machines, vessels, extension services for fishery techniques, and wharf and market infrastructure (Barclay and Cartwright, 2007; Tarte, 1998).

This is not to say that Japanese policies have always delivered outcomes in line with its vision of sustainability in food security. Increased soybean production in Brazil has been linked to deforestation. Japanese fleets have overfished as much as those of any other country, and Japan continues to be the main market for overfished bluefin tuna stocks. The Japanese position on food security is a complex mix of practices and discourses that include narrow sectoral interests, national self-interest, and mutual interest with humanity at large. These ideas about food security have traction because, however instrumentally they may have been used by some actors, the ideas themselves are credibly in the public interest, and capture the concerns of many people beyond those cynically benefiting from practices carried out in the name of those ideas. In other words, they tap into deeper governmentality rationales underpinning the modern Japanese state.

Japan has thus for several decades indicated through its ODA budget, and the overseas activities of *gaikaku dantai* organisations such as the OFCF, that it takes food production very seriously as an issue for low income and developing countries. Japan’s approach to food security, juggling reliance on world markets with protection of domestic production, is woven throughout various aspects of Japan’s international relations. Japan’s leadership role both as a major ODA donor in food sectors and as a host of international meetings about food security puts it in a position to promote this dual agenda of making sure food exports are free and functioning smoothly, while also protecting domestic production from global competition.

**Conclusion**

The Japanese approach to food security goes to the heart of Japanese governmentality. Food production is seen as central to the state’s role vis-à-vis the population. The promotion of free international trade while also protecting domestic production is broadly seen as the “right” way to do food policy within government circles and throughout society. Because of its focus on productive capacity the concept of governmentality could also be usefully applied in analyses of energy security, and also for the broader concept of human security. The significance of understanding the Japanese approach to food security in this way is that it highlights how the approach is entrenched through a range of apparently unrelated institutions and areas as different as whaling and tuna fishing. This means a change to the approach could not occur simply through altering policies on trade barriers and subsidies to food producers, or breaking up the entrenched interests in continued protection between government and food producers. Such a change would involve a fundamental rethinking of government obligations to the population regarding food as a whole – as a physical necessity subject to failures in world markets, as the foundation of rural economies, and as a valued part of national culture. It would also require a rethinking of Japanese diplomacy regarding food, including its overseas development assistance. For changes in food policy to have a receptive environment, changes would need to occur in popular understandings of the way food production and food security *should* be done.

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1. This paper was much improved by helpful comments from Shiro Armstrong, Graeme Smith and Peter Drysdale, as well as two anonymous reviewers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Our point here is not to engage in whether such a defense of whaling is spurious (which it no doubt is) but rather to draw attention to the extent to the extent to which food security has permeated the framing of Japanese fisheries policies. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Members of the Friends of Fish group include Argentina, Australia, Chile, Colombia, New Zealand, Norway, Iceland, Pakistan, Peru, and the USA. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Centrally, in the Kyoto Action Plan the notion of ‘sustainability’ enables the emphasis to be placed on the *production* of food (in this case, fish) rather than on *trade* as a source for securing the provision of foodstuffs. Moreover, ‘sustainability’ is also arguably a red flag with regards to the WTO, given the latter’s poor environmental record and its perceived role in forcing through free trade at the expense of national environmental protection initiatives. Lastly, historically tensions between the FAO and the WTO are not new. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hitherto we use “neoliberal” and “governmental” state interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In his lecture Foucault (2007) shows how the state’s increasing involvement in fuelling and funneling the accumulation of riches called for new forms of power, where power was no longer exercised as top-down expression of sovereign power (the power to kill) but rather bottom-up, productive power to enable and enhance the population’s own productive capacities, such as discipline (which is exercised over the individual) and biopower (which targets the population as a whole). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more expansive analysis of the role of fisheries in Japan’s imperial expansion see: Koh and Barclay (2007); Chen (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Japanese system of fisheries regulation is thus famous for being an effective and efficient form of ‘co-management’ (Makino and Matsuda, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a more expansive discussion of *gaikaku dantai* in fisheries see Barclay and Koh (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Katsuobushi* – smoke-dried and mould-cured skipjack – is a widely used condiment and flavoring in Japanese cuisine. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a case study of public spending on tuna fisheries being used for political ends see Barclay and Koh (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The source does not reveal the design of the survey, which could have been constructed to elicit such an emphatic result. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Interview by Kate Barclay and Koh Sunhui with *Shōdanren* (“Consumers Japan”) members Toshiko Kanda, Yasue Itō and Takako Hasuo, Tokyo, May 2003. Since 1998 Japan’s self-sufficiency ratio in food calculated on a calorie basis using the Food Balance Sheet method has been around 40 per cent, the lowest among wealthy countries. South Korea is under 50 per cent, Switzerland between 50 and 60 per cent, Australia is over 200 per cent, France and the USA are both over 120 per cent (Hasegawa, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As evidenced by its website, which features includes papers such as ‘To What Level Could Japan’s Food Self-Sufficiency Recover?’ (Mashimo, 2009) under the ‘Food Security’ tab. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Epstein (2008) for an extensive development of this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A well-known example of this kind of representation is the award-winning documentary *The Cove*, directed by Louie Psihoyos. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Once again we are setting aside the question whether this is done most efficiently: even if this is done less efficiently than other mix of policies would do it, it still sustains the life-enhancing goals of governmentality. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)