The Meaning of “Bisharu” (Throwing Away) Food: Case Study of a Rural Village during a Period of Rapid Economic Growth

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The present paper uses a case study of interviews in a rural village in Nagano prefecture to focus on ways in which values regarding throwing things away (referred to in the local dialect as “bisharu”) changed during a period of rapid economic growth, even beginning to affect eating habits. At that time, 90% of food needs were met by the use of garden plots (kitchen gardens), with a self-sufficient lifestyle still maintained. However, the self-sufficiency system began to crumble, with “edible food” being thrown away at home and from school lunches, and with the demise of the use of “valuable” fertilizer which had been brought to the field by the villagers for food production. Waste water and sewage from household kitchens, bathrooms and toilets, came to be collected by hygiene trucks (vacuum cars), and became “annoying” waste disposed of in the corner of a field.

While the act of “throwing away” became a reality, the method (the way of throwing away) reflected a more complex consciousness. At present, the disposal of “edible food” in homes, snacks or eating out is “unashamedly” pushed through using the rationale of use-by dates. “Disposal” is even a legally regulated duty. In the 1960s to mid-1970s, however, “throwing away” was equated with “guilty conscience”, and was always minimized. One informant carefully avoided the expression “throwing away” waste water on the fields, using the expression “returning to the field” instead. Similarly, skimmed milk, which was unpopular in school lunches, and burdock, which is time-consuming to prepare at home, were always thrown away “in secret” when no-one was looking.

On the other hand, during this period in which food began to be much more abundant, there was an atrophying of memory and imagination in respect to the “wisdom not to throw away food” and “effort required to make food”, which spread from family members who had moved to the city. Rather than preserving or processing food that had been sent from rural hometowns and was “too much to eat up”, there was growing support for the “rationality” of “throwing away” as a means of resetting the balance. It can be assumed that the existence or non-existence of actual contact with the earth in everyday life played a major role in the gap between concepts of “throwing away” in the village and the city during the period of rapid economic growth.

Key words: a period of rapid economic growth, eating habits in a rural village, throwing away food, changes in attitude