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Japanese Fish Markets, Chinese Seafood Palaces and Global Sushi: Meeting Theodore C. Bestor

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Theodore C. Bestor received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from Stanford University in 1983. He has worked at the Social Science Research Council as Director for the Japanese and Korean Studies Programs, and taught at Columbia University and Cornell University. Currently, he is the Reischauer Institute Professor od Social Anthropology and Chair of the Department of Anthropology, as well as the Curator for East Asian Ethnology at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. His major publications include *Neighborhood Tokyo* (1989), *Doing Fieldwork in Japan* (co-editor, 2003), *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* (2004), and *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society* (co-editor, 2011).

In October 2009, I had the chance to conduct several interviews with Theodore C. Bestor, one of the most prominent researchers in the field of the Japanese fishing industry, market organization and food culture. Besides fruitful impulses for my own work on maritime territoriality, fisheries regulation and property rights in fisheries resources, these meetings provided me with valuable insights into his work and his views on a number of issues, ranging from recent transformations at Tsukiji[1] and in Japanese seafood trade in general to the role of food in cultural diplomacy and tourism.

Tsukiji

Sonja Ganseforth: Your first major publication, *Neighborhood Tokyo*, dealt with an old middle-class neighbourhood in Tōkyō where you looked at social relations and informal institutions.

Theodore C. Bestor: Right, and there were institutions that were part of the life-style of the old middle classes, but they were not really their business relationships. Well, they were to some extent, as it was about the way they interacted with customers and neighbours and so forth. I was really much more interested in the neighbourhood, not the businesses, but that led me to become interested in the kinds of social

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networks, other than neighbourhood ones, small business people are embedded in. That led me to an interest in the Japanese distribution system, which, of course, was infamous at the time – and still is – for being highly fragmented and highly personalistic. So I figured if one looks at the business families as personalized units, then it makes perfect sense that they have personal, personalistic relationships. So then I went back to Tōkyō to look at that and quickly realized that I needed to focus on something, that it was just too many businesses, too many fields. So I narrowed it down to food, but that was still too broad. And then eventually, people said, 'Well, why don't you go to Tsukiji?'. So I went to Tsukiji, thinking this was going to be a little bit of background for something else, and suddenly I realized that the market was, in itself, a fascinating place. And that is how this project came about.

SG: What fascinated you so much about it?

TCB: It is hard to say. Of course, the scale and the busyness and the enormous numbers of kinds of fish are just overwhelming, particularly for somebody who does not come from a particular fishing background. But I think what fascinated me intellectually, standing in the middle of a marketplace, watching all these people running around wildly, yelling and shouting and bidding with their hands, fish going this way and fish going that way, was the realization that this was real economic life, that it was tangible. It was not just something that you read about in the newspaper and it says, 'Prices are up 5%, and savings rates are down', or 'Trading was high on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange, inflation is rising'. Those are all very abstract things, and we all encounter them in our daily lives and interpret them a little bit and think, 'Oh, things are getting better!'. But these are people; Tsukiji is full of people who are actually making a market every single day. It suddenly made me appreciate economics not as an academic discipline, but as an aspect of daily life, that this is about as tangible as you can get, in terms of looking at an economic system at work.

SG: You spent a considerable amount of time doing research on Tsukiji, visiting the market again and again and unearthing fascinating mechanisms.

TCB: I first started doing research at Tsukiji in 1989, and the last bit of research that actually went into the book was in 2002. So that is 13 years. But of course, most of that were very short-term trips. I think the single longest period of time that I spent doing research at Tsukiji uninterrupted was about six months. Most of the rest was lots of little trips, lots of snapshots of things. In some ways, it would have been nice if I could have arranged to do all of my research in one year or in a year and a half. But in fact, I think the fact that my research was spread out over such a long period of time enabled me to get a much better sense of the way the market changes because that 13-year period was pretty dramatic in terms of economic change. So if I had just done two years of research in 1989 through 1991, I would have come away with a very simplistic or rather a much less deep sort of appreciation of how markets change. So I guess I am lucky.

SG: Is it safe to assume you are still visiting Tsukiji once in a while?

TCB: Yes, I am still going there. Partly, I go there because I have got friends there, people I have known for a very long time. But I am also still very much interested in the market and in looking at how the market will change or may change if the Tōkyō Metropolitan Government goes ahead with its plans to move the location of the market by 2016.

SG: Do you think that is going to happen?

TCB: I am really not certain at this point, and that is one of the reasons why I want to get back to Tōkyō, back to Tsukiji, as soon as possible, to get a sense of that. One of the nominal reasons for moving Tsukiji and having it open by 2016 was the Tōkyō 2016 Olympics. They wanted to use the space at Tsukiji for Olympic facilities. Well, as we know now, Tōkyō is not going to get the 2016 Olympics. So that may take some of the power behind the move away. At least last time I checked, there was a fair amount of opposition among the people at Tsukiji about moving. There is a possibility that they may be able to mobilize enough public support, since the idea of the 2016 Olympics itself was never really popular in Japan. So it is hard to say whether or not the market will really be moved.

SG: There appear to be quite a lot of problems with the new site for the market.

TCB: Oh, there certainly are problems! The site that the government selected in an area called Toyosu was formerly owned by Tōkyō Gas. They used it for some kind of storage and processing facilities for petrochemicals. The ground underneath is apparently highly toxic, and a year or so ago, a panel of government scientists – not skeptics, but scientists working for or appointed by the government – determined that the level of benzene toxicity in the ground was something like a thousand times the permissible levels. The government said, 'Oh, this will not be a problem, we will scrape off the top four metres of soil, then we will put in a huge clay barrier and then fill the top with clean soil from somewhere else'. But then people pointed out that this is on landfill, which is inherently unstable, and in the middle of an earthquake zone. So you scrape off four metres of ground, you put in a clay seal, and an earthquake comes, cracks the seal, tsunami rush in from the bay, everything gets screwed up, and benzene is back. So there certainly was a fair amount of opposition from people, just ordinary people, against the idea of building a food market on a contaminated petrochemical dump. There are lots of perfectly good reasons why this might be canceled. But the problem is, if the move is canceled, there is still the problem of what to do with Tsukiji, which is falling apart. And it is falling apart not the least because the government has been saying for so long that they were going to move it, so they were not going to spend any money on it.

SG: The relocation of a market place is bound to bring about certain transformations. In Tsukiji you assumed that the social relations will not be completely broken apart by a move. But what effects do you think a move would have on the social fabric of the market?

TCB: Actually, if I were to rewrite the conclusion of my book, I think I would change that part of it; certainly, the macro level of human relations will change. I think that the micro level of human relations will remain more or less similar. But I think the changes that are inevitable, whether it moves or does not, are that in another half generation, the numbers of companies will have shrunk. Those that remain will be larger, so there will be a consolidation. As companies get larger, that is certainly going to change the overall balance of human relations. If you have a small stall with four employees, and you deal primarily with *sushi* chefs and retail fishmongers, that is one kind of social world. But if you are a large wholesaler that has 20 stalls and 50 employees and you are basically selling products to chain restaurants, then it is a very different kind of a milieu. It is not that one is new and the other is old, it is just that the spectrum of actors 20 years from now will be smaller than today. The small

stalls are going to disappear or become much extenuated and the large-scale, more bureaucratic form is going to be more common.

SG: Are you already observing a lot of buy-ups and business consolidations or do you think this will rather be a future development?

TCB: I think it is an accelerating trend. The last time I checked, the absolute numbers of firms had decreased over the last 10 years or so by something like 10–15%. But I think the economy has been so bad that people have not really had the cash to buy each other up. So what I am told is that there are lots of firms that are sort of waiting, hanging on, until hopefully the economy improves so that somebody will come and buy them. They are keeping in business at a very low level, just because they have to stay in business to protect their one asset. And their one asset is this license [to operate a stall at Tsukiji]. If the market for licenses is very depressed and you are counting on that license to launch you into a new business, then perhaps you are going to wait. But there are also bankruptcies from time to time; people do go out of business.

The Role of Supermarkets

SG: Supermarkets and other large retailers are increasingly entering the markets as direct buyers of seafood now. Would you say that they constitute a threat to the *nakagainin* [intermediate wholesale traders] at Tsukiji?

TCB: Well, they intervene in a couple of different ways. One is that they by-pass the market altogether. It constitutes a threat to the whole system. One of the reasons why Tsukiji will be shrinking is that the percentage of its control over the total amount of seafood consumed has been dropping, because supermarkets can arrange their own deals with, for example, a Hokkaido salmon co-operative, or a tuna co-operative in Kyūshū, or with a general trading company like Mitsubishi to get tuna from the Mediterranean. So the market share for Tsukiji as a whole is shrinking, and that puts everybody at risk. But there are lots of things that supermarkets do not want because they are too expensive, or they are too esoteric, or they just do not fit a supermarket's model. And then there are also things that supermarkets want to get, but it is not feasible for them to set up their own supply lines. Supermarkets need to have weekly specials, right? Those weekly specials can either be things that are commonplace and they could offer at a really low price. So if a package of salmon would normally cost ¥250, they might say, 'This week's special! It's only ¥120! Limit: five per customer!'. This kind of thing they can handle through their own supply lines. They just arrange a deal to get a really cheap shipment of salmon. But the other kind of special could be a particular delicacy that is associated with a special holiday coming up. Supermarkets will want to have a little bit of this expensive delicacy around to attract customers who want to buy their special food for *oshōgatsu*, or *makimono* for *setsubun*.[2] For these kinds of specialties, and particularly seasonal specialties, it is probably in most cases not worth the effort by an individual supermarket chain to set up a distribution network for something that they are only going to sell for two weeks. So for those things they go to the market. When they go to the market, however, they are looking to do business with the large-scale dealers because their volume is large, not the small-scale dealers. So the supermarkets pose a threat to small-scale *nakagainin* on two levels. One is that the entire market share is shrinking,

but then when supermarkets do enter the market, they are avoiding the small dealers and going to the large dealers.

SG: Wasn't the whole market auctioning system set up in order to regulate and centralize the country's food supply? Now what the supermarkets are doing is by-passing this whole system. Is this point criticized by anyone?

TCB: Well, first of all, historically, it is true, the wholesale market system was set up to stabilize and regulate national food supply. But this was in the 1920s, when the national food supply was a lot simpler than it is now. It is probably not until the 1960s, maybe the 1950s, that processed foods of the sort that you can buy in a supermarket really became very common. So changes in the technology of food production have vastly changed the nature of the distribution system for food supplies as a whole. There certainly are, I am sure, people in Japan today who are concerned about the ways in which supermarket chains dominate the food industry, but I do not know if anybody is systematically critiquing it, in part because it would be so difficult to do anything about it. I would guess that the only principal opposition to supermarkets that would ever catch any attraction would be on environmental grounds. And then of course, there are critiques of the food as being overly processed, containing too much sugar and too much fat and being bad for the diet. So from those two angles, the green angle and the organic angle, you could imagine a critique of supermarkets that would have some weight. But neither of those is going to be widespread. In Japan, I do not think the notions of green and organic have become nearly as widespread as in Europe and North America.

Global Seafood Commodity Chains

SG: How about other new actors coming into the seafood trade, for example with the introduction of national Exclusive Economic Zones[3] and the expulsion of Japanese fishing fleets from many non-domestic fishing grounds?

TCB: The only significant set of new actors that I can think of would be foreign producers and foreign distributors, who have become much more visible at Tsukiji and in the whole process, promoting their own products in ways that, a generation ago, I do not think happened. If you think about information about Tsukiji or about Japanese markets in some kind of a lever function, a generation or so ago, all of the power, all of the movement was on the Japanese side, and there was just a tiny little bit of movement on the foreign side because they did not really know or care that much. But as Tsukiji became much more important as a destination for their products, obviously people's incentive was to learn more and more. And so, gradually, the power shifts not to an equal, but to a more equal kind of balance. So we are at a point where there are now more foreign companies that are trying to influence Tsukiji than before. They are trying much harder to make the market move by actively promoting, by creating brand names, by visiting the market, and by inviting Japanese buyers to visit their facilities. For example, a couple of years ago, I interviewed a Mexican businessman, who has a large tuna ranching operation on the Pacific Coast of Mexico. He has produced DVDs about his operation, which he attaches to every tuna. When the tuna arrives at Tsukiji, there is a little plastic pouch stapled onto the side of the fish. So the person who buys it can take the DVD home and look at it. It talks all about the purity of the water, the careful quality control, the veteri-

nary medicine and medical facilities that they use to monitor the health of the tuna and so forth. It is all about promoting his particular brand of tuna. In other parts of the world, producers similarly try to make themselves more visible. Sometimes it is visibility for a particular company, sometimes it is visibility for a particular region. A producer group in New Zealand might band together and create a local name for their product and promote that together. They might try to get MSC[4] certification and promote that. So I guess what I would say is that the major actor, who really was not on the scene when I started my research, is this kind of foreign involvement.

But other than that, the big trading companies have been around for a very long time, the food and the fishing companies have been around since the 1920s. There are six or seven major companies, but what is interesting about them is that if you talk to their executives today and say, 'Oh well, you're a fisheries company', they will say, 'Oh, no, no, no, no, we are a seafood trading organization'. Because they all have gotten rid of their fishing vessels; they no longer have fishing fleets. They are simply involved in buying products from foreign countries, in some cases processing them into canned goods or frozen products that can be sold in supermarkets, and in some cases continuing to sell products to markets like Tsukiji or putting them up for auction at Tsukiji. In some cases, they may have a small division that still handles some actual direct fishing activities, but it is an increasingly small level of involvement. I remember visiting the offices of the chief executive officer of one of the big so-called fishing companies. His office suite is decorated with these wonderful ship models, these very nice, very detailed models that are assembled when a company launches a ship. So there are half a dozen of these scattered around his office, and as I am standing there and being introduced to people, trying to make conversation, I started asking questions about these different vessels. At some point, the president himself said, 'None of us know anything about that! None of us have ever been on a boat. In fact, there is nobody in the company anymore who has been on any of these boats'. So he considers himself to be the boss of a company that trades food products, which happen to be seafood in many cases, but not exclusively. That is a big change, in the sense not of a big actor coming in, but of a big actor going out.

SG: Would you say that, with the expulsion of Japanese fishing fleets from many foreign waters, there has not really been a power shift from fishing corporations to trading houses, but rather a transformation of the activities of fishing corporations into trading?

TCB: Yes. Well, I suppose there is probably some fairly intense rivalry and competition between the trading houses and the former fishing companies. But I do not know enough about that, I can just imagine that there must be significant territorial issues. So to sum it up, the trading houses, big fishing companies and the auction houses are more or less unchanged. The small-scale, mid-level wholesalers, the *nakagainin*, have changed as we have discussed, but it is a gradual attrition rather than anything sharp. Then of course, there is the rise of supermarkets, which is also related to the power of the general trading companies, because many of the general trading companies have invested heavily, or their parent companies have invested heavily, in setting up supermarket chains. So the supermarket chains and the general trading houses are working in conjunction with each other to create not only domestic supply, but also global supply lines, not just for seafood, but for all kinds of things that will enable the system to work.

SG: How important are joint ventures with foreign companies?

TCB: I do not have enough information about joint ventures to really comment on that. I think that one of the ways in which the former fisheries companies have partially left the business is that they do not run ships anymore, but they may have joint ventures with a company in Thailand, Indonesia, or the Philippines that is actually catching the fish. So it is a little bit disingenuous. They are kidding themselves, or they are kidding me when they say they are not involved in fishing anymore. They are, but it is through joint ventures. Similarly, the trading companies have set up joint ventures with tuna farmers or shrimp producers or with Chilean salmon producers. I think a lot of that is a direct response to the Exclusive Economic Zones being set up and the Japanese fleets being kicked out.

SG: Would you say the introduction of the Exclusive Economic Zones was one of the main reasons for the generation of new commodity chains?

TCB: I do not think you can put it to a single cause because the introduction of the EEZs came at just about the same time when jet transportation became a worldwide possibility, so at least for high-priced items, global supply became possible. Nobody is going to ship anchovies by air cargo, but a tuna that might sell for $20 000 – why not? And that became possible in the early 1970s, just as the EEZs were coming in. Also, the rapid development, particularly by Japanese companies, of freezer technology played an important role. I think all of these things make for a transformation of what would be possible for distribution chains. Of course, this also all happened at a time when suddenly the Japanese economy was roaring. The Japanese still had an enormous exchange rate advantage over most other international currencies, and so it was a time when Japan could go out and buy what it wanted. I think it would be very hard to put it down to one factor. But obviously, those four or five factors I just mentioned are going to have different sets of impacts on different kinds of actors in the whole system. Some profit and some lose. The actual fishing divisions of the seafood companies lose. They have to get rid of their ships, basically. And what do they do? They sell them to the Taiwanese or the Indonesians. But they probably sell them to joint ventures. So are they losing or are they winning? Who can say? The fact that all the big fishing companies are still around says they must have won. Obviously, the globalization of supply chains works to the advantage of general trading companies, which have had the expertise in this area, maybe not for seafood, but for iron, electronics, and chemicals – well, why not food? I do not know the specific histories of any of these, but I would suspect that the food trading operations of big companies like Marubeni or Sumitomo or Mitsubishi probably got started on a large scale during the 1970s and 1980s. The actors are changing, of course, in response to the other changes, and they are also contributing to those other changes, so it is a completely interactive system.

SG: How about more recent changes? Would you say there have been some significant transformations in global commodity chains as of recent years? For example, I am thinking of industrialized processing in countries like China for the Japanese market.

TCB: I think the technological changes in food processing have had an impact in a global sense in that there are so many things that can be done off-shore. This fishing company I was talking about before has a plant in Bangkok, where they process *sushi*. Apparently it is an assembly line operation, they have machines that make rice blocks and then people are putting, one by one, slices of tuna, slices of shrimp, slices

of this, slices of that. Afterwards, it is put into plastic shrink-wrap, frozen, and sent by airplane to Japan, where it is sold to *kaiten-zushi*[5] restaurants. If you have a *kaiten-zushi* restaurant, you can order 1,000 pieces of *maguro* [tuna], 1,000 *ebi* [shrimp], 500 *uni* [sea urchin], whatever you want. It comes in a big crate, and there you have it. That is off-shore production, and the technologies that make this possible are airplanes, freezers, shrink-wrapping, being able to create a sanitary environment. I gather that at this factory in Bangkok, everybody is in white suits and everything because obviously they are very concerned about sanitation, particularly given Japanese attitudes towards the Thai.

SG: I was just going to ask about this point. How acceptable is it to Japanese customers to have *sushi* processed in Thailand or China, especially considering the public uproar over incidents like the *gyōza* incident?[6]

TCB: I am sure it is not advertised as such. I am sure if you were the proprietor of a *kaiten-zushi* restaurant, you would not put little stickers on your *sushi* saying 'Thai'. I am just trying to imagine a *kaiten-zushi* restaurant with everybody sitting there in shock at the sight of these stickers. Especially China has gotten such a bad reputation for its food sanitation issues that I would imagine any Chinese processed food product would have a really tough time in Japan right now. China has a pretty dismal record of various kinds of contamination, pollution, poisoning and so on. Of course, there are all kinds of ways to hide these things. The *sushi* for a particular chain may be packaged in a particular way that indicates that it comes from a certain facility in Kobe. There may be a warehouse in Kobe, where the things are kept. There are probably ways slightly illegal in which you can avoid labeling the country of origin, even though that is required under Japanese food packaging laws, which interestingly give consumers more information than consumers get in the United States about places of origin. The set of attitudes towards foreign production of food is a little bit of a wild card. Companies that have invested in that kind of production, probably through joint ventures, are probably taking a pretty substantial risk that if something goes wrong, they might be crucified in the press.

Food Security and Global Competition

SG: Tuna is a fish that is very high-priced, especially on Japanese markets, and at the same time threatened by overfishing and extinction. There is talk of a 'national tuna reserve' in freezers inside Japan as well as abroad; would you say this description is accurate?

TCB: Well, I have heard people say that, but I do not think anybody has concrete figures on this. There certainly are a lot of freezer warehouses, not only in Tōkyō, but also in places like Yaizu, Shimizu and a couple of other big tuna ports in Japan. I have also toured some in Australia that were pretty big. But the question is, if an Australian company has a big freezer warehouse full of tons and tons of tuna, is that a Japanese tuna reserve or is that an Australian tuna reserve? So I think it is a misnomer to think of a Japanese reserve. I think you have to think about it company by company. Mitsubishi may have a stock pile, and Mitsui may, but maybe Maruha does not. But even with freezer technology on very high standards, these are still perishable products. It is not like putting gold bars in a cave in Switzerland where they will not deteriorate. The best-case scenario is that a well-treated piece of frozen

tuna has a two-year shelf live. You can keep it frozen for longer than two years, but I am told that the quality deteriorates. So if it is a reserve, it is a reserve that has to constantly be replenished. You have to be bringing fresh tuna in and freezing them, in order to take some out. So I think it is more a journalist's fantasy than a reality. You would have to get into the inner workings of the Fisheries Agency to find out. It could very well be that there is some official strategy, though not in the sense of creating a tuna reserve. But in order to ensure stability of supplies, different companies and different food sectors need to think about how to make sure the supplies will not be disrupted. So there may be recommendations for the companies to think about keeping a certain back-log. I am not saying that it could not be a national strategy, but no one has ever mentioned it to me. And I think in the years that I have been poking around, I would have come across some evidence of it in some fashion. But there is absolutely no denying that the whole point of having frozen tuna is to bring it into market when conditions are right to sell. And so when there is relatively little fresh tuna available, there will be relatively more frozen. And when prices are particularly high, there will be more frozen available, but it will be carefully controlled because they do not want to depress the market either. So I am sure that there are people in these companies who are probably using very sophisticated software to track supplies and determine all the bases of yesterday's prices in order to determine how many tons should be released the following day. Like a bank and their foreign exchange desk, I suppose.

SG: It is always argued that Japan does not have a lot of agricultural land, so fish is very important and Japanese autarky in supplies should be increased. How important do you think fish really is for national food security?

TCB: Within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan [MAFF], there are bureaus concerned with food security, distribution, ensuring the stability of prices and supply and so forth. So obviously, on some bureaucratic level, there is consciousness of food security. But it is probably more a discursive strategy for politicians than it is a daily concern for bureaucrats or people in the food industry itself, whether fishing or anything else. There have been, at different times, different aspects of what to worry about. In the 1970s, one of the great worries was when Nixon cut off soybean exports to Japan. They were shocked beyond belief that their trusted ally would suddenly, without warning, cut off a major source of food to Japan. When you raise the question of food security to any Japanese over the age of 40, this is the example they will give. Food security issues come up all the time in fishing disputes. 'We need this, we need that, because we are a poor island nation with few natural resources and little arable land!' The most recent iteration of this would be the fear of China. Chinese economic growth seemingly is on a massively upwards street. There is a very genuine concern amongst people, in the seafood business at least, that China will be the competitor for seafood in the foreseeable future and simply dwarf Japan in its ability to purchase things. So it becomes a question whether that is a discursive worry or a genuine reading of the global political economy. I guess I would have to say that it is less of a discursive worry than some of the others. But on a day-to-day, or month-to-month, or year-to-year basis, I do not think that very many people in the food business are particularly concerned. Well, they are concerned about supply and demand, rising prices, inflation, and foreign exchange, but I do not think that they wake up in the morning with issues of food security on their mind.

But if you go to Hong Kong or Guangzhou, there are huge pavilions; to call them 'restaurants' would be too modest a term. About a year and a half ago, I was at a conference in Guangzhou and we were taken to different restaurants for several nights. One night, we were taken to one of these gigantic fish restaurants, where I was told they could seat 2,500 people! It was a two-story complex; the dining rooms were on the second floor. The first floor was like walking through a big wholesale fish market in that there were counters for every kind of seafood imaginable for you to pick out: 'Oh, I'd like that snapper, I'd like that tuna, I'd like that alligator!'. So you would pick the fish and then there were different places where you could pick the technique, whether you ordered it prepared as *sushi*, or if you wanted it prepared fried, or if you wanted it prepared in something steamed. I think most people were there as parts of a large party, so I am sure the host would make the arrangements. But you could still walk around and look at all of these things, watch it being prepared and say: 'Oh, well, I know you've already ordered the main dishes, but couldn't we have some of this as an appetizer?'. Then you go upstairs and sit down, and the waiters bring what you have ordered. It was one of the most astounding spots I have ever been. It felt like walking through Tsukiji with a vast dining room attached. This place we were taken was one of maybe a dozen such places in the immediate area in Guangzhou. It was a huge business. Looking at that, I thought to myself that Japanese concerns about future seafood competitions, particularly with South China, are valid things to be concerned about, that, indeed, as China becomes wealthier and wealthier, as there is more of an urban middle class with a disposable income, and as appetites for seafood become more common, the buying power of China is going to far outstrip the buying power of Japan. Just from casual research on this, the extent to which China is competing in the global market with Japan for bluefin tuna, for Pacific lobster, for all kinds of products that come from Australia, New Zealand, Micronesia, Indonesia, and South-east Asia means that the Japanese, from their own standpoint, are very concerned. I have a half-finished book that is tentatively titled *Global Sushi*. I think my subsequent research in completion of this book is probably going to return to Japan to look more at questions of how Japanese companies, producers and markets are reacting to the tightening of supplies and competition with China.

SG: What do you think are the main reactions or strategies that are being taken?

TCB: I do not have enough information yet to come to any conclusions. Part of the answer certainly lies in ODA [overseas development assistance]. The Japanese government is strategically spending money on development projects that specifically relate to food production in various parts of the world. So, for example, in cases that I know of in the Caribbean, Japanese advisors from MAFF have designed new fishing ports and arranged for them to be built by Japanese construction companies or joint ventures of various sorts. So there is clearly an attempt to cement relationships with potential producing countries and companies with a presumably long-term eye towards being able to call in the debt by saying, 'No, no, we're buying that, not the Chinese!'. Well, the Chinese are probably doing the same thing. From my perspective at this point, I would say the Japanese are competing, or laying the groundwork for competition with China, through ODA, and obviously through strengthening joint ventures with Australia, Indonesia, Korea, etc. But I would bet that some of the big players are probably also busily strengthening their ties with China, that is to say putting together joint ventures with Chinese organizations, providing technol-

ogy in exchange for catches. If I were a businessman, this is probably what I would do. I would realize that I am never going to be able to beat the Chinese, so I might as well be a partner and see where we can get. But I would imagine that this is a fairly low-profile kind of a strategy. For all kinds of reasons, including the food and contamination scandals, no Japanese corporation wants to find itself partnered with some Chinese corporation that is going to get bad publicity for contaminated fish.

Culture, Authenticity, and the Global Spread of *Sushi*

SG: In *Global Sushi*, you are dealing with the generation of global commodity chains in seafood and especially tuna used in *sushi*. Are you also putting a focus on production sites?

TCB: Not in any terribly specific way. But another angle of *Global Sushi* is that I am interested in how *sushi* became popular outside of Japan. How something that, a generation or two ago, no Western person would go crazy over, is incredibly popular in the United States now, and I am sure the same is true in Germany. You could go to any big supermarket in America, and they will have a counter where somebody is making *sushi* and putting it in a plastic box for you to take home. It has become global fast food. So my project will ultimately look at both production and commodity chains, but also at the diffusion of popular demand across cultural boundaries.

SG: Do you think that the global spread of a taste for *sushi* really did give rise to a lot of competition over bluefin tuna for Japan?

TCB: I think it did lead to competition in a couple of different ways. Of course, the case that I know best is the New England fishing industry here, where initially the demand for tuna was entirely focused on Japan. In that sense, Japanese demand created a fishing industry where none had existed before because, traditionally, Americans did not eat tuna except in cans. And so commercial fishermen in New England might catch an occasional tuna, but there was no market for it, so nobody went out of their way to catch it. Sports fishermen caught it as a trophy fish, but commercial fishermen were not interested. That changed in the 1970s, as Japanese buyers began to arrive and create a market. So then there was a small, but fairly active fleet in New England that now focused on tuna. But as the Japanese economy went poorly from about the late 1980s onwards, my sense from interviews with people is that a lot of people who were fishing for tuna continued to fish for tuna, but also needed secondary markets in the United States because they were not confident of being able to get a high enough price from Japanese buyers. So they began to sell more and more to American restaurants and companies. The New England tuna industry today sells the majority of what it catches in North America. There was more demand for Japanese-style cuisine, so there were American restaurants that wanted tuna in order to be able to serve it as *sashimi* or *sushi* or whatever, but as part of a sort of overall global gourmet boom. Tuna came to be seen as something that could be in a very expensive, very elegant dish quite apart from Japanese cuisine. I cannot really date this, but I would say from maybe the very late 1980s or early 1990s, American menus held entries like 'sashimi-grade tuna steak, seared with wasabi and a touch of ginger' or something like that. So it still has some oriental or Asian signifiers, but it is not being served as a Japanese dish. Here you have a plate with a steak and broccoli and mashed potatoes and something else, all with raspberries spread around

the side. So it becomes part of *nouvelle cuisine* in a way. I do not know enough about the European side of things, but my sense is that a similar trend developed. And of course, since the Mediterranean is a major source of tuna, and the Mediterranean is surrounded by a very large number of nations with active fishing fleets, then it is not directly Japanese demand, but it is this kind of diffusion of demand that leads to more and more competition in the Mediterranean, as I understand it. There are now French, Spanish, Italian, American, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Indonesian fleets that recognize tuna as a valuable commodity.

SG: What do you think about the initiative by the MAFF to issue licenses for authentic *sushi* or Japanese restaurants abroad?

TCB: I have looked into that a little bit. I do not think it is ever going to happen. And I have talked to people in the *gaimushō* [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan] who think it is the stupidest idea they have ever heard of, because it would ultimately have to be people in the *gaimushō* around the world who would have to administer this programme, and it is not going to buy them any friends to go out to *sushi* restaurants in Boston and to say, 'Oh, you're not authentic!'. So I think that was a proposal that was generated by some domestic constituency in Japan and the MAFF people just agreed to it, but I cannot really imagine that it would ever happen.

SG: How important do you think *sushi* in particular, or food in general, is for Japan's cultural diplomacy?

TCB: Oh, it is absolutely important. I do not know if they are doing the same kind of campaign in Europe, but at least for the past couple of years, Japanese consulates here in the United States have been promoting a 'Cool Japan' concept. If you look at the 'Cool Japan' materials, food is always one of the components. The consulate here in Boston, at least a couple of times a year, sponsors some kind of food event where they have a famous chef or a famous product of some sort. I assume that they are doing similar things at other consulates, not only in the U.S., but around the world. At these events, they usually have expensive looking publicity packages, DVDs about Japanese food and so forth. So there clearly is an organized effort to promote Japanese cuisine as part of cultural diplomacy. And I suspect that tourism to Japan is at least to some degree motivated by food interest. Well, obviously, you are not going to fly to Tōkyō just because you want good *sushi*, but I am sure for people who can afford to travel anywhere food makes a difference.

SG: Food is very important in inner-Japanese tourism as well, isn't it, with every place having its own *meibutsu* [local specialty]?

TCB: Yes, exactly. That is part of what I want to look at in my next research project, *meibutsu* and *omiyage* [souvenir], travel and eating culture. So I am now more interested in other aspects of Japanese food, including regional specialties and the ways in which locality matters for marketing purposes and travel, the intersection of travel and environmentalism, tourism and food culture. Another thing that I want to look at in this project is how people think about the environment and organic, local, and slow food. How and to what extent have these become part of the discourse in Japan about food, not only the popular/elite discourse about environment, food, nutrition, locality, organicness and so forth, but the extent to which this really matters when people are sitting down to eat or going to the shop and saying, 'Hmm, I'll go for the organic tomatoes, even though they're twice as expensive as the non-organic

ones'. Also, the question of authenticity, identity and locality would not be restricted to seafood, so these are things that are less Tsukiji oriented, but fish markets will still continue to play an important part in my work.

Notes

1. Tsukiji is the central wholesale marketplace in Tōkyō and the largest wholesale marketplace for seafood in the world.
2. *Oshōgatsu* is the Japanese New Year; *setsubun* is a holiday for the beginning of spring in February, where beans are thrown to drive demons away.
3. National Exclusive Economic Zones extending 200 nautical miles from a nation's coastline were established in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III), which was signed in 1982 and came into force in 1994.
4. The Marine Stewardship Council is a non-profit organization that issues ecolabels and fishery certifications for sustainable fishing practices.
5. These are *sushi* restaurants where plates with the food are delivered to every table around the restaurant on rotating conveyor belts, so the customers can either serve themselves from the conveyor belt or place orders.
6. The food poisoning of numerous Japanese in 2007–2008 because of Chinese-produced *gyōza* (pork dumplings), which were found to be pesticide-contaminated, caused an anti-Chinese uproar and widespread suspicions of Chinese-produced foods in Japan.