

Book Review

Japan's Dietary Transition and its Impacts. By V. Smil and K. Kobayashi, 2012. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 229 pages, US \$29.00, ISBN 978-0-262-01782-4.

It is often noted by outside observers that the intricacies, formalities and idiosyncrasies of Japanese culture can befuddle even the most cosmopolitan of globetrotters. On a planet crudely organized around 'in-groups'—the West, the Muslim world, the Sino Kingdom—the Japanese represent an unusually stark example of inward-looking ethnic uniqueness, shaped by a fascinating human and natural history whose effects linger to this day. This concept of cultural inimitability rings particularly true when one analyzes the nation's foodstuffs, for Japanese cuisine is a veritable smorgasbord of culinary innovation, assimilation and diversity. In the new hardcover *Japan's Dietary Transition and its Impacts*, the perennially lucid Vaclav Smil joins forces with the University of Tokyo academic Kazuhiko Kobayashi to present a magisterial overview of the composition, complexities and gradual evolution of the Japanese diet. Adopting a characteristically macro-analytic perspective, the book touches on themes likely to be of interest to a broad category of readers, including the roots of Japan's enviable life expectancy, the health benefits of assorted Japanese food choices and the sustainability implications of the Japanese way of life.

This tome is not designed for specialists seeking detailed investigation of a specific topical area. The authors assume an all-encompassing approach, and contend in the introduction that the 'realities of more than a century of gradual but profound dietary changes with major domestic and foreign implications are of interest to many readers'. The term 'readers' in this context is explicitly generically defined; the authors say as much, noting that the material 'can be read with some profit by non-specialists who seek reliable information about a remarkable historical, economic, social, and nutritional phenomena'.

Divided into several sections, the volume mingles encyclopedic statistics with incisive facts. The material is presented clearly, with sobering but revealing statistics deployed throughout. Throughout this process, no attempt is made to idealize the Japanese food choices, which have led to, *inter alia*, nitrate leeching, marine life depletion, far-reaching land degradation and the frustration of coordinated international efforts to preserve endangered whale and tuna species. Like many holistically minded environmental books, it calls to the fore issues of which the average reader may not be aware (such as the stunning fact that over 25 billion disposable chopsticks are used in Japan every year). Other interesting discussions

include exploration of virtual water imports through the outsourcing of agriculture, debunking the myths about the benefits of Japanese gastronomic exports and scrutiny of reasons potentially underlying the country's stunning longevity (epitomized in the fact that the country contains the world's largest collection of centenarians).

Faults within the text are few but, alas, make an appearance. This reviewer found the incessant use of transcribed Japanese words unduly arduous to navigate. At times, constant references to statistics can be off-putting to a more casual or layman reader (this reviewer must also admit to glazed eyes on more than one occasion), even though Smil possesses an uncanny knack for elegantly presenting back-of-the-envelope calculations¹. Equally irksome was a recurring issue with spelling mistakes. The text would certainly have benefited from more rigorous revision; embarrassingly, even the authors' biographies were not exempt from this trend of editorial sloppiness.

Invariably, readers of this text cannot help but ask what Japan's future holds. No grandiose conjectures or assumption-laden speculations are offered here; instead, emerging developments—demographic, economic, environmental and social—are systemically analyzed. An uncertain picture is the unsatisfying result, as contradictory Japan is at once frugal yet gluttonous, precarious yet stable, and advancing yet falling. Throughout the quagmire, Smil (a scholar who is certainly no stranger to grand intellectual explorations of a given topic, e.g. Smil²; indeed, a country-specific analysis is a departure from his usual fare) and Kobayashi are excellent guides, and no one interested in the nexus of food and environment should look with equanimity on missing their latest comprehensive examination.

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- 2 Smil, V. 2003. *The Earth's Biosphere: Evolution, Dynamics, and Change*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.