

worlds because she was neither;⁵ all her films prove that Chadha possesses the same ease of mobility, the same chameleon “negative capability” of being able to imaginatively inhabit differing worlds. Like Nair, Chadha grasps the immigrant subjectivity complete in all its elation and angst. She operates from a postcolonial feminist rhetorical space and has developed her own voice in the increasingly growing plethora of exile discourses.

What’s Cooking?—as this essay has attempted to prove—stands relevantly poised at the new millennium with its intelligent inroads into the problematic of cultural conflicts. The film maps itself over the emerging cinematic genre of postcolonial cultural crossings, especially against recent examples like Damien O’Donnell’s *East is East* (1999), Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding*, and others. For Chadha, as for many of her contemporaries, the new world order is inevitably and irrevocably a mixed one. And her constant and consistent connection between matters cultural and culinary underscores the hybridization of contemporary metropolitan life.

Notes

1. Gaye Poole, Preface to *Reel Meals, Set Meals: Food in Film and Theatre* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2001), xi.
2. Alan Saunders, Foreword to Poole, *Reel Meals*, 5.
3. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 132.
4. *Ibid.* 111.
5. *Ibid.*

In Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film
 edited by Anne L. Bower 2004
 New York & London: Routledge
 pp. 27-40

3

Food, Play, Business, and the Image of Japan in Itami Juzo’s *Tampopo*

MICHAEL ASHKENAZI

This essay examines the image of “Japaneseness” created by the director Itami Juzo as he looks at Japan through the lens of food in his 1985 film *Tampopo*.¹ The film, which chronicles the (re)construction of the character Tampopo’s noodle restaurant, hybridizes “traditional” and “modern” aspects of Japan. Through multiple images of food and food consumption, through a narrative structure that owes much to traditional Japanese theater, and through sly digs at the Japanese establishment, Itami touches on, and illuminates, much of how Japan views itself.

Two main aspects of the film are examined here. The first is the nature of the foods shown, prepared, and consumed. Itami chose those foods with great care, and each instance of food refers to multiple layers of social reality within Japanese culture (with some subtle satirical digs). My essay attempts to advance an answer to the question of why certain foods are featured. A second aspect to be dealt with here is the interplay of social relations and status that all scholars and native Japanese agree are critical for understanding Japanese society. Virtually all important relationships and social issues are expressed in the film through individuals’ relationships to food rather than directly. Among the social issues are sex and violence, and the breakdown of Japan’s traditional isolationist position: in some ways, Itami prophesies the rise of the multicultural Japan of the twenty-first century. Though Itami the satirist often exuberantly overshadows Itami the social realist and Itami the filmmaker, the film’s unusual nonlinear structure, the images it evokes, and its peculiarly

sober view of Japan offer particularly useful insights into the relationship between the Japanese and their food.

A brief summary of the plot is useful, though it must be noted that the plot is often interrupted by asides—sketches of Japanese life that bear little relationship to the main story except that they reflect on the common theme of food. As in Japanese Kabuki and Noh drama, these asides embellish the theme rather than the main story. These asides are briefly noted in a separate paragraph below.

A milk-tanker driver, Goro (Tutomu Yamazaki), and his assistant, Gan (Ken Watanabe), are struck by pangs of hunger—Gan has been reading a book describing the “art of noodle eating”—and stop at a rundown noodle restaurant run by the depressed widow Tampopo (Nobuko Miyamoto), who is fancied by Pisken (Rikiya Yasuoka), a builder. After an exchange of words, Goro is attacked by Pisken and his men. Waking up in Tampopo’s kitchen after a beating, he critiques Tampopo’s noodles. Because of his masterful critique, she begs him to be her sensei (master teacher), and teach her to make proper noodles. Goro’s training regimen, known as *seishin* (spiritual training; a form of training for personnel in large Japanese corporations) includes not only speed and quality trials, but physical education. Tampopo and Goro then start a lengthy process of observing their competitors, with Goro critiquing each shop: a shop full of wasteful motion and inattention to customers is contrasted with a shop run by two old men in perfect harmony with their customers and their food. A young *Sapporo ramen* (a type of popular noodle) cook shows attention to customers. Goro introduces Tampopo to a group of homeless men, whose leader, a former professor, is an expert on noodles, and he joins the Tampopo support team. Goro and Tampopo have a brief romantic evening. Following a fistfight between Pisken and Goro the two men become friends, and the builder Pisken joins the team, remodeling Tampopo’s restaurant as well as giving Tampopo herself a makeover. Tampopo, who is having difficulty with the soup base for the noodles, steals a secret recipe from a Chinese noodle shop. Eating with her friends at a *nihonsoba* (buckwheat noodle) shop, she saves the life of a wealthy old man who is choking on some food, and he offers her the assistance of Shuhei, his chauffeur and cook, who helps her steal the secret of perfect noodle dough from another Chinese shop. Finally, Pisken teaches her the secret of his family’s special garnish, and the new Tampopo noodle shop is born. A long queue forms outside the prosperous shop, and the various helpers depart in silence.

The film actually opens with two asides; other asides are interwoven throughout the narrative. First, a *yakuza* (organized crime) boss (Koji Yakusho), his mistress (Fukumi Kuroda), and his henchmen (carrying a luxurious picnic) attend a film, and the *yakuza* boss addresses us, the viewers. The film then moves to a scene of a young man being taught to eat noodles by an old noodle master. The *yakuza* boss and his mistress appear from time to time throughout the film in a continuous series of food consumption and erotic

activity. In other asides, a group of senior businessmen are confounded by a Western menu, just as a class in etiquette training for young women is disrupted by a Westerner enjoying a plate of spaghetti. An old lady walks into a luxury convenience store late at night; she handles and damages the products, which results in her being chased by the clerk. A thief is hustled by a con man in a restaurant and then arrested by a detective, but the camera abandons them to follow a husband rushing to the bedside of his dying wife. In her last dying act, she cooks food for her family. A man with a toothache hallucinates about Chinese dumplings, then offers an ice cream to a child whose parents are attempting to maintain an organic lifestyle. In the penultimate scene, the *yakuza* is shot, but before dying he talks to his mistress about some special sausages he has never tried. Whether in the film’s main storyline or in the various asides, the setting is almost wholly within an urban landscape, making this Japanese film remarkable for the fact that there is not a cherry blossom nor a pretty temple, shrine, or perfect volcano to be seen: Itami’s Japan is a thoroughly modern and cosmopolitan one.

The Foods

A large number of meals and items of food are consumed throughout the film. However, within the broad spectrum of Japanese cuisine, which encompasses many types of food,² Itami has chosen to show only a few of the foods that Japanese people consume. An intriguing question that arises is, therefore, “Why those foods?” It is obviously possible to reply that Itami simply liked those foods, but Japanese culture has exhibited a fondness for visual and verbal puns and for extracting meaning from the juxtaposition of items and activities, and it is therefore likely that these foods were chosen with special care. However, the implications and even symbolic meanings of these foods cannot be understood without some understanding of the underlying cultural contexts.

Noodles

The major food in this film is noodles, and this would appear to be paradoxical. “Everyone” knows that the Japanese staple is rice, yet rice appears only twice in the film, in very specific contexts. In fact, the Japanese eat a wide array of noodles. These can roughly be divided into three classes: indigenous Japanese noodles; noodles of Chinese origin; and European noodles, such as spaghetti.

Japanese-style noodles come in two major classes (there are others that we can afford to ignore here). Both *soba* (thin buckwheat noodles) and *udon* (usually thick wheat noodles) are consumed in or with a broth based on traditional Japanese *dashi* (bonito and seaweed stock). Various garnishes—fried tofu, mochi rice cake, duck meat, fish of various types, leeks and/or other vegetables, and many other ingredients—are added.

There are also a large variety of Chinese-origin noodle dishes. These are usually crinkled egg-flour noodles that are most often, as in the film, served in a pork- or other meat-based stock with vegetables, often referred to as ramen (Japanese rendition of the Chinese lo-mien) or as *chūka soba* (Chinese soba). Like Japanese noodles, they are served in a bowl of stock, and garnished according to choice. One particular variant of Chinese-style noodles—*Sapporo ramen*, named for Sapporo, the capital of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island—should be kept in mind.

Spaghetti has been tremendously popular in Japan, as elsewhere. It is usually served on a plate with the usual Italian-style sauces, though oddities such as spaghetti sandwiches (confined, to the best of my knowledge, to Japan and Scotland) and fried spaghetti are available.

Japanese-style and Chinese-style noodles can be clearly distinguished. First, most dedicated noodle shops, of which there are a great number, will serve either one or the other, and will be clearly identified as such. Japanese noodle shops, usually referred to as *sobaya*, will have Japanese décor, and usually sport a blue or a white *noren* (a small banner suspended over the shop entrance to announce it is open). Chinese noodle shops will have a white *noren* with red characters, and probably a Greek-key design. Their interiors often include some evocation of China as well.

The presentation of Chinese and Japanese noodle dishes is also clearly identified, even in shops that sell both. Chinese noodles come in white porcelain bowls, often with a motif of flowers or a classic Greek-key design around the rim. Japanese soba comes in earthenware bowls, often in colors of black or brown, with little or no decoration. The use of specific utensils for specific foods is well documented in Japanese food culture,³ and so it is not surprising to find that a specific garnish-noodle combination will appear in a specific type (color, shape, glaze) of bowl for Japanese noodles. Finally, European noodles will appear, of course, on a European-style plate with fork and spoon.

For those with a statistical bent, let me note that noodles are consumed in eleven scenes in *Tampopo*. One noodle dish is Japanese and one is European; all the rest are Chinese, with one instance of a *Sapporo ramen*, clearly identified by the headband and long hair of the cook (emulating the Ainu natives of Hokkaido, and thus signifying Sapporo) and a small figurine of a bear.

Certainly the choice of noodles as the focus of the film is not accidental. Noodles are a "minor" food in Japanese cuisine and do not have the sacerdotal and formal context of rice. However, they are quintessentially popular, consumed in standing-only bars as well as noodle specialty shops, and can also be a gourmet food. Thus the issue of class, in its Japanese guise, emerges through this most humble and common of Japanese dishes.

Japanese Foods

Interestingly enough, there are only two instances involving the consumption of indigenous Japanese foods in the entire film. That having been said, it must

also be noted that the Japanese have been inveterate borrowers of foreign culture virtually since the formation of Japanese culture in the fourth or fifth century CE. The original diet of the inhabitants of the islands—millet, iris bulbs, and shellfish—was modified by borrowings from the Chinese and the Koreans. Rice replaced millet as a staple. A formal dining arrangement evolved over centuries, as did the standard structure of the Japanese meal, *ichiju sansai* (one soup, three side dishes, and rice as an unstated given).⁴

Significantly, "native" Japanese foods are shown in only two scenes. On the morning after meeting *Tampopo*, while recovering from the beating he received at the hand of *Pisken* and his men, the truck driver *Goro* and his sidekick *Gan* are served a traditional breakfast: rice, seaweed, and raw egg beaten into *natto* (fermented beans). In this scene, *Itami* places the action in context. The film takes place in eastern Japan, where *natto* would be very accepted; western Japanese from the Kansai (Osaka-Kyoto) area and farther westward are as horrified by the strong smell and unctuous texture of *natto* as are most foreigners. *Tampopo* is a traditional woman (she makes her own pickles, which most housewives no longer do, but which was a measure of a housewife's domestic skills in the past), and her household is a traditional one (with a Japanese breakfast rather than today's more common toast and coffee).

The second scene that shows Japanese foods takes place at a Japanese noodle shop, decorated in conventional Japanese style, with both tables and tatami mat seating. An old man is brought in by his wife, who then departs in her chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce. He orders *kamo-nan[ban] soba* (soba noodles in stock garnished with slices of duck and leeks); *tempura soba* (soba noodles in stock garnished with battered deep-fried prawn) and *oshiruko* (a thick sweet soup—almost a porridge—of azuki beans garnished with balls of *mochi* (pounded glutinous rice cakes). It has to be said that these foods may have been chosen simply because *Itami* likes them; however, *Itami* cannot have been ignorant of the fact that all three of these Japanese dishes have foreign referents. Foods labeled *nanban* (meaning "foreign" or "barbarian" style) are those introduced initially by the Portuguese and Spanish, who had great influence on Japan in the sixteenth century. The same is true of *tempura*, the deep fried delicacies that are today a mainstay of Japanese haute-cuisine; the word *tempura*, some scholars believe, is derived from the Portuguese term *tempera* (with egg). And *oshiruko* is part of the class of *okashi*, confectionery, which, while it is usually called *wagashi* (Japanese sweets) to distinguish it from *yogashi* (cakes and other Western confectionery), was introduced into Japan from China.

Japanese foods displayed in the film are thus true to type as an eclectic mixture of influences and foodstuffs that the Japanese have made uniquely their own. In effect, these foods celebrate the diversity within homogeneity that is the true expression of Japanese culture.

Non-Japanese Foods

In Japanese cuisine, as in the film, foreign influences have been formative in the creation of a unique cultural expression. I have argued elsewhere, following Ivan Morris, that Japanese food, as well as much else of its material culture, must be seen in terms of a process of importation followed by a process of digestion; I have labeled this process "Japanization."⁵ Foreign influences are absorbed, then transformed and fitted into the Japanese scheme of things socially, behaviorally, and aesthetically. Thus, the fact that most of the foods (in about thirty-two different food scenes throughout the film) are of non-Japanese derivation is unimportant. These are Japanese foods because that is what the Japanese eat, and, in fact, the entire culture of Japan is composed of objects, actions, and ideas of non-Japanese origin that the Japanese have modified to their taste (in both senses of the word). Two cultural influences predominate, and both are present in the film: East Asian and European. (Interestingly, Itami did not display American fast food or American cuisine, perhaps because, insofar as the former goes, he felt there were boundaries of taste he did not want to overstep.)

Excepting noodles, which have been dealt with above, there are some other instances of Chinese foods being consumed. In the film, there appears to be a thread running through the choice of Chinese foods, which is also common to the appearance of another food culture—that of Korea. The thread here is the contrast between elite and common fare. In regard to the Chinese food, in a scene unrelated to the rest of the story line, we see a tout discussing a business proposition with an elderly, unworldly man who we learn is a professor from Tokyo University (Japan's most prestigious and powerful institute of learning). They are in an expensive Chinese restaurant, and while he listens to the pitch the professor engulfs a large number of pieces of Peking duck wrapped in pancakes—one of the crowning achievements of Northern Chinese cuisine. The professor agrees to give his lifetime savings to the tout for investment. The tout hurries off to get things arranged, and we discover two things: the tout is a con man, and the "professor" is actually a small-time thief who has picked the con man's overstuffed wallet. The professor is then and there collared by a detective, and as the two leave the restaurant they are almost run over by a man running by who is hurrying home to his dying wife. Before the wife dies, as an act of delaying the inevitable and of expressing his grief and perhaps love, the husband urges her to cook a meal. She quickly prepares some *chahan*, fried leftover rice with vegetables—a staple of inexpensive Chinese noodle shops and of everyday home fare.

In both scenes, the origin of the food is Chinese, but through juxtaposition, an expensive delicacy is directly related to an everyday home food. This domestication of the foreign is also apparent in the consumption of Korean food. In the scene following the housewife's death, Goro and Tampopo go out for dinner at a Korean restaurant, and Tampopo plays the part of the traditional woman, wrapping morsels of grilled meat in lettuce leaves and offering

them to her companion. This is also the only scene in which Tampopo and Goro discuss their personal lives. Thus, again, the foreign exotic is domesticated and made a part of *uchi*, the intimate realm of Japanese life.

The European foods displayed in *Tampopo* are also the foods of the powerful as well as the powerless: all of the Western foods appear in the paradigms of social power that interest Itami. The central figure here is that of the *yakuza* boss. He is dressed stylishly when he addresses the audience at the beginning of the film, much as an actor in Kabuki theater might address an audience. While he dreams of traditional foods, imagining delicacies on his deathbed, what he actually consumes is Western food, along with his other pleasures, films and sex. And, unsurprisingly, for a country where the criminal underworld is well integrated into business culture, while he is entertaining his girlfriend with food and sex, a group of managers and businesspeople gather in a French restaurant in the same hotel.

The businessmen are, with one exception, ignorant of Western food culture and stuck in a group mentality, but the reverse is true of the common people, as is shown via members of a homeless gang, who are at the other end of the social scale. In a discussion aimed at Tampopo (who is positioned at the camera's point of view), they discuss and critique the various foods and wine they have gathered from the garbage bins of elite restaurants. Itami is obviously casting a sly eye on the foibles of his countrymen. In yet another scene featuring Western food (spaghetti), a middle-aged manners-school teacher has brought her class to a restaurant to teach these young Japanese women the secrets of Western etiquette. "Unlike the Japanese, who make a slurping noise when eating noodles, Westerners never slurp. It's all done very quietly," the matron says to her attentive class. Their efforts to consume spaghetti in the approved "Western" style are disrupted by the sight of a Westerner happily slurping away at his spaghetti, a sly smile on his face. It should be added that Itami hid a joke within a joke here: the foreigner consuming spaghetti is in real life a well-known Tokyo restaurateur, one of the first to open a Cordon Bleu restaurant there. Itami, whose sympathies are often with the powerless, seems to be indicating here that while the elite in Japan are often prisoners of the social forms they control, the powerless are free to choose from many cultural paradigms, and do so with gusto.

Class and Quality in Japanese Food

Like any other cuisine (the term here following Jack Goody⁶), Japanese food establishments can be placed on a scale of quality and of class. By class is meant, simply, price: higher class establishments cost more, for the producer and consumer alike. Quality is a far more difficult issue. The Japanese tend to be fastidious, highly aware consumers.⁷ The idea of providing quality services and goods permeates Japanese society for a variety of social and historical reasons.⁸ The thread of quality, of the need to be a proper consumer—enlightened, open, demanding—runs through the film. To improve the quality of her

noodles, Tampopo takes a series of lessons from individuals occupying very different stations in life: from Goro the driver, from the homeless professor, from Chinese cooks, from Shuhei the chauffeur. And, in line with Japanese management and business views,⁹ improving the product by attention to every tiny detail is impossible without *seishin*: the process of improving the person, both physically and mentally, that is intrinsic to most Japanese manpower management theory.¹⁰ Significantly, quality is not related, in Japanese social theory, to class in the Marxian or British sense. It is related rather to the concept of self-cultivation, of providing oneself with a skill that, whatever one's class, is practiced to the utmost: the secret, many say, of Japanese economic success.

Practice as a consumer and practice as a producer are directly related in the Japanese view, and Itami takes no exception to that view. Tampopo is expected, and expects herself, to work hard and to use whatever tools are necessary to improve her lot in life. And though, as she says to a competitor, those who eat noodles are all amateurs, in the Japanese view, amateurs are experts who do not choose to become pros, to make money from their expertise. Indeed, in modern Japanese culture the concept of *gurume* has become a significant linguistic icon. A *gurume* is not merely someone who enjoys food. A *gurume* (of course, derived from the French word *gourmet*) is someone who knows food—who understands its *honme*, or essence.

During the years of Japan's greatest economic success, from the 1970s to the early 1990s, *gurume* activities—restaurants, talk shows, food shows, food tours—were plentiful. The object was not merely to entertain oneself, nor, for that matter, solely to engage in conspicuous consumption, which the Japanese did to a great degree. It was also related to the concept of *seishin*. In this view, a *gurume* is someone with an understanding and appreciation of culture as it emerges in food: in effect, a modern consumer, aware of the balances between price and quality, tradition and change.¹¹ Itami, though never the traditionalist, accepts this cultural construct as a given. Modern Japan is not the cherry-blossom and Mt. Fuji Japan of the past. Neither of these icons appears in the film, nor do traditional clothes, temples, or any of the other items that signify Japan to the West. Itami's Japan is instead the Japan of its people, whose cultural principles have now left the old material culture behind while maintaining the inner culture of Japanese-ness within the new context of modern life.

The Social Relationships

Japanese society has been characterized as being hierarchic, group oriented, obsessed with cleanliness and formality, dedicated to providing good education, and strongly oriented toward the family.¹² All of these are true to a degree, and all, of course, are not absolutes. The Japan that until the 1970s was conservative and scored high on all of the aforementioned qualities is beginning to change. There is less formality in Japanese life today than there was in the middle of the twentieth century. There is evidence that the Japanese are

not as group oriented as many scholars once seemed to think.¹³ The incidence of divorce and other marital strains is rising.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Japanese society is far more rigid than is the norm in European or American societies. It is useful, therefore, to look at the social relations Itami portrays in *Tampopo*.

It should be said at the outset that these social relationships are all portrayed through the lens of the protagonists' relationships to food. And while some of these relationships are familiar to non-Japanese people, some of them have particular Japanese twists to them that ought to be examined more closely.

Japanese culture, as noted above, has borrowed many of its features from China; these imports include elements of the Confucian sociopolitical philosophy. Within the Confucian system, pride of place is given to a set of five hierarchical relationships, those of parent and child; ruler and ruled; husband and wife; teacher and student; and friend and friend. This view of interpersonal dealings has had great impact on Japanese social relations.

In the modern world, however, things are not simple, as Itami demonstrates. The child-parent relationship is still important (and the only intact one in the film). Even here, Itami cannot resist a dig at this presumably secure aspect of society: a young child bearing a handwritten note from a parent obsessed with natural foods is seduced into partaking of an ice cream. The seducer himself is obsessed by food to the point that he has allowed a tooth to rot in his head while he has fantasies of consuming Chinese delicacies.

Looking at family relationships, it becomes apparent that there is no single "standard" husband + wife + children relationship in the entire film. The closest one comes to such a family group is in the scene of a dying woman whose husband cannot find any other way of expressing his grief or helping his dying spouse than by ordering her to cook one final meal, then consuming it with his children as an expression of devotion. In Itami's view, the husband-wife relationship is virtually nonexistent in its Confucian and conservative qualities. One couple we see is an infirm and compulsive old man and his wealth-besotted younger wife who deals with him like her favorite lapdog. And the two main protagonists exist outside marriage: Tampopo is a widowed woman and Goro is a divorced man. It is not, apparently, that Itami has anything against marriage or the family (he apparently had a happy and lengthy marriage to the actress Miyamoto Nobuko, the star of *Tampopo* and of his other films). It is rather that, unlike Japanese conservatives, Itami is ready to state that the Japanese family system is not the be-all and end-all of Japanese society. Marriages and families are necessary—they exist—but absence of the normative arrangements is not a destroyer of Japanese society. Nor is marriage the necessary inner location in which sex takes place.

Like many other societies, the Japanese are obsessed with sex, and, like many other societies, often find that sex is a difficult and culture-ridden process. There are two clear sexual contrasts that Itami gleefully explores. One is the relationship between the food-obsessed *yakuza* boss and his girlfriend; the

other is the relationship between Tampopo and Goro, her truck-driver mentor. The *yakuza* boss and his companion consummate their relationship joyously in two scenes in the film, in which sexuality is expressed by the erotic use of various foods—whipped cream, *ebi-odori* (a bowl of live “dancing prawn” in strong liquor), and a raw egg passed from mouth to mouth by the lovers to enhance sex, until the crushed yolk expresses their climax. The second sexual liaison is expressed in much more repressed terms—Goro’s shy brushing of his hair in the bath, using Tampopo’s hair brush, and her own nervous handling of underpants she folds and leaves for him to use.

Japanese have expressed their sexuality in ways that may seem odd, even bizarre to members of other cultures who have other cultural tastes.¹⁵ A historic pedophilic preference for prepubescent women is well recorded,¹⁶ and Itami cocks a judicious eye at it, as the *yakuza* boss lustfully consumes a raw oyster spotted with blood from the hands of a prepubescent *ama* (diving girl). (In fact, most *ama* are in their forties and fifties.¹⁷) The blood on the shellfish actually comes from the man’s lips: an inversion of roles that Itami clearly relishes. The erotic symbolism of eggs is well documented in Japan as well.¹⁸ And the same is true of the *ebi-odori*: The death throes of the fish on the mistress’s belly are not only erotic, but they also evoke that very Japanese thrill of death in association with sex.¹⁹

Stepping outside the relationships of family members and lovers, it seems that the Confucian virtues are somewhat upheld. There are two relationships that Itami deals with sympathetically and at length: the relationship between pupil and master, and the relationship younger people have with the aged.

Any student of the martial arts or viewer of martial arts films will be familiar with the want-to-be-a-disciple scene. The sincere student mortifies himself before the master until accepted as a student.²⁰ This is precisely what Tampopo does when Goro shows her he is a master of noodles. And, indeed, he takes her on as his *deshi* (disciple). The concept is so important (and yet, even for Itami, slightly ridiculous) that one of the opening scenes of the film—again, detached from the main storyline—shows an elderly “noodles professor” instructing an eager young disciple in the mysteries of eating noodles. The “way,” as many Japanese sages have noted gravely, can indeed be found in many things, and this includes, apparently, noodles. Whether this is a reaffirmation of the Zen desire for both obscurity and simplicity, or whether the director was merely delivering a sly dig at the portentousness (and pretentiousness) of “Oriental philosophy” can be left, in traditional Zen fashion, to the decision of the viewer.

And the role of the teacher, Itami continues, is to make a student greater than oneself. At the end of the film, with Tampopo established as a master of her craft, the teachers (Goro and others), masters all, fade unnoticed into the background. In effect, Tampopo’s real teacher has been the totality of the Japanese culture.

Like any other modern society, Japan has a problem with its aging population. Birthrates have been shrinking since World War II, and yet the Japanese population has remained virtually constant. The “graying” of the Japanese population is causing a great deal of concern to the authorities.²¹ The Japanese, who enjoy strong family ties, with a Confucian concern for the aged, are unable to cope. Itami demonstrates the problem in a characteristic way. An elderly woman enters a posh convenience store late at night. She scurries down the aisles, squeezing the fresh, luscious, ripe foods until they are as careworn and used as she is herself—a peach, a piece of camembert, and various pastries receive her attention. The young male store clerk, obviously baffled by this behavior, rushes after her, trying to stop the vandalism, and, in the process, provides the old lady with at least a modicum of human contact.

There are other old people in the film, each of whom has to make his or her own adaptation to inevitable circumstances. One old man is the mentor of a band of homeless people. Another, the professor of noodles, instructs an awe-struck young man in the proper way of consuming them. The elderly thief cons a con man for a good meal of Peking duck. Two venerable noodle chefs calmly, and without a wasted motion, move the pots around on a stove, displaying the perfection of art that comes only from years of practice. The aged, in Itami’s world, may be hard to deal with, but they have incomparable skills and experience to offer. They have achieved a mastery of style only possible, in the Japanese view (which Itami seems to support), after decades of single-minded practice.

Style in All Things

The idea of perfect style has been a hallmark of Japanese culture for more than a millennium. Elegance and style—in life as in death—have been considered more important, in many ways, than actual success. Early Japanese writing, such as that in *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon and the *Tale of Genji*, was obsessed with the idea of finding the perfect style in dress and deportment.²² Style was important in death as well as in life, and there are numerous myths and legends about heroes—male and female, and indeed entire clans such as the Taira—dying in style.²³ The same is true of Japanese food, in which the presentation is at least as important as the taste and consistency,²⁴ and where elements of presentation are matter for lengthy and dedicated training.²⁵

The transformation from Lailai (the original name of Tampopo’s noodle shop) to Tampopo is an important stylistic change in two ways. Both Tampopo the person and Tampopo the place are refurbished. The dowdy, down-home Japanese decor is replaced with a modern, bright, stainless steel and white-surface style of modernity and the West. That those who have caused the transformation—Goro and the rest of his gang—feel uncomfortable about it is almost a given. They do not fit anymore, though their values and style will be transmitted in the new form. Only the young driving

assistant, Gan, understands and approves of the transformation: it is part of his world, and of Tampopo's son's world: the modern Japan of today.

But style also has another side. This is the inner style of doing things, the style embodied in the Zen practitioner; and as Itami shows in one of the most evocative scenes in the film, all Japanese have style. Tampopo, accompanied by her son and guided by Goro, visits the homeless. Groups of homeless can be found in many warm underground passages and subway stations in Japan. Most people ignore them, averting their eyes as they pass. But these people, Itami argues, are as Japanese as any other. In this scene, the homeless—scavengers of restaurant garbage bins—are completely capable of discussing the qualities of superior vintage and commenting adversely on the choice of cuts from one restaurant while praising those from another. One of them offers to cook for Tampopo's son (who is not tempted by any of the fancy French dishes the derelicts have assembled), promising him a homely dish familiar to millions of Japanese children: *omeraisu*.

In a wordless choreography, accompanied by a tune on a honky-tonk piano, the homeless man and the young man sneak into a neighboring restaurant. With quick, deft, balletic motions the derelict quick-fries some cooked rice with ketchup. Placing this on a plate, he expertly beats the eggs, fries a perfectly cooked omelet, tips it over the rice, slicing open the egg so that the softer insides glisten in the light and the egg covers the rice. He then garnishes the top with some more ketchup: voila, a perfect *omeraisu*, and a no less important demonstration of "Japaneseness": perfect style.

"Japaneseness," or *Nihonjin-ron*, is a much-debated issue in Japanese society. For centuries the Japanese have argued that their culture is unique, unapproachable, and not understandable by others.²⁶ While Harumi Befu and others have argued that not all Japanese hold this view, and while this view is clearly the derivative of political and elite thinking,²⁷ it does filter down into common thinking. While Itami is clearly satirizing most Japanese pretensions, here and in his other films, it also seems clear that at least in the matter of style, he agrees with the supporters of *Nihonjin-ron*: style is everything, and even those who are down-and-out in Japanese society have it, and (at least in the film) can flaunt it.

The Food, the Film, and the Satirist

It is difficult to do justice to a film as complex as *Tampopo* in a short essay. In highlighting some of the film's features, it is possible only to scratch the surface of Itami's intentions and of the richness of this film, let alone his entire oeuvre. Itami's premature death, whether from suicide or murder, leaves unanswered the questions that many of us would have liked to ask the director himself.

Clearly, Itami is critical of his fellow Japanese; at the same time he is also just as clearly proud of them. The penultimate scene of the film shows the diverse collection of clients who frequent Tampopo's refurbished noodle shop:

white- and blue-collar workers, housewives and teenagers, foreigners, some with their babies, some working men with hard hats. Itami seems to be rather heavyhanded here in utilizing a symbolic ending, saying, apparently, "Look at us, we Japanese. The entire world comes to learn from us. And what we have done has not been done by the politicians and leaders, it is rather the anonymous common people, who do their work, and then, like Goro, the homeless (and nameless) professor, Piskin, the chauffeur, and many others, vanish into the mass of the populace." And whether or not he intended that particular message, this is the impression that comes through.

But Itami the satirist cannot end on a mawkish note. In the final scene, completely unrelated to any scene that has come before, but directly related to the theme of the film, he shows a mother breastfeeding her baby. The baby's expression says it all, and very smugly: no matter what our style, we're all obsessed with food.

Notes

1. *Tampopo* directed by Itami Jūzo. 1985.
2. Michael Ashkenazi and Jeanne Jacob, *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine: An Essay on Food and Culture* (Richmond, United Kingdom: Curzon Press, 2000).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Naomichi Ishige, "(Table) Manners Makyth the Man," *UNESCO Courier*, May 1987, pp. 18–21.
5. Michael Ashkenazi, "Japanization, Internationalization and Aesthetics in the Japanese Meal," in *Rethinking Japan*, eds. Adriana Boscaro Franco Gatti, and Massimo Raveri, (London: Paul Norbury, 1989); Ivan Morris, ed. and trans, *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).
6. Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
7. The nature of modern Japanese consumerism has been discussed in, among others, Michael Ashkenazi and John Clammer, eds., *Consumption and Material Culture in Contemporary Japan* (London: Kegan Paul, 2000); Brian Moeran and Lisa Skov, "Mount Fuji and the Cherry Blossoms: A View from Afar" in Pamela Asquith and Arne Kalland, eds., *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives* (Richmond, United Kingdom: Curzon Press, 1997).
8. Robert J. Smith, *Japanese Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
9. Masaaki Imai, Kaizen (Ky'zen), *The Key to Japan's Competitive Success* (New York: Random House, 1986).
10. Thomas P. Rohlen, "'Spiritual Education' in a Japanese Bank," *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973): 1542–62.
11. For a discussion of consumer knowledge in Japan, see John Clammer, *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
12. Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970); Smith, *Japanese Society*; Joy Hendry, "Humidity, Hygiene, or Ritual Care: Some Thought on Wrapping as Social Phenomenon," in *Unwrapping Japan*, eds. Eyal Ben-Ari, James Valentine, and Brian Moeran. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Joy Hendry, *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation, and Power in Japan and Other Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michio Nagai, *Higher Education in Japan*, trans. Jerry Dusenbury (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1971).
13. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946) is the classic example. See Harumi Befu, "A Critique of the Group Model of Japanese Society," in *Social Analysis*, nos. 5–6 (1980): 29–43, for a summary of the weaknesses of the group theory in Japanese society.
14. Wim Lunsing, "Prostitution, Dating, Mating and Marriage: Love, Sex and Materialism in Japan," in Ashkenazi and Clammer, eds., *Consumption and Material Culture in Contemporary Japan*.

15. See, for example, Nicholas Bornoff, *Pink Samurai: The Pursuit and Politics of Sex in Japanese Society* (London: Grafton, 1992), and Mōa Ripōto: *Nihon no Joseitachi ga Hajimete Jibun-tachi no Kotoba de Sei wo Katatta* [Further Report: Japanese Women tell for the First Time in their Own Words about Sex] (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1983).
16. Bornoff, *Pink Samurai*.
17. See Dolores P. Martinez, "Tourism and the Ama: The Search for a real Japan," in Ben-Ari et al., eds., *Unwrapping Japan*.
18. Liza Carihfield Dalby, *Geisha* (New York: Vintage, 1983).
19. On the Japanese fetishistic admixture of eroticism and death see, for example, Brian Moe-ran, "The Beauty of Violence: Jidaigeki, Yakuza and 'Eroduction' Films in Japanese Cinema," in *The Anthropology of Violence*, ed. David Riches (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), and the Oshima Nagisa film *Ai no Corrida* (*In the Realm of the Senses*; 1976).
20. The film *Karate Kid* (directed by John G. Avildsen, 1984) shows one Americanized example of this long tradition.
21. John Creighton Campbell, *How Policies Change: The Japanese Government and the Aging Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).
22. Morris, ed., *Pillow Book*; Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Viking, 2001).
23. See, for example, the vast spread of Japanese romantic literature such as Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *The Taiheiki* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *Yoshi-tsune: A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle* [Gikeiki] (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966); and Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).
24. Yoshio Tsuchiya, *A Feast for the Eyes: The Japanese Art of Food Arrangement* (Tokyo: Kodan-sha, 1985).
25. Tsuneo Tanaka, *Hōchō Nyumon* [Introduction to the Kitchen Knife] (Tokyo: Shibata Shōten, 1976).
26. Claims of this sort by Japanese intellectuals are legion, but the idea has also spilled over into foreign scholastic discourse; see, for example, Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946); Nakane, *Japanese Society*; Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1978).
27. Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press Japanese Society Series, 2001); Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

4

Il Timpano — "To Eat Good Food Is to Be Close to God": The Italian-American Reconciliation of Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott's *Big Night*

MARGARET COYLE

I first saw the movie *Big Night* during a blizzard in 1998. The snow began coming down hard at dusk, covering the streets of my midsized Maryland town. My then husband and I decided to go to our local video store and rent a movie to occupy us during the cold winter evening. We chose the videotape of Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott's *Big Night* (1996), which had an interesting back cover that promised a good cast. Furthermore, we fancied ourselves to be budding gourmets, utterly fascinated by the art of the Italian table, though we were really beginners in culinary technique. Anticipating the "treat for food lovers"¹ that the back cover advertised and lulled by promises of culinary comfort, we were assured that the film would be the perfect companion to a glass of wine and a plate of grilled bruschetta while cuddling on the couch under a warm blanket.

By the end of the movie, we were both ravenous, absolutely starved for good Italian food: food made with care and passion, and thorough attention to detail and artistry, as the character of Primo (Tony Shalhoub) demonstrates so aptly in the film. *Big Night* had awakened our sense of hunger, need, and infatuation with "real" Italian cooking. Inspired by the way the movie fed the soul and the mind, now we needed a similar (literal) filling of the belly. Knowing that the blizzard had shut down all restaurants within walking distance, we poured more wine and began to cook. We pulled some shrimp out of the