

Ocean, Empire and Nation: Japanese Fisheries Politics¹

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Introduction

Water has been as important as land in Japanese senses of self and belonging in relation to place. Scholar Amino Yoshihiko has proposed that ways of life revolving around the sea were at least as influential as wet rice agriculture in the historical development of Japanese cultures, and that Japanese people should be understood as being ‘sea folk’ (*kaimin*) (Amino 1994). Other scholars who have contributed to this field include Tanabe Satoru, who wrote of ‘sea people’ (*kaijin*), who proposes that the coastal peoples of Japan shared a common culture with coastal peoples in areas we now call China, Korea and Taiwan (Tanabe 1990: Habara 1949). This *kaijin* culture was based on shared experiences of lives lived on or near the sea; involving fishing, travel, trade and piracy. Marcia Yanemoto (1999) has written of Japanese imaginaries of the world in the Tokugawa era (1608-1868) through to the early modern era being made up of a “complex web of regional and global connections” across the seas.

This chapter focuses on the modern era, showing how Japanese ideas of maritime sovereign rights evolved through imperial expansion, defeat in war, Japan’s postwar re-emergence as a world fishing power, development of the United Nations Law of the Sea, and finally Japan’s declining status as a fishing power. The Japanese empire was in many ways a naval and fishing empire. Using the protection afforded by Japan’s military, Japanese fishing interests came to see the Asia Pacific region as their territory in terms of resource

exploitation. Defeat in war did not rupture this sense of entitlement. Rather, entitlement to fisheries resources was seen as belonging to those with a history of using those resources, as opposed to being a sovereign right within the waters 200 nautical miles out from coastlines, which was the version of entitlement that came to be internationally accepted through the Law of the Sea in the 1970s and 1980s. Understanding this history helps explain Japan's position in contemporary international fisheries negotiations. The second half of the chapter then explores the implied role of the ocean in contemporary Japanese identities through economic and cultural nationalism in representations of fisheries and fish food culture.

History of Japanese Distant Water Fisheries

Japan's modern industrial fishing industries started during the Meiji era (1868-1912). The Meiji government had a mission to match European powers of the time by modernizing, building military strength, and building a colonial empire. Overseas fishing activities were part of the empire building exercise, and part of the improvement and expansion of food production and distribution necessary for an urbanizing industrializing economy, especially since parts of Japan were susceptible to food shortages (Peattie 1984; Fujinami 1987).

Fisheries were so important the Meiji government supported them in various ways, within the framework of the *Fisheries Promotion Act* of 1897. Government support for fisheries included initiatives such as the Fisheries Training Institute (opened 1889, now the Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology), as well as financial support for technological developments in ship-building, such as installing engines (1903), refrigeration equipment (1907) and radios (1918) (Fujinami 1987).

Japanese fishing fleets were fishing around the Korean coastline from the start of the Meiji era. Japanese fishing effort intensified as Japan moved towards colonizing Korea, so that by the early 1900s Japanese fishing interests dominated fishing in Korea, and Korea was supplying a significant portion of Japan's seafood (Koh 1998). Fisheries were also a key part of Japanese colonial settlement in Pacific territories taken from Germany in the Treaty of Versailles. Families with limited economic opportunities at home, especially from Okinawa, went to these colonies, often on fishing vessels, and many continued working in fisheries in the colonies, while others branched out into trading stores and other small businesses (Hanlon 1998; Tomiyama 2002; Wakabayashi 1993).

Along with most of the rest of Japan's infrastructure, Japan's fishing fleets were decimated at the end of World War II. In part because of the important role played by fisheries in Japan's empire, Japanese fishing fleets were restricted to waters close to Japan. Then there were food shortages in the immediate postwar years. The empire had provided a large proportion of Japan's food supply, so Japan had not only to recover domestic food production but also to replace colonial production. In order to boost food production the Allied occupying forces and the Japanese government again supported fisheries to rebuild fleets and port infrastructure. Fisheries, including whaling, played a major role in this (Bestor 2004: 177). Restrictions on Japanese fishing fleets' travels were lifted by the Allied occupying force in 1952, so Japanese fishing fleets once again roamed the waters of the globe. This re-expansion was promoted in the government slogan 'from coastal to offshore, from offshore to distant waters' (Bergin and Haward 1996: 13; Fujinami 1987: 58).

The Japanese postwar economic recovery was consolidated in the 1960s, and fisheries production increased dramatically. Up until 1950 tuna production² had remained under 10,000 tonnes, then in 1960 it was over 50,000 tonnes and from then on mostly stayed over 40,000 tonnes (Fujinami 1987). Quantity ceased to be a pressing national food security issue and consumers started to demand high quality high value products. At the same time developments in freezing technology on fishing vessels and refrigerated transport on land enabled widespread supply of chilled or frozen fresh seafood (in the past only locally caught, canned, cured or dried seafood were feasible).

Up until the 1970s the oceans were open slather in terms of resource rights.³ Territorial waters extended only a few nautical miles from coastlines, and beyond that was available to anyone with vessels that could fish those waters. The Japanese and USA fleets were dominant in international waters during the 1960s and 1970s. Then in the spirit of the New International Economic Order, when newly independent former colonies were optimistic of the economic opportunities they could make from their natural resources, countries started declaring exclusive economic zones (EEZs) 200 nautical miles out from their coastlines. Japan and the USA fiercely opposed this move by coastal states to extend their sovereign rights over waters to which they had previously had free access (Schurman 1998).

Especially in the case of tuna, a highly migratory species, the Japanese perspective was that no state could claim rights to a resource that was in one EEZ one day then in another EEZ the next. Japan argued that rights to migratory marine resources such as tuna should lie in the history of using those resources, rather than in a territorial zone.

The weight of international opinion, however, was against Japan and the USA. 200 mile EEZs were enshrined in practice and the United Nations Law of the Sea by the 1980s. This was seen by the Japanese government and fishing industry as a grave injustice and a great setback to their fisheries. The advent of the *nihyaku kairi jidai* (200 nautical miles era) warranted a whole chapter in the *Fifty Year History of the Kagoshima Prefecture Tuna and Skipjack Fisheries Cooperative* (2000), discussing the difficulties faced at that time such the oil shocks as well as the advent of EEZs. One captain was quoted as saying that, since fish were caught close to land, with the 200 nautical mile rule they might as well just give up (359).

Japan's international fisheries politics from the 1970s were shaped by the need to secure access to what had ceased to be open access marine resources through the advent of EEZs. Postwar distant water fishing was no longer part of a military expansion, but it retained a sense of being a Japanese political presence overseas, mainly through economic ties and aid diplomacy (Tarte 1998). In the 1970s the favored way to secure fisheries access was to establish joint ventures with newly independent coastal states. This way Japanese fishing companies were in economic partnership for technology transfer and employment with Pacific islands countries, and through the joint venture being classified as a local company avoid paying access fees, which would imply acceptance of the legitimacy of EEZs. More than a dozen such joint ventures were established around the Pacific from the 1960s-1980s. Fisheries aid and later on the payment of large access fees for the Japanese fleet were other modes of Japanese international fisheries politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

Japanese government representatives and fishing industry people do not seriously expect that the 200 nautical mile EEZ rule can be wound back, but neither have they quite accepted it as a normal part of business. Their representations of EEZs and other issues relating to international fishing access indicate that they see EEZs as an unjust obstacle to business, and that any further developments in allocating oceanic fishing rights on the basis of national ownership of certain zones of ocean should be vigorously opposed. This is visible in Japanese negotiations on fisheries management for the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO).

The management of fisheries targeting species that migrate through or live across more than one EEZ must by necessity be conducted in the international arena. Under the United Nations Law of the Sea this has come to be done through regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs). The RFMO for the WCPO is the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC 2006). This came into existence in 2004, after its foundational Convention was ratified by a sufficient number of signatories, subsequent to several years' negotiation through a series of Multilateral High Level Conferences and Preparatory Conferences. Fishing rights have not yet been allocated in the WCPFC, but throughout the negotiations leading up to the Convention and all Commission meetings so far there have been disputes about the basis on which rights might be allocated, and Japan has been a vocal participant in these disputes. The island states of the Pacific have argued for an allocation of fisheries rights based on zones, with rights to fish on the high seas to be divided up amongst fishing states and rights to fish in EEZs to be divided up amongst

coastal states. Japan has argued instead that the allocation of fishing rights should be based on catch history (the amount of fish the fleet of each country has caught in the past) rather than the location where the fish was caught. This pattern of allocation would wind back the rights island states have asserted over catches in their EEZs (Anderson 2002). Agreeing on an allocation of fishing rights will be difficult in any case (with nearly thirty countries involved in the process) and Japan's position adds to the difficulty. Allocation of fishing rights is a necessary step to implementing effective fisheries management for the region, so Japan's sense of national rights over the ocean is playing an important role in a fishery that is ecologically and economically of global significance.

Fish in Japanese Politics

Although Japan was no longer in danger of famine by the 1960s, oceanic fisheries remained domestically politically important to the end of the twentieth century. This is visible in the membership of what was the premier fisheries promotion organization, the Dai Nippon Suisan Kai (Great Japan Fisheries Association) (1998). Another organization, the Federation of Japan Tuna Fisheries Cooperative Associations (shortened to Japan Tuna in English and *Nikkatsuren* in Japanese) took over as the leading body for distant water tuna fisheries in the 1960s, but the Dai Nippon Suisan Kai remained important through its exceedingly high connections to government. The Honorary President of the Dai Nippon Suisan Kai, until his death in 2004, was former Prime Minister Suzuki Zenko.⁴ Members of the imperial family have always been involved with the organization. Membership of the committees for this organization also includes the heads of all key sectors related to fishing, such as trading companies, fisheries cooperatives, and fish markets. The high ranking

membership of the Dai Nippon Suisan Kai both reflected the importance of fisheries in Japan, and helped ensure fisheries stayed a priority at the highest levels of government.

One reason fisheries have been politically important is that rural areas have been disproportionately electorally important in Japan. This is both because of a historical concern with food security, and because rural electorates are weighted more heavily than urban electorates and these rural electorates have been the heartland of the Liberal Democratic Party, which has been in power almost continuously since 1955.⁵ Rural areas receive a range of government benefits from preferential tax treatment, to lower electricity charges, to public works for infrastructure development (George Mulgan 2000). Many distant water fishing companies are based in rural areas, such as Kushikino in Kagoshima Prefecture, and Kesenuma in Miyagi Prefecture (see Fig. 1).

[INSERT Fig. 1. Map of Japan NEAR HERE]

The political clout of oceanic fisheries is reflected in the extensive government support they have received. By the 1980s fisheries had become very competitive, and the relatively high cost fleets of the USA and Japan lost their dominance to lower cost fleets from Taiwan, Korea and Southeast Asia. Competition from lower cost fleets (while Japanese immigration regulations restricted Japanese distant water fleets from cutting their labor costs by hiring non-Japanese) as well as increasing fuel costs and increased fishing ground access costs due to EEZs all contributed to Japan's decline as a major fishing power. Because distant water fisheries (mainly tuna) were politically important, national government support was

provided in the form of price support schemes, low interest loans, fleet reconstruction schemes (to update technology), and structural adjustment (Campbell and Nicholl 1994; Fujinami 1987; Bergin and Harward 1996). Economists Campbell and Nicholl (1994) found that in 1987 the total subsidies to the tuna industry from the Japan Fisheries Agency (¥269 billion, US\$1.8 billion) exceeded the losses incurred by the tuna fleet that year. They also found that during the 1980s as a whole the Japanese distant water tuna fleet was operating at a loss to the extent that 'it is difficult to believe the industry could have continued without such assistance'.

Fisheries-related nationalism

It is well known that the political influence wielded by the rice growing lobby in Japan has been bolstered by a nationalist ideology that links food security, national identity being bound up with eating certain kinds of food, and the economic health of rural communities (see Francks 2006; George Mulgan 2000). Oceanic fisheries have also shored up political support through this ideology, being rurally based, through contributing to the seafood that makes up a large part of Japanese diets, and through the iconic importance of the tunas used in sashimi and sushi cuisine for contemporary Japanese cultural identities.

Ever since Japan entered into the modernization race with the Western powers in the late 1800s, the belief that Japan is a resource poor country has influenced political and economic decisions. Food shortages, especially those after World War II, have been used to support the argument that Japan should have self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs. An opinion poll by the Prime Minister's Office in 2000 found that 78 per cent of Japanese were

concerned about the stability of food supplies in the future, and 95 per cent called for the government to ensure national food security (MAFF 2003). The mass media disseminates the discourse of dependency on imports, helping to keep fears about food security alive (Bestor 1999: 167), even though famine seems a highly unlikely scenario in contemporary Japan. Food production has a special place in Japan's political landscape, and fisheries, like rice, are a key part of Japanese imaginaries of food production.

As part of a project looking at southern bluefin tuna industries, co-researcher Koh Sunhui and I interviewed members of the non-government consumers' organization Shōdanren for their views on sashimi tuna.⁶ The Shōdanren members said Japanese consumers tend to prefer domestically produced food because they believe that it is more likely to be healthy and safe to eat than food produced overseas. They also said Japanese consumers believe some goods, such as sashimi tuna, are better quality when produced by Japanese than by non-Japanese. Anthropologist Theodore Bestor (1999: 168-9) has noted that seafood products labeled '*kokusan*' ('made in Japan') claim higher prices and prestige than imported seafoods. The Shōdanren interviewees said Japanese consumers are willing to pay up to 50 per cent more for domestic rather than imported food. They also raised the issue of Japan's low rate of food self-sufficiency, saying they felt the current rate of 40 per cent domestic food production was too low, and that Japanese consumers felt that a rate of '80 something per cent' self-sufficiency in food was the right level.

The Shōdanren discussion of food self-sufficiency ended with a strong statement from one of the interviewees saying that globalization was going too far and that she felt it

reasonable that ‘Japanese citizens’ should defend their food self-sufficiency. The word she used for ‘citizen’ in this outburst was ‘*kokumin*’, literally ‘nation-people’. Other words she could have used are ‘consumer’ (*shōhisha*) or another word for ‘citizen’ ‘*shimin*’ (literally ‘city-people’), which is often used for ‘citizen’ in a civil society sense, such as in ‘citizens’ movements’ (*shimin undō*). Her choice of the word ‘*kokumin*’ shows the consumer nationalism undercurrent pervading the food security and food self-sufficiency debates in Japan.⁷

Patricia Maclachlan (2004) has theorized a *kokumin* aspect of Japanese consumer identity, arguing that historical developments during the twentieth century caused Japanese consumers to be politically different to consumers in the English-speaking world. Before and during World War II part of the difference was that consumption was seen by many Japanese as shameful waste, because of an ethic of personal frugality in order to be able to devote resources to the national endeavor. Then in the postwar period, with famines and chaos as Japan rebuilt, consumers sided with producers in a joint effort to achieve national food self-sufficiency. Consumers thus developed a ‘survivor’ identity that was teamed on the same side as, rather than in opposition to, food producers. This postwar survivor consumer identity again connoted a sense of pulling together for the nation. Maclachlan notes that the ‘survivor’ *kokumin* aspect to Japanese consumer identity that has meant consumers’ movements have done apparently paradoxical things, like supported agricultural protectionism, which meant they paid several times the world price for rice.

The Tokyo-based consumers' group Women's Forum for Fish (WFF, in Japanese *Ūmanzu Fuōramu Sakana*) also represents fisheries issues with a *kokumin* aspect to consumer identity like that of the interviewee from Shōdanren. Shiraishi Yuriko started the WFF organization in 1993 after realizing the extent of Japan's reliance on seafood imports.⁸ She felt Japanese consumers should be better educated about this important part of their diet. Shiraishi's consumer identity resonates with that detailed by Maclachlan (2004) when she noted that *kokumin* identity was 'rarely evoked in movement discourse' (because it is an explicitly nationalist term which sits uneasily with progressive social movements in post-war Japan) but is nonetheless visible in activities and attitudes. In written material Shiraishi uses the word *shōhisha* (consumer), not *kokumin* (Shiraishi 2004). In her spoken representations, however, she does use the word *kokumin*.⁹ Economic and cultural nationalisms are evident in various representations she makes about fisheries issues, interwoven with internationalism.

Shiraishi allies consumers not only with Japanese producers, but with producers the world over who supply the Japanese market. She wants to establish dialogue with seafood producers everywhere in order to educate Japanese consumers. She calls for an alliance between fishing industries, governments, traders and consumers against illegal fishing, which endangers stocks and undermines fisheries operating in accordance with international and national measures to protect stocks (Shiraishi 1999a; Shiraishi 1999b). This aspect of Shiraishi's consumer activism is internationalist.

Shiraishi also calls for an alliance of ‘fish food culture’ (*gyoshoku bunka*) countries of Asia against the hegemony of the ‘meat food culture’ countries of Europe and North America. Describing Japan as having a fish food culture versus the meat food culture of the ‘West’ is a way of asserting Japanese national identity (Hirata 2004; Bestor 1999). Fisheries production is important in Japan not only because of concerns about food security, but also because it is seen as part of Japan’s cultural heritage (Bestor 2004: 167). Food is a prominent part of culture at all levels in Japanese society, and is used as a marker of cultural identity, both for regional differences within Japan and between Japanese and foreigners (Bestor 1999). Fish food culture—the arts of fishing, preparing and consuming fish—is seen by many as an essential part of Japaneseness. So in evoking the idea of fish food culture Shiraishi is engaging in a kind of cultural nationalism. Economic nationalism is evident in Shiraishi’s assertion that increasing world population will put pressure on food stocks such that there will be a ‘fish war’ (*osakana sensō*) in the twenty-first century. She deplores the fact that Japanese consumers feel no sense of danger that half of their seafood is imported and predicts that soon it will not be possible to buy fish from other countries (Shiraishi 2004).

Bureaucrats governing distant water tuna fisheries usually represent the issues similarly to the consumer activists quoted above. Komatsu Masayuki has been a key figure in Japanese distant water fisheries governance over the last decade. A senior bureaucrat with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), he has been the Japanese Head of Delegation in international tuna management commissions and also been a vocal presence at meetings of the International Whaling Commission meetings. Komatsu is more

outspoken than many of his colleagues but it is fair to say he represents the prevailing public policy philosophy of the Japanese government regarding fisheries production.¹⁰

According to Komatsu:

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 answers to these questions that should tell you why I firmly believe that we need to become more self-sufficient for reason of our national health and at the most basic level, to guarantee the supply of food to our people.¹¹

Komatsu's representation is nationalist in that his 'us' and 'our' signify Japan, not some transnational alliance of fish consumers or producers.¹² In Komatsu's vision Japanese fisheries must be supported for the sake of the Japanese nation. He has said that 'Japan does not need globalization', and that importing 'too much' tuna is 'bad for Japan'.¹³ Other MAFF officials also assert that national interest should be balanced against globalization. In response to calls for further trade liberalization under the World Trade Organization, MAFF has said 'further radical reforms will ... deteriorate food self-sufficiency and multifunctional benefits. This must be a huge loss for *the Japanese* and their *national economy*' (MAFF 2003, italics added).

Conclusion

The history of fisheries over the last century shows the central position of the ocean in Japan's political landscape. Japan's empire was made up of watery as well as earthy territory, and movement in the watery world was restricted under the postwar occupation. Japanese senses of having a right to be in and appropriate resources from the world's oceans, based in its history of having done so, however, remained essentially unchanged. Consequently, the Japanese government and fishing interests were outraged by the development of EEZs, and remain opposed to the notion that fishing rights are based on national ownership of bodies of ocean. This background is useful for understanding contemporary Japanese international relations on fisheries issues. The domestic political importance of oceanic fisheries in Japan is similar to that of rice farming in Japan. Continuation of Japanese oceanic fisheries is understood as being important for the nation, for reasons of food security as well as cultural identity.

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Notes

¹ Parts of the empirical material and analysis of nationalism in Japanese fisheries contained in this chapter have previously been included in a previously published chapter and a working paper: 'Marketization of Japanese Governance? Case Study of Long Line Tuna Fisheries' in *Regionalization, Marketization and Political Change in the Pacific Rim*, J. Goodman (ed), University of Guadalajara Press; 'Neoliberalism in Japan's Tuna Fisheries? Government Intervention and Reform in the Distant Water Longline Industry', Working Paper in International and Development Economics 05-2, Australian National University (available at http://www.crawford.anu.edu.au/degrees/idec/working_papers/IDEC05-2.pdf).

² These figures are for the large species of tuna such as bluefin, yellowfin, bigeye and albacore, not skipjack.

³ While the oceans were commons, probably because of the difficulty of establishing and protecting resource rights over oceans until modern shipping and surveillance technology was developed, coastal zones were not open access. Histories and anthropologies of coastal fishing communities have shown that sophisticated regimes of resource rights usually operated in coastal zones.

⁴ Suzuki had originally studied fisheries at college, and then worked in organizations connected to the fishing industry until entering politics in 1947. He was the Minister of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries for several years in the 1970s, before becoming Prime Minister in 1980.

⁵ Rural areas are in decline, however, mostly from depopulation. For this reason among others they are less politically important than they were.

⁶ *Zenkoku Shōhisha Dantai Renraku Kai*, usually abbreviated to *Shōdanren*, or 'Consumers Japan' in English. Interview in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, May 2003.

⁷ As McVeigh (2004) has pointed out, labeling social features in Japan ‘nationalist’ can be very contentious because of undesirable associations with Imperial Japan’s militarist ultranationalism, and contemporary sentiments along these lines held by small numbers of *uyoku* right wing groups. The nationalisms described in this paper are neither militarist nor ultranationalist, but are the ‘banal’ forms of nationalism discussed by Billig (1999) that are endemic in the contemporary normative system of nation-states. I am not trying to make the case that Japan is any more nationalist than other countries, rather I aim to identify the roles played by everyday forms of cultural, economic and consumer nationalisms.

⁸ According to MAFF (2003) Japan imports 60 per cent of its food supplies, measured in caloric intake. In the 1970s Japan was the worlds largest seafood exporter, by 2001 Japan had become the worlds largest seafood importer, with 23 per cent in value and 14 per cent in volume of world production (JIFRS 2004).

⁹ Shiraishi’s spoken representation was observed when she spoke in a panel at the biennial conference of the International Institute for Fisheries Economics and Trade in Tokyo, July 2004.

¹⁰ According to Hirata (2004), opinion on whaling in MAFF is not unified, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs MoFA) often disagrees with MAFF stances taken on whaling, but the pro-whaling group, lead by Komatsu, is dominant and their agenda prevails. Komatsu’s position vis a vis MAFF and MoFA on tuna issues is similar.

¹¹ Komatsu as quoted (and translated) by Roger Smith in his chapter ‘Japanese Whaling Policy and Food Security’ from his doctoral thesis in International Relations, St Anthony’s College, Oxford University, 2007.

¹² This style generates political capital in that domestic contesting voices can be devalued because they seem to be against the nation. Hirata (2004: 194) notes the political device of framing issues as ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in the whaling dispute has helped marginalize domestic anti-whaling voices.

¹³ These comments were made by Komatsu in a panel discussion at the biennial conference of the International Institute for Fisheries Economics and Trade in Tokyo, July 2004.