

artfoodandpolitics

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On "Fuhyo Higai" (Harmful Rumor)



As a student who is researching on consumerism and nationalism in Japanese food movements, I am very concerned about the impact of this tragedy, especially that of radiation contamination on foodscapes in Japan. I am alarmed in particular by the intensive use of the word "Harmful Rumor" (Fuhyo Higai, 風評被害) to address the sympathy for farmers and fishermen in affected area. Although I do sympathize for them, even grow angry out of the sympathy for them, I am apprehended to have this word "Fuhyo Higai" represent my sincere concerns.

Upon the discovery of radioactive substances contained in spinach and raw milk produced in the surrounding area of Fukushima nuclear plants exceeding the tentative standards, on March 21st, the government ordered to suspend the shipping of spinach and kakina (a kind of leaf vegetables) from Fukushima, Ibaraki, Tochigi, and Gunma prefectures, and raw milk from Fukushima prefecture. Although this suspension was limited to those three items, the market did not accept other items from 4 prefectures. Since then additional items got suspended and also a part of suspensions were lifted ([the list of items whose shipments was ordered to be suspended as of April 18th, 2011](#)), yet consumers' avoidance of any produce from

those prefectures spreads regardless of the absence of official suspension orders. Farmers already suffering from the ravage caused by earthquakes and tsunami are put in even tougher situation.

On March 28th, governors of 8 prefectures, those 4 plus Saitama, Chiba, Tokyo, and Kanagawa, made an official request to the government to ease the standards and to change the scope of suspensions from prefecture level to town level. Indeed diffusion of radioactive substances was affected by wind blows, thus within the same prefecture the difference in radiation contamination level had been observed. Thus, on April 4th, the government announced that [regarding the area where town basis monitoring would be available, the suspensions of shipment would be ordered on town basis](#). Under this new rule, the suspension order was lifted in some parts of 4 prefectures, instead, some towns in Chiba prefecture was added to the list. However, the government did not ease the standards despite the claim from 8 prefecture governors on 28th that "it is too strict comparing to international standards."

Still, produces from affected area are in deep disfavor with consumers.

This is a picture shot by my friend in Yokohama, Kanagawa on April 12th. The sign reads "As advertised, only on 12th and 13th: Secure and Safe Vegetables, A delicate bitterness is perfect for hot pot!, Grown in Ibaraki, Mizuna (a kind of leaf vegetables), 69 yen". My friend holds her judgment on why it was on sale (could be simply due to a wholesale deal, or any problem in its freshness), but still says the price was "impossible", given that Mizuna is usually sold for about 140 yen.



She took another picture of "Secure and Safe" (安心・安全) sign onslaught. It was almost too hysterical for her to appear as a joke.

We have to ask why "Secure and Safe" needs to be publicized for consumers that insistently, almost absurdly. The answer seems pretty much simple to me: consumers are skeptical, or at least uncertain about the safety of allegedly "safe" foods. People do not trust the official safety standards.

In this context, Fuhyo Higai suggests that it is a consumers' overreaction. Consumers should not be unreasonable to avoid purchasing those foods, given that their radiation level is "below the standard", thus "safe". The context in which the word "Fuhyo Higai" is used also encourages consumers to willingly purchase foods from affected area in order to support producers in difficulties. The photo on the top of this entry was shot on March 27th. The sign reads "We support Ibaraki. Lettuce from Marujo shipping coop, Grown in Yachiyo, Ibaraki. We are selling foods that we confirmed secure and safe by checking and measuring (their radiation level). Please purchase them free from anxiety."

Here I would like to point out some problems of "the standards" by which the government determine whether given food is safe or not. Originally, in Japan, there did not exist the legal standards regarding radioactive substance contained in foods. On March 17th, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) announced that thereafter, by referring to [the](#)

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[Guideline on Restriction of Food Intake issued by Nuclear Safety Commission in 2010](#), they would monitor the radiation level and set restrictions on shipment and on intake. This guideline is still active as the tentative standards until today. Although the governors claimed that the standards was too strict, just simple comparisons of numbers reveal this claim highly doubtful. For example, since the Chernobyl accident, [Japan has been banning the import of foods whose radioactive Caesium \(Caesium-134 + Caesium-137\) level exceed 370Bq/kg](#), while in the current tentative standards in Japan Caesium level is set on 500Bq/kg. When it comes to the standards of drinking water, Japan had been following the WHO standards in which the level of Iodine-131, and Caesium-137 was both set on 10Bq/l. However, after the MHLW notification on March 17th, the level of Iodine-131, and Caesium was raised to, respectively, 300Bq/l, and 200Bq/l. These facts illustrate how the standards, and the alleged safety based on the standards, are indeed arbitrary. Yet, [Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano has been repeating that the standards is set under the assumption that if one keeps consuming that item throughout life, it is possible that one's health may be affected, and that therefore occasional consumption of even those items whose radiation level exceed the standards should not cause any immediate problem](#). Some experts follow the official statements, mollify people not to panic, and even give useful just-in-case tricks to reduce radioactive substances on foods by "washing them thoroughly".

Tossed by confusing, rather deceptive information, if consumers including my friend who is currently pregnant, and my another friend who is nursing her newborn, "cannot dare to buy" what they are not a hundred percent sure, I do not believe that it is an irrational reaction.

Producers are indeed in extremely difficulties. And many people are sincerely sympathetic for them. However, I maintain that it is not consumers, but is Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) who has to support producers. This is fundamentally a compensation problem. Not a problem that should be solved by conscience, or courage, of people at their own cost and risk. Fuhyo Higai is the idea that sneakily transfer the responsibility of redressing affected producers to conscientious consumers. This is exactly the same logic underlying so-called "ethical consumption".

Ethical consumption can be understood as a type of consumption which is not made for the sake of individual egoistic interest, instead, is motivated by concerns for and awareness of its effect on wider social and political issues, e.g. environmental damage, labor exploitations, problems associated with globalizing economy, animal rights, etc. From boycott against goods that are regarded unethical to active purchasing of goods that are considered as ethical, it takes various forms. Through the research of Whole Foods Market shoppers, Josée Johnston points out that the emergence of the "citizen-consumer hybrid", the most recent form of ethical consumption, can be understood as **a reaction to the social inequality and ecological deterioration of neo-liberal capitalism and its associated veneration of market-based based solutions**. The rise of ethical consumption opportunities, namely, the trend in which individuals feel responsible for taking care of the environment and ethics at the moment of consumption, represents "the privatization of social and ecological concerns as the neo-liberal state distances itself from responsibility to ensure sustainable means of social reproduction" (Johnston 2008 "The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market" in *Theory and Society* 37: 262).

Johnston's point can be applied to the current situation in Japan. Encouraging consumers to purchase allegedly safe foods to support producers is nothing but another case of privatization of social concerns.

I also would like to emphasize the injustice of having farmers in affected area keep production based upon arbitrary standards. [On April 8th, Nuclear Emergency Response Headquarters in Cabinet Office \(NERH\) set the restriction standards on planting of rice on 5000Bq/kg soil](#). The field whose radiation level exceeds 5000Bq/kg will be banned to cultivate rice, but as long as its level is below that, producers can keep producing rice. (cf. [the radiation in soil monitored in Fukushima as of April 12th](#)) According to NERH, this number was calculated by assuming that 10% of radioactive Caesium in soil would be transmitted to crops. Thus based upon the MHLW standards on radiation level of food, 500Bq/kg, the maximum level of soil radiation was set on 5000Bq/kg. Namely, the standards was set by referring to consumers' interest (if not satisfying) only, without considering producers' interest at all. Just imagine, working on soil that is contaminated with 5000Bq/kg of radiation, almost everyday for 160 days from planting to cropping. This means not only continuous direct contacts with contaminated soil, but also continuous intakes of contaminated dust, that cause serious health damage by internal exposure to radiation.

It was told that although they realized that something was wrong with fishes by watching cats in town got abnormal, people in Minamata could not stop taking fishes. Because it was their lives. There are people went back to and are still living in their home in restricted area in Chernobyl. Because it was their homes. Knowing the danger, there still may be farmers keep cultivating their contaminated soil. That is life, history, culture, affection and at the end of the day, that may be the humanity. Yet, it does not at all exempt the government from responsibility to provide farmers with substantive information of possible danger and to stop them engaging in dangerous work, and TEPCO from responsibility to compensate them. At all.

Under the Fuhyo Higai hype, encouragement for consumers to support farmers and encouragement for farmers to be tough are nothing more or less than the trick to obscure what should be taken care of by those who are really responsible.

The only way to prevent Fuhyo Higai in its original sense, I believe, is to make the standards on food radiation as well as that on soil radiation genuinely strict, at least consistent with international standards and Japanese past standards, and to conduct thorough monitoring of radiation level in order to retrieve consumers' trust on foods on the market. AND this must be paired with the sincere and substantial compensations to producers who have to give up cultivating on their land and selling their products under the strict standards. By sincere and substantial, I mean that the affected farmers should get compensated for their loss of expected profit, not only for this year, but for all coming years of crops, given the considerably long half-life of radioactive substances. Still, we should never forget that there is no way to compensate the dignity of farmers who have to give up their lands and lives.

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