

What is OBANZAI? A Study Report

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What is *Obanzai*? We have contemplated about *Obanzai* from different angles because it is a unique cuisine culture in Kyoto and a tradition that needs to be preserved toward the future. *Obanzai* has great potentials to attract tourists and also enrich food-cuisine industries, thereby make broader contributions to the people in Kyoto.

As our discussions on *Obanzai* advanced, however, we came to realize that *Obanzai* entails so much diversity and complexity, and variation along its long-time history that it seems hardly possible to even define its contour. Still, for a better discussion of *Obanzai* as a cultural heritage and how to pass it to the future, we at least need to have somewhat consistent demarcations. Thus, in what follows, we provide our arguments on what constitutes *Obanzai*. Nevertheless, note that they are by no means to establish *the definition* of *Obanzai*, but rather are a basis for further discussions.

1. What is *Obanzai*?

We define *Obanzai* as “a distinctive cuisine style established through domestic livings in Kyoto, and which has gone through alterations yet been inherited over generations.”

While the word “*Obanzai*” could mean everyday dishes, prepared meals and delis, it often informs its cooking processes and episodes related to the cooking, and has different connotations, including spiritual images the people of Kyoto embrace.

Today, *Obanzai* is usually spelled in Hiragana. In the ancient literature, *Nenjuu-Bansairoku*, which is known as the oldest text recording the word *Obanzai*, it was spelled in Kanji, “番菜” (pronounced *Banzai*).

In the meantime, little is known as to the origin of the word *Obanzai*. As mentioned above, the oldest literature that noted *Banzai* (“番菜”), the older version of *Obanzai*, is *Nenjuu-Bansairoku*, published in 1849. Hence, it can be assumed that at least in the middle of 19th century, this word was already used. Since then, until 1964 when Ms. Shige O'mura revived the word, no public record of the term *Obanzai* has been found.

Therefore, it is totally unknown how contents and styles of *Obanzai* have been changing during the time between 1849 and 1964. However, it is no doubt that what both *Nenjuu-Bansairoku* and O'mura recorded are simple daily dishes on ordinally people's dining table.

It is not until the 1970s that the word *Obanzai* became popular. This was when tourism started booming in Japan. The tourism boom might idolize and enhance the

ordinary daily livings in Kyoto and *Obanzai* introduced by O'mura through book published in 1964.

During the 1970s and 1980s, eating outside the house became increasingly common, and the daily live became growingly mechanized. Japan was going through the successful yet very fast industrial development, while losing traditional cultural practices. Some people felt disappointed and concerned about the fading tradition and realized its importance. Attracted to the somehow nostalgic tone of the word *Obanzai*, these people eventually came to patronize it as a Japanese tradition. Thus, *Obanzai* gained its fame as a tradional cuisine and is recognized so popularly that nowadays an Internet search with the word would return over 800,000 results.

With the narrative above, it is likely that an examination of *Obanzai* would center on the record noted by Ms. O'mura. In fact, most of the past research and literature on *Obanzai* has centered on her works.

2. The structure in *Obanzai*

Obanzai, born through daily domestic livings, is prepared at a kitchen and consumed at a dining room. Thus, *Obanzai* entails the two processes, namely, the cooking and eating. Those who prepare *Obanzai* are usually also eaters and knowledgeable about the eaters including family members, who usually have full trust in the cook.

(1)The preparing of *Obanzai*

The preparing of *Obanzai* consists of several processes, which are related to each other and constitute a series of cooking performances. To every process a custom or routine is attached. These customs all together have been inherited, though with gradual alterations, over the time, and come to shape Kyoto's unique cuisine culture.

The process of preparing *Obanzai*



1) Planning menu

Obanzai menu are, though with some variations, conditioned according to seasonality, ceremonial events and customs, and created taking into consideration nutritional values of ingredients. While a combination of one soup and three courses is the most common in an *Obanzai* meal, that pattern is not decisive---note that the past literature

does not necessarily mention the one-soup-three-courses combination as an established cuisine style of *Obanzai*.

2) Procuring ingredients

Traditionally, ingredients, cooking tools and kitchenware for *Obanzai* would be procured through negotiations among local people. Major ingredients *Obanzai* include seasonal vegetables produced in Kyoto as well as soy bean products. Whereas salted dried saltwater seafood and freshwater fish were common *Obanzai's* ingredients, nowadays fresh seawater fish is frequently used in *Obanzai* dishes as the cold-chain distribution system has been developed and improved.

3) Cooking

The core of the *Obanzai* cooking comprises preparing broth with subtle flavors and stewing ingredients in the broth with soft water, which derives flavors from the ingredients, although other techniques, such as grilling, sautéing, frying, and steaming, are frequently employed. In addition, a variety of seasonings, and Kyoto's traditional fermented condiments, including *Shiro-miso* (white soy bean paste) and *Usukuchi-shoyu* (light-colored soy sauce), add distinctive flavors to the ingredients, creating the uniqueness of *Obanzai* as a cuisine culture.

4) Plating up

In *Obanzai*, the simplicity characterizes plating of dishes, except when special meals are prepared for special occasions. Nonetheless, even everyday *Obanzai* dishes are aesthetically plated, considering layout and colors of ingredients and tableware, so that seasonal changes are reflected in the meal.

5) Serving and eating

Many *Obanzai* dishes, once prepared, can be stored, reheated and repeatedly served so that people can save the time for meal preparation. Usually in an *Obanzai* meal, those who prepare dishes and the eaters, sitting together at the dining table, share the dishes. Eating the same dishes together has educational and cultural values, such as preservation of traditions, and even can serve to strengthen solidarity of families or communities.

6) Cleaning and restoring

After the meal, tableware are cleaned and restored to the shelves so that the next *Obanzai* can be prepared smoothly. It is common that those who share the dishes also share this post-meal task.

7) Mentality

In *Obanzai* exist certain mental elements, or mentality, of the people of Kyoto, which serve as guiding principles in their daily life and value judgments. The mental elements in *Obanzai* have hardly been altered over generations and had little correlation with social changes, thereby contributed to establishing *Obanzai's* identity. Following are examples representing the essential mentalities of *Obanzai*.

○ *Shimatsu*

This word denotes “from the beginning to the end,” thus signifies “using every part of ingredients without wasting them.” *Shimatsu*, oftentimes echoing with *Mottainai*, a word advising not to waste resources, implies not a stringent or pathetic attitude; but rather, it relates to spirits and prides alive in the people of Kyoto.

○ *Deaimon*

The word denotes that two different characters, objects, or themes encounter so that they create a new identity. *Deaimon* means pursuing something novel from a happenstance. In *Obanzai*, *Deaimon* can ensue not only when different ingredients are combined or an ingredient is combined with a new cooking method, but also when different people or people and the environment come across.

○ *Honmamon*

The word signifies the authentic product, material, object, or character. In pursuing the best quality in cuisine, *Honmamon* is sought. A *Honmamon* is expensive, thus, *Shimatsu* of it becomes crucial.

○ *Kokorozukai*

Kokorozukai refers to being considerate to others. Meals can make the relationship between eaters and those who prepare fonder and stronger, and at the basis of the relationship always lies *Kokorozukai*. In Japan, expressing the appreciation to a meal by saying *Itadakimasu* (before eating) or *Gochisousama* (after eating) also indicates *Kokorozukai* to those who made the eating possible.

○*Ambai*

Ambai is an act of mind finding a good balance between, or taking a comfortable distance from, things. *Ambai*, grown through urban lifecycles in Kyoto as the historic capital, can be found all over the place and occasions, including the cuisine culture.

(2) The significance of eating *Obanzai*

Having *Obanzai* meals consists of consuming nutrients as well as participating in human activities, which help shape a character and strengthen the solidarity among people. Eating *Obanzai*, moreover, is not just consuming foods, but rather accentuates the importance of demeanors in dining. *Obanzai*, for instance, postulates that all family members sit together at the dining table and share the meal. Sharing dishes with family members would create communications, which can bring about educational values, cultural inheritance, socialization and pleasure, and strengthen the family tie.

1) Spirituality

Spirituality attached to the eating of *Obanzai* seem to be shared commonly among many Japanese, rather than being a particular trait the people of Kyoto possess. As an agricultural people, and having been influenced by the Buddhist and Confucius spirituality, the Japanese have tended to appreciate exceptionally harmony and morality in life. Yet, in Kyoto as the ancient capital of Japan such spirituality still remain delicately alive.

○Appreciation

It was not until half a century ago that most Japanese could enjoy the abundance of foods. Until then, the value of foods was so appreciated that Japanese people genuinely would say *Itadakimasu* (meaning that I humbly receive foods) and *Gochisousama* (meaning that I thank for preparing the meal).

○Aesthetics of the eating demeanor

Beautiful beautifully or elegantly (e.g., without leaving mess after the meal) with a good table manner indicates appreciation toward foods and people who prepared them, although that is not easy as skills and knowledge in handling foods are needed.

○*Kokorozukai*

(Discussed above)

○Cooperation

From preparation to cleaning and restoration of tableware, *Obanzai* entails a variety of

roles that people involved in the meal are supposed to play in cooperation.

It can be argued that the four spiritual aspects discussed above would be found across Japanese households. Nonetheless, it is quite uncertain that such spiritualities still remain vigorously alive in Japanese family meals in general, and even in *Obanzai*.

(3) Structure of *Obanzai*

The process to prepare *Obanzai* consists of a series of events from menu making to table cleanup. At each act of processing, knowledge and skills are applied, and inherited and accumulated over generations. Accordingly, although there have been alterations in changing environments, the process of *Obanzai* preparation has been inherited as a unique cuisine culture. *Obanzai* has created the unique spirituality alive in Kyoto, which has maintained the consistent distinctiveness of Japanese historic cuisines.

In the meantime, the significance of eating *Obanzai* centers on the sharing of meals. Having a meal together makes family relationship stronger and helps one be independent.

Thus, *Obanzai* could be understood as having the two facets, that is, the preparation and the eating, and discussing the two together could complicate the analysis. Probably it is appropriate to separate *Obanzai* conceptually and call its making “*Obanzai*” while the concept involving the two facets (the preparation and the eating) could be called “*Obanzai ryouri*” (*Obanzai* dishes or meals). Conceptualizing the *Obanzai* this way allows us to better understand the process through which *Obanzai* has been inherited.

3. Rules in *Obanzai*

Obanzai has rules. With the rules, *Obanzai* has been inherited over the history as a tradition. Yet, at this point it is difficult to determine what constitutes the rules of *Obanzai*. As explained earlier, in *Obanzai*, vegetables are the major ingredients and stewing is the most common cooking method. Likewise, the basic pattern of an *Obanzai* meal comprises one soup and three courses. These “rules,” however, are by no means definite and fixed.

Obanzai is a cuisine culture, and a culture changes over the time. Hence, it is hardly possible to figure out rules in *Obanzai* that are applicable everywhere across its long history. All we can do is an analysis of *Obanzai*'s rules in a certain time period or a single household, although the reader may find some of the descriptions provided above helpful to detect patterns, if not definite rules, of *Obanzai*.

Conclusion

Up to this point we have discussed what constitutes *Obanzai*. With the result of the discussion, I meant to publish a definition of *Obanzai* and provide recommendations toward better preservation of the cuisine culture. Unfortunately, however, at this point this paper can put forward no concrete recommendations, but only descriptive analyses of *Obanzai*.

In the meantime, it is the case that little research has been done as to *Obanzai*. The available literature concerns mostly Shige O'mura's works, which has had much to do with the shape of today's *Obanzai*. And thus the present investigation also has ended up focusing mainly on her works.

The next question should address in detail the mechanism through which *Obanzai* has been inherited over the time. For that purpose, more careful research methods and approaches, including concrete case studies, are to be developed and employed. More case studies will allow us to fulfill what is still missing in this paper and grasp the entire contour of *Obanzai* more clearly.

Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the members of Obanzai Workshop and especially the preliminary group, who devoted precious time to the research despite their busy schedule.