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Bentō – The Japanese lunch-box culture

Introduction

It is common in almost every culture all over the world for people to eat lunch as either a homemade food or a meal that was bought in a shop. In this case, Japan isn't different from other countries. Japanese people take lunch, called *bentō*, most everyday to school or work. The history of *bentō* is quite long, it started around the 8th century, and during all those years it has changed not only in shape but also in its dish up, or type of served food.

In this article the author wants to present the history of *bentō*, its previous versions and also the etymology of the word *bentō* and the Chinese characters (*kanji*) that it is written with.

Etymology and semantics of the word *bentō*

In nearly every Japanese dictionary, we find a very similar explanation of the word *bentō*. In the *Kōjien* 広辞苑¹ dictionary we can find these definitions:

⊖Food that is packed into a box and is taken by somebody, to be eaten outside the house. Also this box itself.

⊖In short, a meal that is eaten in a meeting or outside the house?.

Other examples from the *Encyclopedia Japonica*² or *Minzoku kojiten. Shoku* 民俗小事典。食³ offer very similar explanations where *bentō* is defined as a “meal or box, which someone can take with themselves to eat outside.[...]”.

¹ *Kōjien* 1997: 2323.

² *Encyclopedia Japonica* 1971: 321.

³ *Minzoku kojiten. Shoku* 2013: 35.

We can find the oldest notes about light meals in the poetic anthology called the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集⁴:

家にあれば笥に盛る飯を草枕旅にしあれば椎の葉に盛る

*Ie ni areba, ke ni moru meshi o kusamakura tabi ni shi areba shii no ha ni moru*⁵
When I am at home, I pile up the rice in a vessel but being on a (grass-as-cushion) journey, then I pile it on oak leaves.⁶

In a different scroll we read:

常知らぬ道の長手をくれくれといかにか行かむ糧米はなしに
*Tsune shiranu michi no nagate o kurekure to ikanika yukamu karite wa nashi ni*⁷
The universally unknown stretch of road how will I, in the dark and uncertainly, be able to find the [long] way [to Yomi], without provisions?⁸

In the first quoted poem we see how food (in this situation rice) was packed for a trip – in the old days it was wrapped in a tree's leaves. In the second one, rice *karite* (dried rice) is mentioned. In those times, taking a lunch along during a trip was very common. Especially while going to an unknown place, not bringing *karite* might cause a nuisance in someone's heart⁹. The word *karite* comes from *kare*, meaning food or a meal eaten on a journey.

Based on the first poem we can easily guess that one of the first types of food carried by Japanese people during a journey was dried rice, called *inuimeshi* 乾飯 or *hoshi ii* 糲. It is cooked by steaming and then dried in the sun. Its origin comes from the Nara period (710-769). The word *Hoshi ii* was used not only for the dried rice, but also as a meal eaten on a trip or during war expeditions. *Hoshi ii* was very practical because it was light-weight and compact so it was easily carried in a small sack (pouch) tied to the belt. And because it was dried, it couldn't go bad. Also the way of eating it was simple and convenient. It was eaten as rice porridge in the winter with hot water and in the summer with cold water. What's more, during a long walk, Japanese warriors ate it dry, without any water.¹⁰

⁴ *Man'yōshū* – is the oldest compilation of Japanese poetry, written between 759 – 790.

⁵ *Man'yōshū* 1976: scroll 2 poem 53 (142).

⁶ Pierson 1931: 89.

⁷ *Man'yōshū* 1976: scroll 5 poem 96 (888)

⁸ Pierson 1938:155.

⁹ Sakai 2001: 39.

¹⁰ *Kokushi Daijiten* 1993: 714.

The most famous *hoshi ii* is prepared in Dōmyōji Temple in Osaka. This form of preparing rice is an important ingredient of Japanese sweets such as *tsubaki mochi* 椿餅¹¹ or *sakura mochi* 桜餅¹², which are very popular nowadays.

The word *bentō* is first mentioned in the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1560–1603) during Oda Nobunaga’s (1534–1582) supremacy. In the book called *Rōjin zatsuwa*¹³ 老人雑話 written by Emura Sensai, published in the 2nd half of the 17th century, we can find these lines:

信長の時分は弁当といふ物なし、安土に出来し弁当と云ふ物有り、小芋程の内に諸道具納まると云¹⁴

Nobunaga no jibun wa bentō to iu mono nashi, Azuchi ni dekishi bentō to iu mono ari, koimo hodo no uchi ni shodōgu osamaru to iu

In Nobunaga’s times, there wasn’t such a thing as *bentō*. It showed up with the Azuchi Period to describe many things in a small potato shape.

Additionally, in the *Wakunnoshiori* 和訓栞 dictionary published in the second half of the Edo Period (1603–1868), under the term “*bentō*”, Nobunaga is mentioned.

べんとう 辨當とかけり、行厨をいふなり、昔ハなし信長公安土に来て始めて視とそ¹⁵

Bentō bentō to kakeri, kōchū to iu nari, mukashi wa nashi Nobunaga kō Azuchi ni kite hajimete shi to so

Bentō – written with 辨當 kanji, also called *kōchū*, hadn’t been used in the old times, it showed up with Nobunaga in the Azuchi Period.

The word *kōchū* 行厨 is written with two kanji ideograms, where the first, *iku*, *yuku* 行 means “to go”, and the second one that can be read *kuriya* 厨 meaning “kitchen”, a place where we can prepare a meal¹⁶. We can read both kanji together as a kitchen (meaning the food that is prepared therein), which we can then take

¹¹ *Tsubaki mochi* – we make rice flour from *hoshi ii* and mix it well with a special sweet syrup. From this dough we make small sweets with *an* bean paste inside and wrap them with *tsubaki* flower leaves.

¹² It is similar to *tsubaki mochi*, but we wrap the sweets with Japanese cherry tree leaves (*sakura*).

¹³ Emura Sensai (1565–1664) was a medical doctor living at the turn of the Azuchi-Momoyama era and the Edo period (1603–1868).

¹⁴ *Kokushi daijiten* 1993: 522.

¹⁵ Okumura 2006: 3.

¹⁶ *Jidaibetsu kokugo daijiten* 1967: 274.

with us to go somewhere. Both quoted examples can suggest that it is true that the first use of the word *bentō* was during Oda Nobunaga's supremacy. During those times many Catholic missionaries from Portugal came to Japan to spread Christianity, and thanks to those relations, the first Japanese-Portuguese dictionary was made. Even in this dictionary we can find an explanation about *bentō*:

文具箱に似た一種の箱であつて、抽斗がついており、これに食物を入れて携行するもの

*Bungubako ni nita isshu no hako de atte, hikidashi ga tsuie ori, kore ni shokumotsu o irete keikō suru mono*¹⁷

Some type of box similar to a pencil box, which we can open, put food inside and take out with us.

It is worth mentioning that the word *bentō* was used not only to define a meal, but also the whole box. The chief maturity of *bentō* was during the Edo Period and since that time we have two words: *bentō* to define food eaten outside the house and *bentōbako* to define the box for food.

The classification of *bentō* due to time and place

In the old times, not only *hoshi ii* was used during trips as a lunch. According to archeological discoveries, in Rokusei city in Ishikawa prefecture remains of small rice balls made from *kowa ii* rice 強飯¹⁸ were found, probably from the Yayoi period (300 BCE to 300 CE). *Kowa ii* rice was steamed in a special vessel called a *koshiki* 甑.

In Heian period (794–1192) once again the Japanese people started to eat rice balls, at that time called *tonjiki* 屯食. However since the Edo period until today the name *nigirimeshi* 握り飯 or *omusubi* お結び¹⁹ is being used. In the Heian period, for aristocracy it was an austere and ordinary food, but for people from the lower classes, *tonjiki* were a special delicacy. That is why very often during official occasions and celebrations, lower social groups received them¹⁹. We can find *tonjiki* even in Murasaki Shikibu's novel *Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語²⁰, in the *Kiritsubo*

¹⁷ Okumura 2006: 3.

¹⁸ Sakai 2001: 40.

¹⁹ Kanzaki 1987: 50-51.

²⁰ *Genji Monogatari* – The Tale of Genji. Divided into 54 chapters is a classic work of Japanese literature written by Murasaki Shikibu in the early years of the 11th century. The work illustrates a unique depiction of the lifestyles of high courtiers during the Heian period. It is called the world's first novel.

桐壺²¹ chapter, during prince Genji's coming-of-age ceremony²², young officers received *tonjiki* for their meal²³.

The next period in Japanese history is the Kamakura period (1192–1333), where we can find different types of meals. Governance by the Kamakura shogunate marks this era and the Emperor didn't have any real power to rule the country anymore. Due to those feudal times, people traveled more to other parts of Japan with business or to see the shogun²⁴. Interestingly, during the Kamakura period, many clans were fighting to gain a monopoly of power, so many warriors had to travel as well in order to fight with their enemies. To make all those journeys easier, Japanese people developed *koshihyōrō* 腰兵糧, which means “military food supplies that you keep next to your hip”.



1. An example of *tonjiki* that we can find in the *Genji Monogatari* novel²⁵

²¹ *Kiritsubo* – literally it is a vessel made from Paulownia tree. In the Tale of Genji, the main character's father's name was Kiritsubo.

²² Celebration of someone's coming of age (*genpuku* 元服) – in the old times in Japan, when a boy had his 12th birthday, he became a grown man and during this celebration, he had his hair cut.

²³ Okumura 2006: 3.

²⁴ *Shogun* – general in the army and military ruler of Japan.

²⁵ Akiyama 1977: 122.

In the case of going to the front, samurai had so-called *hyōrō* 兵糧²⁶, which they packed in a material pouch, called *uchikaibukuro* 打飼袋, the content was usually *mochi* snacks, grilled *nigirimeshi* with *miso*²⁷, dried rice *hoshi ii*, grilled meat, and dried-pickled apricots *umeboshi* 梅干. Samurai kept this kind of package tied to the hip or across the chest where it was easy to reach and convenient while walking²⁸.

Tonjiki, the well-known rice balls of the Heian period, have changed their name to *nigirimeshi* in the Muromachi period (1333–1560). Since that time, Japanese people started to grill them a little. The reasoning behind that type of preparation was simple. *Nigirimeshi* with a slightly grilled skin didn't stick to each other and it was easier to eat them. In that time, *nori* 海苔²⁹ wasn't used in the kitchen so often, it was a very rare and expensive ingredient; thus, grilling was used to prevent *nigirimeshi* from being glued together. Another good aspect of the grilled skin, which looked like *hoshi ii*, was that it kept food fresh longer, extending the expiration date. In the previous pages it was mentioned that *tonjiki* was eaten mostly by the lower class society. However, after many battles and wars, in the Muromachi Era there was finally peace again in the country and the *daimyō*³⁰ and samurai started to eat *nigirimeshi* during their various outdoor entertainments.

All over the world people try to prepare good and convenient food. And *nigirimeshi* was a very good example of that kind of thinking. In the *Tabemono no kigen-jiten* たべものの起源事典 dictionary, we can find three pro-*nigirimeshi* arguments:

- ① rice, even when cold, didn't break apart, it was still in a rice ball shape
- ② *nigirimeshi* didn't go bad so quickly [grilled skin kept rice inside fresh longer]
- ③ it was practical and easy to carry

Furthermore, depending on the region in Japan, *nigirimeshi* could have a different shape – usually it was a triangle, but there were also round or cylinder shapes. In Kyoto the most popular were cylinder shaped *nigirimeshi* with sesame sprinkled over it, but in Edo they preferred the triangular one without any sprinkles³¹.

During the Edo period many changes occurred within the country. At this time, the real power lay with the shoguns from the Tokugawa clan. To avoid any contact with foreign countries they closed Japan for almost 200 years and only in Nagasaki city on Kyushu Island were traders from the Netherlands and China allowed to stay.

²⁶ Each samurai received a supply of rice that would be enough for 3 days. It was called *Mikkabun no koshihyōrō* (三日分の腰兵糧).

²⁷ *Miso* paste – soybean paste.

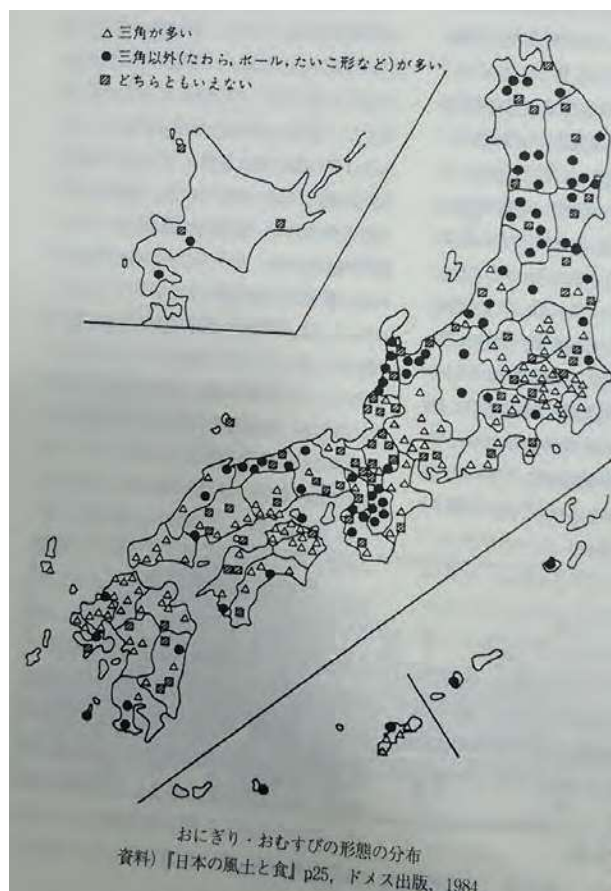
²⁸ Nagayama 2011:138–140.

²⁹ *Nori* – is an edible seaweed species. Finished products are made by a shredding and rack-drying process.

³⁰ *Daimyō* – Japanese feudal lord.

³¹ Okada 2003: 350.

Caused by a lack of wars, the number of samurai was getting smaller (they couldn't do any other job than being a warrior). On the other hand, there were more and more townfolk, caused by the development of trade between cities. Thanks to good governance and peaceful times without any wars in the country, we see huge development of not only the economy but also culture and art. Especially noteworthy, the townfolk culture had its golden age, including the creation of new theater types, *kabuki* 歌舞伎³² and *ningyō jōruri* 人形浄瑠璃³³. Peasants spent entire days in the theater; this is why they started taking their lunch with them and eating in the intermission.



The following maps shows how *nigirimeshi* were divided in Japan. Triangle – *nigirimeshi* in triangle shape; circle – different shapes, such as round, cylinder etc; square – it is difficult to define what kind of *nigirimeshi* were in the area³⁴

³² *Kabuki* – is a classical Japanese dance-drama.

³³ *Ningyō jōruri* – is a form of Japanese classical puppet theater.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 350.



Edo Sakaimachi Nakamura-za uchigai no zu, Utagawa Toyokuni-ga: one part of a woodblock picture showing the audience at a Nakamura *kabuki* theater, made by Utagawa Toyokuni.

Between the seats we can see many boxes with *maku no uchi bentō*.

[Reprint from the collections in the Department of Japanese Studies, University of Warsaw]

This kind of lunch was first called *shibai bentō* 芝居弁当 in the region of Kyoto, Osaka and Nagoya, while in Edo they used the *maku no uchi bentō* 幕の内弁当 name, which gradually became popular in the whole country. The phrase *maku no uchi bentō* literally means a lunch that is eaten in the intermission. This type of *bentō* usually contained grilled *nigirimeshi*, *tamagoyaki* and boiled root vegetables³⁵. The amount of ingredients was just right and the food was well balanced, so *maku no uchi bentō* met the Japanese people's requirements. Another convenient thing about this type of *bentō* was that it was prepared in disposable packaging, so customers didn't have to worry what to do with the empty box after eating.

Japanese people love to spend time outside and admire nature. Whenever they have time, they make trips to the nearest mountains (*yusan* 遊山), cruise in the lakes and rivers (*funaasobi* 船遊び), they make picnics in the spring to parks in order to marvel at the blooming sakura trees (*hanami* 花見) and in the autumn to admire the changing colors (*momijigari* 紅葉狩り) of the maple tree leaves. Also in the summer there are many occasions for spending time outside, such as viewing fireworks (*hanabi* 花火) or Tanabata Day 七夕³⁶ and many festivals that are held in the warm months. Since the Edo Period, during all those events Japanese people spend time together with their families and friends, being close to nature, often for the whole day. To accompany those event *bentō*, Japanese people made up suitable names, e.g. *hanami bentō*, 花見弁当, *momijigari bentō* 紅葉狩り弁当, *yusan bentō* 遊山弁当, *funaasobi bentō* 船遊び弁当 or *koshiben* 腰弁 (*bentō* you tie next to your hips, its origin form was military *koshiyōrō*).

Japanese people were very keen on many different types of entertainment, so they had many chances to eat *bentō*. This was a great opportunity to create new businesses, i.e. open shops and restaurants specialized in preparing a *bentō*, called *shidashi bentō* 仕出し弁当, which could be used during many occasions or events. It was very convenient for consumers because they didn't have to spend many hours in the kitchen cooking for a whole family. They just ordered the right amount of *bentō* boxes, enough for everyone³⁷.

However, even though *shidashi* restaurants were popular, many Japanese people still prepared their own *bentō* for work. This was especially so because farmers working a rice field or lumberjacks spending all day in the forests and mountains couldn't go back home for lunch. That is why they always took cooked rice with *takuan*, *miso* paste or soup and ate it at the workplace. Usually, just after taking a look inside a *bentōbako*, it was easy to recognize what someone's job consisted of, because lumberjacks had easier access to mushrooms, farmers to vegetables and

³⁵ Gotō 2006: 26.

³⁶ *Tanabata* – is a festival called Star Festival, it is celebrated July 7th. Only during this night two stars, Vega and Altair, are allowed to meet in the Milky Way.

³⁷ Takahashi 2007: 2.

fishermen to fish and seafood. Those *bentōs* were named after the type of work: *norashigoto no bentō* 野良仕事の弁当, a *bentō* for people working in a field, *yamashigoto no bentō* 山仕事の弁当, a *bentō* for people working in the forests. The same is for fishermen – they had *gyojō no bentō* 漁場の弁当.



Tōkaidō gojūsantsugi mizue, Fujisawa, woodblock picture made by Hiroshige presents three people who are eating *bentō* during a trip³⁸

³⁸ Polish National Library, online collection access: <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1309950> [access: 27.08.2015]

Even in the city we have a similar story – especially while working the night shifts as guards, Japanese people had to provide themselves lunch called *yakin bentō* 夜勤弁当. But sometimes they received it from a castle manager, as it was in Nagoya castle, where the Tokugawa clan lived³⁹.

Since the turn of the Edo and Meiji periods we can divide *bentōs* into new types, such as *tsūgaku bentō* 通学弁当, *tsūkin bentō* 通勤弁当 and *bentō kanri* 弁当管理⁴⁰. The first type of *bentō* was made to name lunch that students and teachers took to school. The content of this lunch was usually the same – rice with one or two simple extras like pickled radish or some other pickles. Very similar in content, we can find two other examples of lunch – *tsūkin bentō* and *bentō kanri*. Their main difference was who took it to what kind of work – people commuting to any kind of company took the first type and people who were lower administration workers used the second type. However, all of these three examples have the same ancestor – *koshiben* that were used in any trips and when they had to commute⁴¹.

Since the Meiji Period, Japan once again opened her borders to other countries. It was a time of many changes in the country, such as cultural, social, political and economic. Along with the economic development we can see more work places for Japanese people and together with many changes in education, more children could learn. We can also see more possibilities in food consumption – although they still use *bentō*, at many schools in big cities they started to run a school cafeteria. The content of *bentō* was usually very similar – *nigirimeshi* with pickled *umeboshi*, radish *takuan* or some other pickles. From time to time they also added salted salmon and cooked beans⁴².

For many years the main task of *bentō* was to satiate Japanese people's hunger. However during all the changes that were in the Meiji times, the attitude towards *bentō* also changed. Before, with only *nigirimeshi* rice balls with *umeboshi* and *takuan*, Japanese people were completely satisfied, but the presence of food was gradually more and more important. Mothers and wives started adding extras to make *bentō* more interesting. In newspapers from those times we can find many tips and recipes and a special culinary column for housewives. From all these changes toward not only *bentō* but all cooking, we can easily notice that food apart from satiating hunger, with this variety of ingredients and adding extras such as Western bread or meat, had to meet Japanese people's culinary expectations. It became commonplace to boil rice everyday in the morning. Before the Meiji Period, depending on the region, rice was cooked in a different time of day and eaten in different forms, e.g. in Kansai they boiled rice at midday and in the

³⁹ Okumura 2006: 5.

⁴⁰ *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* 1976: 700.

⁴¹ Okumura 2006: 5.

⁴² *Shokubunka to shite no obentō* 2007: 8.

evening they ate it in a soup *yuzuke* 湯漬け and the next morning as a rice porridge *kayu*. However since the Meiji times, even though they were still eating *kayu* in the morning, they boiled extra rice for a fresh *nigirimeshi*.

From 1872 the first train rides were set, first on a Shinagawa-Yokohama route and then they extended the route to Shimbashi station. Along with the development of the railway more and more train stations were built. For the Japanese people's convenience, in each station they made news-stands, souvenir shops and booths with *bentō*, called *ekiben* 駅弁.

There are many different theories about when and where they started to sell *ekiben*, e.g. in 1877 (Kobe and Osaka stations), 1883 (Kumagaya and Ueno stations), 1884 (Tsuruga station), 1885 (Oyama and Utsunomiya stations)⁴³. But the most often instance is the last place, i.e. Utsunomiya station in Tochigi prefecture. This *bentō* contained two *onigiri* rice balls with *umeboshi* inside and sprinkled with sesame and with two pieces of *takuan* wrapped in bamboo leaves⁴⁴. The first *ekiben* were sold directly on the platforms from mobile booths so the traveler didn't have to get out of the train – he could buy food through the opened window. With the development of the railway and longer journeys, for the traveler's convenience within the train a dining car was added. Additionally, the variety of *ekiben* was getting larger, more *bentō* with regional ingredients appeared. We can say that since that time train rides became a very interesting culinary journey – Japanese people could try ingredients characteristic to many different parts of Japan.



An exhibition of available *ekiben* in the station in Aomori prefecture. All lunch boxes contain cuttlefish or scallops, which are very popular in this region of Japan. [photo MN]

⁴³ Tokuhisa 1995: 241-242.

⁴⁴ Minzoku kojiten. Shoku 2013: 36.

In the Taishō Era (1912–1926) there were many factors e.g. World War I or the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake that caused much damage and problems with getting food supplies. As it is easy to imagine, it had a very bad influence on *bentō* content because products were expensive and hard to get⁴⁵. Along with the decrease in the daily ration of rice, people tried to substitute rice with other products such as sweet potatoes, wheat noodles, bread and a second-rate sort of rice that was normally used as animal fodder⁴⁶.

Huge changes in Japanese daily life and nutrition can be seen at the beginning of another period – the Shōwa Period (1926–1989). The country was still in a terrible condition after the war and earthquake, which is why there was still a shortage in food rations. As a solution, they made a rice allowance, around 300 grams per day, which is why very often people used potatoes and other grain products as a main ingredient in their meals⁴⁷. Since the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) there was an organization called the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement 国民精神騒動員運動 (*kokumin seishin sōdōin undō*) which made many public calls for increased patriotism, they tried to keep a national spirit together. At this time, a very popular slogan was “贅沢は敵だ” (*Zeitaku wa teki da*) which means “Luxury is our Enemy”. One of the most popular and famous initiatives used to show patriotism was to prepare for school and work every 8th day of each month a *bentō* with *umeboshi* put in the center of rice in the box⁴⁸. This type of *bentō* is called *Hi no maru bentō* 日の丸弁当. It was easy and cheap to make *umeboshi*, so many people did it themselves. The fruit was put in barrels with salt for a month. They are typically dyed red using purple perilla herbs (called *akajiso*). When we put *umeboshi* on white rice it reminds us of the Japanese flag. The name *hi no maru bentō* comes from the name of the flag, which is *hi no maru* in Japanese (i.e. the Rising Sun). The usual version of this type of *bentō* was only rice with *umeboshi*, because during that time people couldn't afford many ingredients for lunch.

After the war, the habit of preparing *bentō* was less popular and more often people started using the cafeteria at school or work, which was called *kyūshoku* 給食. From around 1945 many laws about nutrition and well-balanced diet were made to help undernourished people eat healthier once again⁴⁹. Moreover, in the canteen children and workers could eat balanced, cheap meals that were better than preparing and packing lunch everyday themselves. In those times, the number of restaurants and bars was growing, so many businessmen preferred to have their lunch at those places. Thanks to many cafeterias and restaurants, people had an

⁴⁵ *Shokubunka to shite no obentō* 2007: 8.

⁴⁶ Tokuhisa 1995: 245.

⁴⁷ Tamura 1998: 196.

⁴⁸ *Shokubunka to shite no obentō* 2007: 9.

⁴⁹ Tamura 1998: 197.

increased variety of meals they could eat. That was one of the reasons why there were less people having *bentō* at that time.

There was one more factor that made *bentō* less popular comparing to *kyūshoku* or eating in the restaurants. For the most part, all meals in the Japanese culinary are served hot. The only exceptions are pickles or rice balls, *onigiri*. This is the reason why Japanese people preferred to buy a hot meal in the restaurant for a similar amount of money as they would spend for the ingredients. However, everything changed in the 50's, with the advent of many popular electric facilities that changed the methods of preparing food and the ability to keep them fresh. Also, from around the year 1965 people could buy a glass thermos, which changed “the world of *bentō*” once again. Owing to this new invention, Japanese people could enjoy warm *bentō* with the addition of a soup anytime and anywhere⁵⁰.

In the 60's of the 20th century, there was continuing change in the rail industry, mainly a new type of train called the *shinkansen* 新幹線. These trains, called bullet trains, were going very fast, so for the increased safety of the travelers all the windows were made to stay closed and they reduced the train cars to a minimum i.e. they removed dining cars. But the solution of how to sell *bentō* during a journey was found very quickly and small carts with food were provided in every train so travelers could enjoy meals without moving from their seats⁵¹.

The main difference between *ekiben* and other types of *bentō* is that it is eaten only during a journey. You never buy it in the station to eat later at home. So we may even call *ekiben* “the flavor of the journey”. There are two main sorts of *ekiben*:

- *futsū bentō* 普通弁当 (normal *bentō*)
- *tokushu bentō* 特殊弁当 (special *bentō*)

Rice makes up half of the contents in the *futsū bentō* and the rest are additions, which are usually grilled fish or meat, boiled vegetables and pickles. While in the *tokushu bentō* the main product is not rice but one of the ingredients that is always something typical and most famous in the region of Japan that produces it.

In the 70's the first convenience stores, called *kombini* were opened. In this store we can find a new type of *bentō* called *hokaben* ほか弁, i.e. different *bentō*. All ingredients used to make this form were very fresh with a short expiration date. With this new *bentō* we can notice a change in the meaning of *bentō*. From the beginning it was

外出先で食事をするために持ち歩く食べ物⁵²
gaishutsusaki de shokuji o suru tame ni mochiaruku tabemono
 food taken from home to eat outside

⁵⁰ *Shokubunka to shite no obentō* 2007: 9.

⁵¹ Tokuhisa 1998: 246.

⁵² Sakai 2001: 60.

but since kombini were made, it became
 外で買って持ち帰って食べ物⁵³
Soto de katte mochikaette tabemono.
 Food that we buy outside and bring back home

From these quotes we can see an inverse – the place to make *bentō* was not home anymore but shops or special places and the place to eat *bentō*, instead of outside, more often was home⁵⁴. Furthermore, in *kombini* there are public micro-waves so people right after buying a box with food, can warm and eat it.



Examples of *ekiben*: upper photo – *bentō* with eel from Nagoya;
 lower photo – *bentō* with scallops from Aomori [photo MN]

⁵³ *Ibid.*, s. 60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

Women more often decided to quit being only a housewife and started working a job. To make their lives easier, *kombini* and many department stores created special booths with many different *bentō*, already prepared meals or frozen half-finished products to shorten preparation time at home⁵⁵. Thanks to many companies who provided ready meals *shidashi*, it was possible to order a high quality *bentō* or other course without going out.

Not only in the Shōwa period but also in the Heisei Era (1989-) for dozen of years, companies try to lead in innovations with new accessories needed to prepare an original lunch. In our times, people use not only colorful and many shaped lunch boxes, but also cute animal-shaped toothpicks, small containers for dips or extras. It takes a lot of time to prepare fancy *bentō*; so another new simplification has been the creation of special *onigiri* and *sushi* forms.



A board to encourage travelers to buy *soraben* at the airport in Sapporo. The three the most popular *soraben* in this area are written. [photo MN]

⁵⁵ *Shokubunka to shite no obentō* 2007: 11.

During this time, other types of *bentō* have developed, such as *soraben* 空弁, *hayaben* はや弁, *aisai bentō* 愛妻弁当 and *kyaraben* キャラ弁.

Soraben is very similar to *ekiben*, but it is available at the airports. It gained its biggest popularity at the beginning of the 21st century. This type of *bentō* can't be too big, so it can be eaten quickly. Also, not all ingredients can be used to prepare *soraben* – not to bother other travelers, it is necessary to not use any food with a strong aroma. The different names for *soraben* are *kūkōben* 空港弁 (airport *bentō*) and *hikōben* 飛行弁 (plane *bentō*).

Depending on how we write the first Chinese character *kanji* “*haya*” 早 in *hayaben*, we can define a different type of *bentō*. If we write it with the *kanji* that means “early”, it shows us a *bentō* that is eaten earlier than a normal lunch (something like a brunch), i.e. “early *bentō*” 早弁. But if we use the *kanji* for “fast” 速, it defines a special *bentō* that we can buy in the shops on the highway, so it's a “fast, quick *bentō*” 速弁.

A *bentō* that has existed since the Meiji period and was carried to work, usually made by the loving wife, is called *aisai bentō* 愛妻弁当. Women, while preparing their husband's lunch, always tried to prepare a well balanced meal that provided lots of energy and strength to work (e.g. by making a sentence *ganbatte* 頑張つて – do your best, work hard – using laver *nori* for it). In this example we can see another usage of *bentō* – it interceded between the feelings of the wife and husband. Currently *aisai bentō* is not prepared only by wives and it can be made for kids or friends, in other words for anyone we wish to express our feelings, gratitude or to show our support to.



An example of *shikaeshi bentō*⁵⁶

⁵⁶ A frame from *Begin Japanology* program 2008: episode 1 season 1, 13:33 min.

However, with a help of *bentō* Japanese women can show not only their love to their husband, but also anger after a fight or a partner's bad behavior. It is called *shikaeshi bentō* 仕返し弁当, which means a revenge *bentō*. It can be mostly anything that shows that the wife is angry and doesn't care if the husband will be hungry during the day or not. Everything depends on the woman's imagination as to what her husband may get in this kind of lunch. It may be only rice (not necessarily cooked), the whole lunch box filled in with one ingredient (e.g. pickles), bad words written with *nori* on rice or all the content arranged into an embarrassing picture.

Another type of *bentō* is *kyaraben*, which is a contraction of *kyarakutā no bentō* キャラクターの弁当, which means the lunch box with food arranged into some cartoon characters. These days this form is very popular, where all ingredients have to be cut and shaped into animals, characters from cartoons or comics or even famous people. The main purpose of this kind of *bentō* is to trick children into eating the whole meal, even if they don't like some kind of vegetables. On the Internet we can find many websites and blogs with advice on how to prepare *kyaraben*, how to "conceal" those not-favorite ingredients that are important in the daily diet for the child⁵⁷. More and more popular are special cooking courses for mothers, where they can learn how to make cartoon characters from food or prepare edible masterpieces. Due to some extreme pressure that mothers are under to make this special and unique *bentō*, in some preschools it is forbidden to make *kyaraben*, children can bring only normal *bentō*. Thanks to this rule, children whose mothers can't prepare *kyaraben* due to lack of free time, don't feel worse and are not bullied by classmates.

Etymology of the Chinese characters *kanji* that define the word *bentō*

When we look at the *bentō* 弁当 *kanji*, it is very difficult to understand that it is "a lunch that we take with us to eat outside". We use *ben* 弁 e.g. in the word *yūben* 雄弁 (eloquence), *bengoshi* 弁護士 (lawyer), *benron* 弁論 (speech, debate) and some words can mean also a dialect. While we use *tō* 当 to write e.g. *tōban* 当番 (turn, duty), *kentō* 見当 (direction, guess) and it means advisable, well, reasonable.

In this chapter the author would like to show how the word used by Japanese to define lunch has changed during the ages and what kind of Chinese characters were used for it.

As was explained in the previous chapter, in the old times there were many words to name provisions that Japanese people took with them for a trip, such as *hoshi ii*, *kare ii*, *tonjiki* or *hyōrō*. On the other hand, the first words that were used

⁵⁷ *Shokubunka to shite no obentō* 2007: 12.

to describe a box for lunch were *warigo* 破子 or *mentsū* 面桶. Those names were used since the Kamakura Era (before that time rice was packed into a pouch or wrapped in a leaf). Even today in many regions in Japan we can find words like *mentsu* メンツ, *mentsui* メンツイ, *menchi* メンチ or *memba* メンバ, which are all variations from the origin word *mentsū*.

Firstly, it is important to understand the meaning of the *kanji* that are in the word *mentsū*. The word *men* 面 we can find e.g. in a *menmen* 面面 i.e. each, everybody. *Tsū* 桶 is used now to describe tub (*furooke* 風呂桶) or trough (*kaibaoke* 飼い葉桶), in the old times it meant a small bucket for water (*teoke* 手桶). So all together we can understand *mentsū* as a container in which we pack a rice (meal) for everybody. That kind of box was made from a thin strip of wood (usually *Cryptomeria* or Japanese cypress) bent in an oval shape⁵⁸. Because *mentsū* was a simple and modest vessel, it also had a different usage. It was very often used as a rice bowl or according to *Edogo Daijiten* 江戸語大辞典, a beggar kept his received charity in it⁵⁹.

The word *mentsū* is in the *goon* 呉音⁶⁰ reading system, however Japanese people changed it into a *kan'on* 漢音⁶¹ system and at that time the *kanji* 面 started to be read *ben* instead of *men*, and 桶 as *tō*, not *tsū* anymore. In the Azuchi-Momoyama Period they changed ideograms for describing lunch. Japanese people got to the conclusion that lunch packed in a small box is handy and convenient (*benri* 便利), and they can eat it in an appropriate place (*tekitōna basho* 適当な場所). This is why they started to use 便当 *kanji*. It seems right to use *kanji* 便当 to describe lunch, when we notice how useful *bentō* is and compare it with those Chinese characters.

The exact time of changing ideograms from 便当 into 辨當, the old version of 弁当, is unknown. However, in the Edo period, during the greatest development of *bentō*, the new version of *kanji* is already in use.

One of the main reasons for using 弁 instead of 便, was the other meaning of this *kanji*. It is used in words such as *benjo* 便所 (toilet) czy *daishōben* 大小便 (excrements). Although 便 is practical (*benri*), more often it reminds Japanese people of the other meanings and this is why it wasn't suitable to describe food or the box for lunch. Therefore they started to use the *kanji* 辨當 to write the word *bentō*.

A very good explanation of all those *kanji* can be found in *Daikanwa Jiten* 大漢和辞典⁶².

⁵⁸ Ishige 1999: 409.

⁵⁹ Maeda 2003: 768.

⁶⁰ *Goon* 呉音 – One of the several ways of reading Japanese *kanji*. It is based on the classical pronunciation from the Middle Chinese times.

⁶¹ *Kan'on* 漢音 – One of the ways of reading Japanese *kanji*, from Tang Dynasty times.

⁶² Morohashi 1984: volumes 1, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12.

Kanji	Reading	Description in Japanese	English translation of description
面	ベン (<i>ben</i>) メン (<i>men</i>)	① 器物又は材木の稜角を浅く削ること。(<i>Kibutsu mata wa zaimoku no ryōkaku o asaku kezuru koto</i>) ② 平たい器物を数える詞。(<i>Hiratai kibutsu o kazoeru kotoba</i>)	A. The slightly cut edges of a container made in wood. B. A numeral for flat containers, tableware.
面	ベン (<i>ben</i>) メン (<i>men</i>)	① 平たい器物に添へる詞。(<i>Hiratai kibutsu ni soeru kotoba</i>) ② もと朝鮮地方行政地区の一。日本の町村にあたる。(<i>Moto chōsen chihō gyōsei chiku no ichi. Nihon no chōson ni ataru</i>)	C. A word added to describe flat tableware. D. Originally, an administration area in Korea. It is used in Japanese administration in cities and villages.
桶	トウ (<i>tō</i>) ツウ (<i>tsū</i>)	① をけ (<i>oke</i>) ② 六斗を容れる方形の器。(<i>Roku masu o ireru hōkei no utsuwa</i>) ③ うるしをけ。(<i>Urushi oke</i>) ④ まるをけ。(<i>Maru oke</i>)	1. A bucket. A. A square container the size of 6 masu ⁶³ . B. A bucket made from lacquer. C. A round bucket.
便	ヘン (<i>hen</i>) ベン (<i>ben</i>)	① 都合がよい。便利。(<i>Tsugō ga yoi. Benri</i>)	1. Convenient. Useful.
辨	ヘン (<i>hen</i>) ベン (<i>ben</i>)	① わける。(<i>Wakeru</i>) ② さく。剖判する。(<i>Saku. Bōhan suru</i>) ③ 分別する。区別する。(<i>Bunbetsu suru. Kubetsu suru</i>)	1. To divide. A. To spare. To divide. B. Classify. Divide.
弁	ヘン (<i>hen</i>) ベン (<i>ben</i>)	② たのしむ。般に同じ。(<i>Tanoshimu. Han ni onaji</i>)	2. Enjoy. The same as the kanji han (Carry).
當	タウ	① あたる。(<i>Ataru.</i>) [...] ② つりあふ。相持する。(<i>Tsuriau. Aimochi suru.</i>) [...] ③ あふ。時にあふ。當面する。(<i>Au. Toki ni au. Tōmen suru.</i>) [...] ④ かなふ。適合する。(<i>Kanau. Tekigō suru.</i>)	1. To be hit, to strike, to touch to win, to go well, to face. [...] B. Balance, match. Joint ownership, sharing. [...] I. To fit. Perfect timing. For the time being. [...] L. To match. Accommodate. Adapt.
当		當の略字。(<i>Tō no ryakuji.</i>)	Simplified character of the kanji tō (當).

⁶³ Masu 斗 – it is an old measuring system.

From the table above we can understand how the ideograms of the word *bentō* have changed and a reason for selecting those and not other characters. It is also understandable from the table below, where there is an explanation of words defining lunch⁶⁴.

Kanji compound	Description in Japanese	English translation of description
面桶	飯を盛って一人づつに配るに用ひる曲物の食器。ツウは宋音。(Meshi o motte hitori zutsu ni kubaru ni mochiiru magemono no shokki. Tsū wa sōon.)	A round vessel used to distribute rice for everyone one by one. <i>Tsū</i> is a <i>sōon</i> reading.
便當	②都合がよい。便利な。重寶な。(Tsugō ga yoi. Benrina. Jūhōna.)	2. Convenient. Functional. Useful.
辨當	①外出先で食事するため携へる食物。又、それを容れる食器。弁当。(Gaishutsusaki de shokuji suru tame tazusaeru tabemono. Mata, sore o ireru shokki. Bentō.) ②転じて、外出先で他より取寄せて食ふ食事。(Tenjite, gaishutsusaki de hoka yori toriyosete kū shokuji.)	1. Food that we take with us to eat outside. Also, a vessel that we put lunch in. 2. A meal that we order somewhere and eat outside.
弁当	外出先で食事をするために携へる食物。辨當に同じ。(Gaishutsusaki de shokuji o suru tame ni tazusaeru tabemono. Bentō ni onaji.)	Food that we take with us to eat outside. See: <i>bentō</i> (辨當).

Bentō accompany Japanese people in daily life during many occasions, sometimes it is even unnoticeable. Apart from the role of satisfying hunger, it's a non-verbal communication form (it is seen especially during picnics and trips but also in relations in a family), Japanese people use the word *bentō* in everyday conversation, i.e. there are proverbs with it.

One of the proverbs containing *bentō* is 弁当は宵から (*Bentō wa yoi kara*). Literally it means, "Lunch is from the evening", because we cannot predict what may happen in the morning. So always every bit of early preparation is highly recommended.

Another proverb runs as follows 弁当持ち先に食わず (*Bentō mochisaki ni kuwazu*). We can translate it as; a man taking lunch does not eat it earlier. Even if we have something, we don't use it. A rich person does not consume money, he tries to keep as much of it as he can⁶⁵.

⁶⁴ Morohashi 1984: vol. 1, 4, 10, 12.

⁶⁵ *Koji kotowaza kan'yōku* 1992: 1028.

Conclusion

Bentō, even though it looks like a normal lunch, has a great history in Japan. Japanese people through the ages were using it, changing it to meet actual needs and situations in the country. With its simplicity *bentō* has many functions, not only to keep one from starvation, but also as a great form of non-verbal communication – you can express most every emotion and thought via this small box. It can also be a factor in keeping good relations with friends while sharing food and eating in groups during trips or picnics. Even the etymology of the word looks interesting since we can see how the word has changed during the ages to fit its times.

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Monika Nawrocka

論文の日本語レジュメ

弁当 - 日本のランチボックス文化

世界中のほぼすべての文化において、手作りであれ市販のものであれ、昼食をとるということは共通している。この点において日本も他国と相違ない。日本人は弁当と呼ばれる昼食をほぼ毎日、学校や職場に持っていく。弁当の歴史はとても長く、およそ8世紀には既に存在し、歴史とともにその形態のみならず盛り付け方や中身も変化してきた。

本論文では、弁当の歴史を記述しながら、昔の弁当の諸相や、弁当の語源と表記に用いられた漢字についても言及する。

キーワード: 弁当、ランチボックス、乾飯、頓食、丸の内弁当、日の丸弁当、仕返し弁当