

Cooking Co-operatively at Shun

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The fourteen women worker-owners of the Japanese lunch restaurant 'Shun' cook co-operatively and part-time. As a member cooks she may casually offer the cook at her elbow a chance to taste and suggest changes to her dish. I came to call this practice "giving a taste", but its practitioners do not remark on it or focus it as an object of awareness. Leaving this practice tacit in their work allows it to sustain both the consistently high quality of their popular cooking without reference to of the cook of each dish, and their egalitarian ethos by forestalling 'aggressive egoism'.

Hot lunch delivery restaurants (*shidashi bentoya*) are traditional and common throughout Japan. Uncommonly, the fourteen women worker-owners of Shun ('In Season') own and manage their restaurant - as well as cook its food - collectively and democratically, even as each member works not more than two or three days a week.

At Shun all members cook. As she cooks a member will sometimes offer the cook at her elbow a taste of what she is making. As she does so, she also asks for an opinion, giving the taster a chance to suggest changes to the flavour of the dish. Cooks offer tastes routinely and almost always make any suggested changes. This emergent, continuing and unselfconscious work practice is crucial to both the consistently high quality of their popular fare and the sustenance of their egalitarian ethos; it creates these effects precisely because to Shun, it is unremarkable. And Shun's members deftly and deliberately decline to reflect on this aspect of their cooking practice, to keep it that way.

During the time I cooked with them, Shun's fifth year in business, while offers to suggest changes to a dish's flavour often met with a taster's comment such as "Oh, that's delicious" to show an unwillingness to alter the dish, offers continued to be regularly made nonetheless, at least a few times per week. I came to call this practice "giving a taste", but the cooks themselves do not distinguish this aspect of their cooking explicitly. Beneath their notice, they do not call, remark on, or mention this pattern in any way. As far as I could tell, they cook without reflecting on this aspect of their practice, without drawing it to their own attention. Not an 'it' to them, but simply an emergent unremarked-upon aspect of how they cook at Shun. I think I would not even have noticed that Shun cooks this way if I too had not been asked so often, so casually and always so futilely to take a taste. Only in this way did cooks bring this practice to my

attention, never by talking about it to me or among themselves. The apparent and persistent pointlessness of asking me too to take a taste was, however, what roused my interest in trying to understand this way of cooking and its effects.

Shun is as completely and deliberately egalitarian as its members can make it: they own equal shares in the business, make an identical hourly wage, share bonuses equally, rotate all offices of authority (necessary by legal regulation) annually, take decisions by consensus, renounce division of labour, and embrace an ideology of equality: explicitly, absolutely, "no one is in charge here." But maybe making matters utterly clear may not always be the better way to achieve an otherwise hoped-for effect.

To understand why this might be the case in egalitarian organisations, primatologist Christopher Boehm offers us an "ambivalence model of human nature: ... egalitarianism is in effect a bizarre type of political hierarchy: the weak combine forces to actively dominate the strong." (Boehm, 1999 p3) These observations from Shun support the further recognition that for the weak many to talk about how they dominate the strong few may not always help them do so. Indeed, relational identities and coalitions may be sufficiently fluid, contingent, situational in some settings (such as at Shun) that it is not always easy for anyone, insider or observer, to say consistently or accurately who is weak, who is strong.

Anthropologist and philosopher Maurice Godelier has observed that

... every social order, if it is to convince itself and others of its legitimacy, needs both to pass over in silence certain aspects of its workings and to thrust others to the fore by loading them with ... symbolic weight. (Godelier, 1999)

We might also recall a sometimes neglected

commonplace, that “passing over in silence” too can load a practice with symbolic weight. “Passing over in silence” at Shun can be understood as its members’ disposition to remark on this practice of “giving a taste,” when I invited them individually and collectively on several different occasions and in different settings to do so, only with comments such as “Oh, it’s just the way we cook, that’s all,” a polite and deferential declination to put an interpretation into words. Such remarks are not a folk explanation, but evidence of the absence of one: this too requires an explanation. After all, no one can have a default state of “just working” that is not culturally constituted (Sahlins, 1976), and Shun’s members are broadly aware of many alternative ways of cooking easily available to them they deliberately and consciously do not use. Particularly, they talk easily and eagerly about not having a “boss,” but I was never able to, or they never let me, draw them into conversation about how the specific way they cook makes a boss unnecessary.

Taking Shun’s practice of cooking by “giving a taste” as one form of its members’ tacit performance of their abstract value of egalitarian cooperation lets us understand how the way they cook helps them:

- 1) Keep up confidence in each other’s cooking without having anyone in charge,
- 2) Maintain a taste that is characteristically Shun’s no matter who cooks which dish or for how many,
- 3) Forestall potentially disruptive outbreaks or accusations of “aggressive egoism” (Boehm, 1999 p254), and
- 4) Avoid consciously trying to “fix something that isn’t broken” by talking about work patterns which may help them to do all this successfully for reasons they cannot, or refuse to, rationalise.

Failing to distinguish a practice as a subject for discussion does not lessen the impact of the consequences of that practice for its practitioners: what could be **more** important for a restaurant than how its cooks cook? Further, as members cook by “giving a taste,” they may even be inspired to yet greater achievement as they come to appreciate more deeply both the high quality of the food they cook and the fine character that their cooking practice nurtures in their fellow cooks.

The following section locates Shun in relation to Japan’s consumer co-operative movement

and the Seikatsu Club Consumer Co-operative, which supported its members’ earliest development of women-owned worker collectives, among which Shun is one. The subsequent section describes how they cook at Shun, which is followed by an analysis of Shun’s way of cooking as an important part of their practice of the values of egalitarian collectivism to which Shun’s members continue to dedicate themselves.

Seikatsu Club Consumer Co-operative and women’s worker collectives

If Shun’s cooking practice of “asking to take a taste” has evolved along a unique path, Shun itself is only one of dozens of similar restaurants developed as Women’s Worker Collectives (WCC) on a general concept arising within a segment of Japan’s extensive consumer co-operative movement. In the late 1960s housewives in the Tokyo-Yokohama area started the now internationally renowned Seikatsu Club Consumer Co-operative (SCCC) to gain control of the nutritional quality of the food they serve their families. In the mid-1980s SCCC sponsored an initiative to organise worker collectives to provide paid work to its members - middle-aged housewives of white-collared husbands. Women in the Tokyo-Yokohama area especially have made the most of this opportunity. (Marshall, 2005) The authoritative roster compiled by Workers’ Collective Network Japan, the official organ of the Women’s Workers Collective movement, shows more than 12,000 women working in 463 wākāzu korekuteibu (workers collectives) as of February, 2000. (Iwami, 2000) Virtually all of these women work part-time only.

About one-third of WWCs prepare food or food products, (Sumitani, 2000) not surprising in a movement of housewives originating in a consumer co-operative devoted to food. Unusual for a consumer co-operative, however, SCCC itself continues to develop ever-greater member activism on several fronts rather than turn their co-operative into a network of stores. In the words of Yokota Katsumi, one of the founders of Seikatsu Club Kanagawa,

It is not our ultimate purpose in life, as individuals, to buy safe reliable consumer goods at reasonable prices. (Yokota, 1991)

Two hundred housewives in Tokyo's Setagaya Ward started SCCC in 1965 to buy whole milk directly from a reliable producer, rather than the expensive, reconstituted milk alone available through retail channels. The organisation's history shows annual increases in membership and increasing activism by members over an increasing range of activities. Members have used their organisation as an alternative to the status quo in consumption from its beginnings, in work from the founding of the first women's workers collective "Ninjin" in 1982, and in electoral politics from 1983 when it elected its first ten women to prefectural representative assemblies. Membership in the consumer co-operative underpins SCCC members' other activism.

Early in its history SCCC developed the three fundamental and interrelated practices that continue to distinguish this organisation as a consumer co-operative: the 5 to 15 member small group (*han*), co-operative purchasing (*kyōdō kōnyū*), and purchasing directly from the producer (*sanchoku*). Together, these three systems take the place of stores. But these procedures also require considerable carefully coordinated activity among members, especially at the lowest level, that of the small group (*han*). (Craig, 1993) SCCC activism extends outward from the solidarity of **han** organisation.

The WWCs arose from the desire of members who spent time on SCCC activities above the *han* level to make money from that effort. (Utsuki, 1993) 'Ninjin' was begun as the workforce for the Kanagawa distribution centre. The mid-1980s saw the percentage of full-time housewives in Japan drop below one-half for the first time, (Ueno, 1987) and many SCCC members too began to take part-time jobs. Sato found that as part-time employment began to rise even among SCCC members, many SCCC members also began to experience schedule conflicts between their part-time jobs and their *han* activities. (Satō, 1995)

Members who do not have sufficient time to participate in the food distribution activities of the *han* to which they belong can pick up their orders at their local depot. Introduced in 1981, the depot system solved at a stroke two problems for SCCC: members could have their orders prepared for pick-up separate from the rest of their *han*, and members who wanted to make money in connection with their participation in SCCC could do so as members of a worker co-operative contracting to provide the labour

for the depot's work - at first, office work and handling members' orders.

Kutsuzawa observes that the development of the depot is the result of SCCC's efforts both to accommodate the membership of employed women and to provide an alternative form of work for members who want to earn money through a connection with their consumer co-operative. (Kutsuzawa, 1998 p73) This plan dovetailed closely with SCCC's other activities in politics and environmentalism designed to reach out to a wider population. The SCCC's so-called 'soap movement' illustrates their creativity in forging alternatives that reach out to recruit through networked social, environmental, political and economic activism.

Following their initial success organising a consumer co-operative, activists within SCCC began a petition drive to have synthetic detergents banned in 1977. In Japan wash water is not sent to sewage treatment plants but discharged untreated into the 'gray water' stream. Synthetic detergents are a major and serious pollutant throughout Japan's waterways, and also a source of allergic reactions among infants from laundered diapers. (Utsuki, 1993) Housewives also contribute a second substantial source of water pollution when they rinse used cooking oil down the kitchen sink (the default practice) into the 'gray water' system where it too enters, remains in, and kills rivers, streams and wetlands.

The discovery of the SCCC 'soap movement' was how to create networks among SCCC members for the collection and manufacture of soap from used cooking oil in a way that provides realistic alternatives for action at the individual, community and government levels. Individual housewives collect and turn in their used cooking oil, and use the easily biodegradable soap made from it in place of synthetic detergents in their homes; movement activists collect used oil in public places, and educate and recruit around these environmental problems; and WWCs make soap from the used oil and sell it through the SCCC. Other worker co-operatives in Japan design and manufacture small-scale soap-making machines, and a washing machine that is especially effective using this soap rather than synthetic detergent was being designed. (Marshall, 1997) SCCC activists made the Kanagawa Prefectural legislature's failure to act on their petition into the springboard from which to launch SCCC member candidates. Over 100 SCCC members

had been elected to local and regional assemblies by 1995. (Iwao, 1993) SCCC members have used their organisation to create an expanding array of alternative social, political, and above all economic opportunities, first for consumption and more recently for production.

My introduction to Shun came through two of its members whom I first met at a demonstration sponsored by the SCCC's soap movement at a restored wetlands. As a participant in the soap movement, Shun has its used cooking oil turned into the soap with which it washes its dishes and lunch boxes. All long-term members of SCCC, Shun's members are highly self-selected for the high-minded, public-spirited ethos of egalitarian cooperation practiced at Shun. Shun is explicitly organised around its members' sense of the importance of egalitarian co-operation and collective responsibility in their lives.

"Tell me how this tastes"

At Shun, egalitarian co-operation can be seen not only in how the restaurant is owned and how it is managed, but also in how its central work is performed. Requests to take a taste are common, requests to give a taste unheard of: thus these cooks forestall offers of assistance and advice on cooking, assertions of authority such offers might imply, accusations of the arrogation of unwonted authority such implications might require, and finally all discussion of the right of any member to supervise another member's cooking. Shun's is a story of **quality** control and **equality** control in both cooking and governance at the same time. Cooking as Shun does - individual cooks routinely ask for advice on flavouring dishes as they're preparing them - lets an entirely part-time workforce make the same dish taste the same for 200 on Tuesday that a completely different set of cooks made for 50 last Friday, without a master chef, without an elected or self-appointed supervisor, without a guidance committee, and without a cookbook. Cooking by casually asking whoever is at your elbow for a judgment and a suggestion maintains Shun's ethos of egalitarian co-operation as well by forestalling the rise of Boehm's "aggressive egoism," (Boehm, 1999 p254) as this term might be understood to apply to middle-aged, middle-class Japanese housewives, for whom silence rather confrontation is second nature and a publicly applauded virtue.

These 14 housewives, all between 40 and 60 years old, operate Shun as a workers' collective of part-time workers. All of them members of SCCC and several quite active in its organisational apparatus, these women replied individually to an announcement from Seikatsu Club Saitama headquarters that it would begin providing economic opportunity to women by helping them start worker collectives. (Satō, 1995 and Seikatsu Club Kanegawa, 1993) Each of 12 women invested ¥10,000 (about US\$ 1000) to get Shun started. They told me their first year was hard because no one would be frank. (Mellor et al, 1988) Since then it has been busy but fun. After the first month one member quit: the work was just too physically demanding. Her share was returned to her whole. No one has quit since and three more members have joined, each paying in her own ¥10,000 capital share. In its fifth year when I went to work there, Shun was already finding its space on the ground floor of the Saitama Prefecture SCCC Building cramped.

Shun's space was designed to be a lunch restaurant in the new Saitama SCCC headquarters building; their equipment was all new at the start. A half-wall and divided curtain (noren) split their space into a kitchen in back and a lunch-counter and tables out front, which area they call 'omise', their 'shop'. On a typical day six women make 125 lunches, 30 of which they serve out front and the rest they deliver to five or six customers. A slow day might reach only half that number of lunches. A busy day has as many as ten members cooking 200 or more lunches in the overcrowded kitchen. There are occasional 300-lunch days, ordered perhaps by a Parent-Teacher Association meeting or a consumer co-operative's local convention. Shun's members work long days, from 8:30 am to 7:00 pm or later. Rarely does anyone work two full days in a row, though a late afternoon followed by a whole day is not at all uncommon. They all do any and all of the work that needs done except for bookkeeping, for which three members were given training, and delivery: urbanites all, some members are not licensed drivers.

Shun serves a lunch that any of its members would make for a friend visiting her home, and friends do often visit Shun to lunch and chat. Shun's meals are all handmade home cooking, almost exclusively from SCCC's wholesome ingredients. They serve a different lunch every day. Each member cooks everything in Shun's

repertoire of some 100 main dishes and as many side dishes. No one's appearance suggests she is not at home, cooking in her own kitchen. These cooks explicitly decided not to wear uniforms (oshikise) so common in Japanese businesses. They favour slacks, even jeans, and blouses, even sweatshirts, and big colourful aprons with big pockets.

Mornings start slowly, often with a cup of tea and a bun on slower days, while a few late customers phone in small orders, hoping to be squeezed in. The bulk of orders are placed days in advance or left standing. The pace gradually picks up, timed to get the deliveries all out the door in a burst, hot. At 11:30 am, their work all done for the moment once more, the cooks collect in the shop to pronounce the benediction "Kirei!" ("How pretty!") over their creations spread out across the lunch tables just before the lids are fitted on the boxed lunches, and the stacked boxes, bundled in enormous bright coloured cloth squares (furoshiki), are rushed out the door into Shun's delivery cars.

Shun then serves lunch out front to walk-in customers until 1:00 pm or so, as long as the food holds out. The cooks eat lunch from 1:00 to 2:00, that day's meal when any remains, or cook something for themselves if not enough does. Today's cooks plan tomorrow's menu while eating lunch together, and just after. Whoever goes round to retrieve the reusable plastic lunch boxes also does supplementary shopping, usually minimal. The rest hand wash the pots, pans and the reusable lunch boxes from 2:00 till done, often 5:00 or later, and then get started preparing tomorrow's meal until 7:00.

One implication of each member rarely coming in more often than every other day, and which seemed mildly amusing to the crew to whom I observed it, is that almost never do any of the women making out tomorrow's menu cook it. Many days I was the only person at lunch scheduled to work the following day. It was then their joke to pretend to put me in charge of the next day's meal. Explaining kills the joke, but at Shun, emphatically no one is in charge. While they had talked early on about putting one person in charge of each day's work on a rotating basis, the sort of system Kutsuzawa documents for the quite similar WWC lunch restaurant 'Sö', (Kutsuzawa, 1998 p118) the explicit and certainly plausible reason they gave me for not installing a system of this sort was their desire for maximally flexible scheduling. In an economy where small businesses notoriously tend to

instability, (Chalmers, 1989) Shun continued in 2005 into its sixteenth year in a highly competitive, low-wage, low-profit service industry despite the profound stagnation in Japan's national economy all the years they have been open for business. To be successful for fifteen years as a co-operative based entirely on part-time workers, a small business cannot have a great dependence on any one or two members. Shun even had three members get training as bookkeepers. All the original members spent the year before they opened in a course on small business management run by Saitama Prefectural Government.

In general, no member works more days than she wants to work and several not nearly as many. Shun does a great deal of hour-juggling as the end of the fiscal year approaches to avoid anyone hitting "The Million Yen Wall," a phrase which refers to family income-tax problems they would certainly encounter if they worked too many hours.¹ One Saturday morning each month they clean their restaurant from top to bottom and then hold a business meeting for two to three hours after lunch. An annually elected director chairs these meetings, but has no particular authority otherwise. I did not find out they had an official director until I attended a monthly business meeting: I could not discern who was that year's officer from watching Shun cook.

The sheer continuation of their business does not represent the pinnacle of success to all of these women. On separate occasions four members told me of their hopes to open restaurants, bakeries or cooking schools of their own. A large majority, although certainly not all, of the fourteen members would like Shun to grow and diversify. To this end Shun accepted a request to bid on the catering for the Saitama Teachers Union's 400-guest reception thrown to celebrate the opening of the union's new office building. They won the job by treating it as an opportunity to invest in supplies and knowledge they could use in similar future jobs, and by determining to pursue such opportunities actively. The days before the reception were hectic with preparation. Shun closed on the date of the event itself. On the night before the reception, four members slept in the tatami room upstairs in the SCCC office building that houses their kitchen. Two members did not work on the project, one ill with flu and another keeping arrangements made long before for a ski vacation with her family.

In the US one grows up hearing how “too many cooks spoil the broth.” At Shun the implicit guiding principle seems to be just the opposite: “too few cooks ruin a restaurant.” A day begins with each cook picking the dish on the menu she will make. Gathering up ingredients and implements, she starts to prepare her choice. Later, as she stirs in seasoning, she might offer the cook at her elbow a taste and a chance to comment, to make a suggestion to alter the flavour of what she’s cooking. Cooks offer tastes often and almost always make any suggested changes. Often, though, a taster’s answer “oishii” (delicious) follows the cook’s standard question “dō?” (how is it?). Occasionally a taster is not quite sure just what a dish does require for improvement and the cook offers a taste to a second taster. I think we must accept in principle that these cooks **do** want each other’s comments and suggestions when they ask for them; they remain open to changes tasters offer. What requires explanation is why they cook this way at all, asking each other to taste and suggest improvements, involving each other in the flavouring of the dishes they are cooking as they prepare them. The task of the analyst is to understand why cooking this way makes such sense to them that they are able to take it for granted and make it their routine practice.

A cook certainly does not now, if she ever did, ask another to take a taste from a lack of confidence in her ability to prepare each dish deliciously. Shun is popular and successful, looking for ways and money to grow and branch out. In Shun’s kitchen cooking is a social and collective process for which results the members are collectively responsible. Day after day cooks ask whoever is nearest to taste dishes they have all prepared dozens of times since starting Shun, and throughout their married lives at home. Their behaviour is spontaneous and genuine.² These requests to taste a dish and the responses tasters made were too frequent, too fleeting, too formless for me to type and count with any greater precision. Busy with my own vegetables to chop or goma (sesame seeds) to grind,³ my attention to the way Shun cooked lapsed so often I even thought I occasionally saw spoons used for tasting continue to be used for stirring, which of course, being quite illegal, must never have actually happened. Shun’s effort to reproduce the special qualities of home cooking was never studied.

I cannot think, and have no evidence, that Shun’s way of cooking was ever a product of

conscious design. Cooking by offering tastes this way was never talked about in my presence, never identified or called, never explicitly brought to the fore as a distinct practice. I didn’t count how often a cook asked me too how I thought a dish tasted when I was at an elbow. But it was often, at least once or more each week after my first few days there. The kitchen was crowded and I was always next to somebody. When given a taste, I always said “delicious,” which was actually what I always thought. I sometimes also added, cultural relativist to the end, that I did not really know if my taste would suit their customers. And while they always agreed in turn that this might well be true, they continued to include me in this process of soliciting criticism and correction right up to the time I left the restaurant, although of course I never once offered a suggestion to alter a dish.

Cooking this way, each cook puts her reputation for skill, sensitivity and taste into the hands of another cook at least once or twice a week. While the usual answer to “here, try this” is “delicious,” sometimes, not often, not on average more than once during a meal’s preparation, I would hear “maybe a little shōyu (soy),” or “what about some mirin (thick, sweetened rice wine),” or any of a range of possibilities appropriate to the dish being tasted. But suggestions made politely are not merely politeness. They affect the food. They are considered as well as considerate. The cooks eat the leftovers for lunch, so they know the taste of their cooking by the mouthful and in combination as well; but a judgment then is too late to affect that day’s food. A taster does not just reply automatically, but makes a genuine judgment of taste. Otherwise, would a taster sometimes say one thing, and other times another, add this, add that, and so on? Or a second taster sometimes disagree with the first taster, suggesting a different flavouring? By the time I arrived at Shun this way of cooking had long become unselfconscious, if it had ever been otherwise.

Several consequences equally relevant to taste and work organisation follow from this practice. The most obvious and perhaps the most important is that everyone gains and maintains confidence in each other’s abilities. There is speed of preparation: a cook must have her dish prepared on time, and in time to have others taste and comment on it and for her then to change it a bit before it has to be sent out. So, if a dish is proving slower to prepare than

anticipated, a hand can be given or received. Further, each cook has become entirely familiar with, actually participated in creating, the flavours that characterise the restaurant's cooking and has become able to reproduce those flavours in batches of any size, from 30 to 300 servings. Each cook can make any of the restaurant's two hundred or so dishes to any number of servings from experience. I never saw a cookbook or a written recipe although every day the next day's menu is laid out on a paper template to help imagine how it will fit and appear in the lunch box compartments. It is from this layout, with the name of the dish written into the box segment in which it will be served, that the cooks choose which dish they will cook that day as they arrive in the morning.

Every day she works each cook makes a dish from a menu not of her own choosing with ingredients others purchased. Every combination of members will cook a meal that tastes like Shun's cooking always does taste. Between the fourth of January and the thirtieth of March, the period of my stint, chance matched the same crew (of seven) only twice, February 7 and again on February 14. Only the very popular entrée kara-age, deep-fried chicken in spiced breading, was served as often as three times in those three months, and not on either of these two dates (on which the entrées were saba [mackerel] and tonkatsu [deep-fried breaded pork] respectively).

These women do not worry that one of them may be working with less effort than the others, all of them working in plain view and under an imminent deadline, side by side in a tiny kitchen day after day. In general, a member works no more days than she wants to work, although occasionally a member is called in to work on a busy day for which not enough cooks have already signed up. This evident offering of an opportunity to judge one's work is not a matter of how much or hard a member works, or even how eminently she cooks, which several of them genuinely do as a result of extensive training and years of practice. It is a matter of taste, of hitting a target, of each cook's knowledge and ability to achieve consistency in the quality of Shun's cooking over a wide range of dishes. A request to taste tests and teaches the taster's judgment as much, and in the same way, as it does the cook's.

Nor can anyone take on the role of 'master chef', and begin to act as if she alone is the arbiter of taste, that her judgment alone

surpasses that of any of the others.⁴ Quite possibly everyone offers her food to be tasted; certainly everyone tastes and comments after an offer, and everyone who offers a taste is evidently open to altering flavours according to suggestions given. I never noticed anyone turn down a request to take a taste. Never did anyone ever ask to taste something. Certainly there was no one whose approval was needed for a dish to be served. Neither is there a small group of superior cooks to whom the rest defer. Nor is there one, two, or any other number of members whose cooking is thought by the rest to be somehow inferior to the standard. Not once did I ever hear anyone say anything like "I'd like to taste that first before we serve it." Nor did anyone ever taste a dish during its preparation while the cook's back was turned and comment on it or alter it without having been first asked. Never did I hear anyone tell someone else "the right way" or "the best way" to do anything around the kitchen. The practice at Shun is to ask to have one's dish sampled: the work talk is all "here, taste this, what do you think? Here, you taste it too. A little more shoyu? Too sweet? What do you think?" The side talk was always about the business and SCCC, to which they all belong. In all this, however, I cannot say I was able to document that every cook offered and accepted offers; perhaps some offered more than others, perhaps one or two never offered tastes. But I did work in crews that included each member at least several times and my sense of the cooking practice of the kitchen was that it did not vary by the crew's composition in any way of which I was aware, although two cooks were openly acknowledged to be especially fun to work with because of their vivacious personalities and sharp senses of humour. The fundamental practice at Shun is not to offer suggestions or advice to fellow cooks unasked, but to ask routinely for suggestions on seasoning.

These fourteen women, several of whom have studied cooking, all of whom have cooked as housewives for 10, 20, 30 years, put their skills and taste to their colleagues' direct judgments every time they cook, every time they taste. They cannot say or even deeply cultivate in themselves a disposition to think, "anyway, what does she know, I'm a much better cook than she is, I certainly won't let her fool with my cooking." Thus, this practice of asking, tasting, and responding became casual, unobtrusive, impersonal, and constant in a fairly brief period,

certainly within less than two years. Utterly crucial to how they cook and discipline themselves in their cooking, this practice has come to seem innocuous and unthinking, routine to the point of invisibility. No matter who cooks which of 200 dishes, the taste is Shun's.

These women do deliberately and carefully monitor the contents of the reusable lunch boxes they've retrieved as they scrape each compartment out and submerge each box in the hot, soapy dishwater. They are eager to know what people ate and what they did not. But they do not blame the cook for what customers might not have eaten all of, even if they remember; certainly during clean-up they do not ask who cooked what. Actually, I do not think anyone, perhaps not even the cook herself, does remember, aside possibly from the deep-fried dishes which need two or three cooks working in close coordination. They blame the recipe, more or less, or just leave it at that, since they have each made all these dishes many times before and have long since weeded out the unpopular ones. "Guess they didn't like the spinach today" is about as full a comment as anyone makes now. But almost always all the compartments in all the boxes are completely clean and everyone is satisfied all around: "Kyō

wa oishikatta, desu ne!" ("Today was tasty, wasn't it!").

Conclusion

The practices of these cooks can be understood to offer support for Boehm's hypothesis that:

in holding onto their personal autonomies, the collective weapon of the rank and file has been their ability to define their own social life in moral terms, and to back up their thoughts about political parity with pointed actions in the form of collectivised social sanctioning." (Boehm, 1999 pviii)

The present paper takes his notion one step further with the suggestion that where everyone explicitly identifies herself as one of "the rank and file," practicing pointed actions need not be self-conscious, may be more effective when left undiscussed, and may even be most effective when forestalled by the tacit practice of the banal. In a Japan so famously theorised as inherently hierarchical, (Nakane, 1968 and Nakane, 1978) egalitarianism often must be developed deliberately. In some isolated quarters it may even have more support, and forms of support, than people care to recognise.

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Notes

- 1 Several of Shun's members would prefer to work more than they do, but their income tax bills would rise dramatically if the second income in the household, the one from Shun, rose above the relatively low level of ¥1,030,000. See Mason, Andrew and Naohito Ogawa (1998) 'Why Avoid the Altar?' In *Japan: Why It Works, Why It Doesn't*, eds James Mak, Shyam Sunder, Shigeyuki Abe and Kazuhiro Igawa, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp11-19, p15). This phenomenon is popularly called "The Million Yen Wall" (hyakuman-en kabe). See Marshall (2005).
- 2 Faking requests and their responses could not be sustained, it would seem, beyond the first year. The methodological recommendation Wikan offers for the study of women in Bali applies here as well, in so far as Japan is somewhat similar to Bali with regard to public expression of emotion and motive for women especially. Wikan points out that to be interpreted reliably emotional expression must always occur with a cluster of **other** signs of significance "that serve to position people with regard to their orientation as a key to what people are beneath (or within) the bright face it is incumbent on all to display" (Wikan, 1990). At Shun tastes are given, suggestions solicited, replies varied, changes made as suggested. I could not discern anything like boredom or disinterest with the work or the enterprise by any member. And while some members did offer me characterisations critical of other members, no one ever even hinted to me that another member was not a good cook, was uninterested in cooking or indifferent to the success of Shun. The first thing each member said when I asked why she answered the ad was either because she liked to cook or because she wanted to start her own business. The other answer was always second. They gave me the feeling they'd all been asked this, and rehearsed these answers, many times before.
- 3 The "participant" part of my participant observation at Shun consisted of my doing the scullery tasks. I ground all the sesame seeds that were ground at Shun while I worked there. Grinding roasted sesame seeds into paste by hand with a mortar and pestle is tedious and tiring work. The expression "to grind goma for someone" is the Japanese equivalent of "to apple polish," "to brown nose."

- 4 There are workers co-operatives like this in Japan, however. I visited but did not work at a bread and pastry bakery centred on a retired master baker eager to pass on his knowledge to a younger generation. This co-operative was not incubated by the Seikatsu Club Consumer Co-operative and is not rooted in the consumer co-operative movement but in the organised labour movement.

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