

Izakaya Culture in Japanese Society: A Case Study of Midnight Diner

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Abstract. The izakaya, however, is not only a place to drink and eat but also take root in Japanese society and people's everyday life. In this article, I take the Midnight Diner as a sample and apply the research design of qualitative case study for discussing how izakayas express themselves and their impacts on Japanese society at large. dings suggest that, in real-life contexts, izakaya perform a dual role: they function both as a “buffer zone” that alleviates social pressure and as a “social lubricant” that facilitates interpersonalinteraction, while simultaneously serving as an important site for cultural continuity and transmission. Beyond providing wage earners with an opportunity for shedding of social masks, and reestablishing transitory intimacy under relaxed conditions, the izakaya is thus not only a place to preserve generational food memory but also an important site for maintaining regional identity by creating a bridge from past Japanese traditions to contemporary city living. This research could also be regarded as an alternative approach to analyzing the socio-cultural aspects in Japanese society, but it can also serve as a case study to examine how certain eating formats are inter-related with larger social systems, contributing to knowledge related to maintaining and developing local food culture in a time of globalization.

Keywords: Izakaya Culture, Japan, Midnight Diner, Social Functions, Transmission of Culture.

1. Introduction

“In Japanese, the act of drinking alcohol at a particular place is referred to as izakaya, and the term izakaya can be literally understood as a 'place for drinking.’” [1]. Across Japanese cities, izakaya are often marked by warm yellow lighting and wooden façades, forming a recognizable urban landscape. From the office districts surrounding Tokyo's business centers to the historic lanes of Kyoto, izakaya are ubiquitous across cities of varying sizes, serving as a common dining choice for people of different ages and occupations. As an important medium of Japanese food culture, the izakaya is far more than a simple tavern or restaurant; its historical development has been deeply intertwined with Japan's processes of industrialization and urbanization, gradually giving rise to a distinctive cultural form and a set of specific social functions.

As Japanese society becomes increasingly competitive and complex with people's lives becoming busy due to modernization, the social values of izakaya have become ever more apparent. Not only

did they want to satisfy their bellies, they have become important sites for relaxation, emotional expression, and building social ties. Over the last few years, academic interest—in both Japan and abroad—in izakaya culture has grown. However, most of these studies remain descriptive in nature and focus more on how it is used culturally, with less emphasis being placed on its social use. In such a context, the current work uses *Midnight Diner* as an exemplar to explore systematically the various roles played by izakaya in Japanese society. To clarify the role of izakayas in helping customers escape temporarily from everyday life as well as facilitating social interaction through a discussion about their spatial design and function, this paper examines: thus explaining why they have a social and cultural meaning other than just being related to eating or drinking.

2. Case selection

This paper uses one TV drama from Japan – *Midnight Diner* to illustrate our discussion. Season One aired on October 9, 2009, with subsequent seasons released between 2011 and 2019. Over its decade-long run, the series has maintained a high audience rating of 9.2 on Douban, a popular Chinese review website, which has been considered the archetype for such websites in that period [2].

The setting is an izakaya (small restaurant), which opens on the midnight hour at the corner of two streets, in Shinjuku: The action occurs in this narrow and crowded establishment where the owner serves a succession of regulars who arrive after dark: the series portrays an intricate picture of the izakaya as an emotionally meaningful place of interaction. The play features average office employees who stayed late to work until midnight ordering piping hot ramen in their cups, and publishing company editors drinking some sake at an izakaya to relax themselves from busy days. Such common occurrences show how the izakaya served as an interlude space for city dwellers to rest and rejuvenate themselves. Repeated visitors ordering the same dish get to know each other and thus transform from strangers to friends who can share their worries with each other, thus vividly illustrating the social worth of that area for building interpersonal relationships.

By closely reading the series' spatial layout, character interactions, and narration, I extract from it material about the izakaya's role as a space for emotional solace and social bonding; especially as spaces where patrons, in which they momentarily cast off prescribed social identities, practice self-disclosure, and employ food and talk as media of emotionality. The most common mood in *Midnight Diner* is relaxed and tranquil which provides psychological comfort and allows people to go back to themselves [3]. Such peaceful ambiance is not just for aesthetics; it is also a necessary prerequisite for realizing the izakaya's social functions. This opens up room for stories about loneliness, pressure, and contact to be told in an atmosphere of acceptance; this is also a good place to discuss the izakaya as places of psychological "return" and emotional "reconsideration".

It is these specific details and contextualized situations, drawn from the series' storytelling, which illustrate the practical sense making that takes place within izakaya culture as it manifests itself through action. Thus, they successfully overcome some of the shortcomings that a pure literature study has with respect to emotion aspects, micro-level interactions, and lived experiences, and therefore provide a good empirical basis for further analysis of the social functions of izakaya in the present study.

3. Modes of life and the fundamental roles of izakaya for the Japanese society

3.1. A “buffer zone” for social pressure

Japan has a reputation as one of the most demanding countries in terms of working hours, while also being socially conservative where people have expected responsibilities at home or at the office. self-control, self-restraint. The izakaya is an open space where you can let down your guard for a while, functioning as an important channel for the release of social pressure.

In *Midnight Diner*, such a role can be shown in several characters. Each of them has been very well-drawn and strongly personalized, representing real parts of the Japanese population [4]. The yakuza guy Ryu is constantly ordering octopus-shaped little sausages not because they are good, but in order to express his childhood memory and true self, for a moment, the mask of his formidable social persona. In the same vein, Marilyn becomes friends with another generation of people who loves to gamble because they also play pachinko together, here the life is easier and the relations between people do not carry a load of burdens [5]. The businessmen leave aside their struggle for money, bureaucrats relax, actors get peace of mind and crooks regain humanity. The readers are various, such as singers, writers, middle-aged widows, white-collar workers, the underprivileged [6]. Through the series, individuals from various statuses and experiences find each other in the izakaya for shared comfort and solace amidst food and drink.

In this context customers do not have to conform to their working place hierarchy or carry out obligations and anxieties of a family role; instead diners can communicate freely, show their feelings, and talk in a straightforward manner. In addition, the common layout features of izakaya—small spaces, warm lights, and mild soothing background music—which provides a cozy environment that is relaxing. This combination of physical and emotional comfort makes izakaya become one of the most favorite places where Japanese people can relieve their psychological stress.

3.2. A “social lubricant” for interpersonal relationships

However, note that in a dining hall one can witness how minorities suffer from discrimination and how they recover from it [7]. In Japan, where etiquette and hierarchy are important, people’s lives can be governed by status and occupation, and age. The izakaya serves as an ephemeral “holding space,” wherein these social tags are put on hold. In the series, suit-clad office workers are seated next to casually dressed labourers; Yakuza members eat at the same table as ordinary citizens. Being physically co-present in this way subtly upends Japan’s normative social order. When people come together around the common denominator of “diner,” workplace hierarchies and social differences blur so that people can communicate with one another in a less formal way; For example, Ryu chats with an office employee about his liking of a humble food and this reflects the role that the izakaya plays as a “social lubricant”.

The “lubrication” of relations in *Midnight Diner* often takes place via acts of listening and storytelling; a good example is an episode that revolves around “sake-steamed clams”, which illustrates the phenomenon well. Grandma Ren is upset with her son Jo because they have been having little fights about small things, but not talking to each other for quite some time now. the fact that the diner is an anonymous, nonjudgmental “third space,” combined with the calming ambiance and the owner’s attentive but nonintrusive listening, provides security for expressing emotions. In such an environment, the mother is freed from her family image as the “nagging parent”, nor is the son himself the person who has been constantly reprimanded. The clam-sake stew becomes an important intermediary that causes, and also contains, feeling. Not just a taste lodged into the son’s

memory, but also an iconography of the care and attention that he yearns for but has never been able to articulate. Through their shared experience of eating this dish and through the memory attached to it, feelings of understanding, of love - difficult to express in daily life – find their simple, unassuming outlet.

Accordingly, the izakaya's function as a “social lubricant” is concretely manifested in its ability to provide a neutral physical setting, a nonjudgmental social atmosphere, and food as an emotional medium. Together, these elements build bridges for obstructed communication, allowing rigid relationships to be loosened and gradually repaired through emotional resonance.

3.3. A “vehicle” for cultural transmission

Traditional izakayas are not just eating houses, but drinking places where people can talk, chat and laugh together [8]. In addition to socializing and entertainment, izakayas are also important conduits for transmission in the spread of Japanese foodways and folklore. As to ingredients and technique, and everything else such as the wine etiquette or the mode of service reflects traditional culture features.

The menus of izakaya typically center on classic Japanese dishes—such as grilled skewers, oden, sashimi, and tempura—that have been passed down through generations. These dishes preserve the natural flavors of their ingredients while reflecting the aesthetic ideal of “refined simplicity” central to Japanese food culture. At the same time, izakaya are key sites for the circulation of Japan's drinking culture: traditional beverages such as sake, plum wine, and shōchū are widely consumed, and customary practices including toasting rituals and the etiquette of pouring drinks for others are continually enacted and maintained.

Food in Midnight Diner functions as a symbolic carrier for representing various life stories or social conditions, whose production and reception is inseparable from the cultural space of the izakaya [9]. This is how the culture of ownership manifests itself : by cooking meals imbued with customers' own memories and feelings and by an attitude towards hospitality based on non-invasion and privacy preservation. he creates a setting in which the symbolic meaning of foods emerges spontaneously. Such as setting is suitable for his relations with patrons, who are treated with due respect and kept at arm's length.

Take for example the case where “the three sisters of chazuke,” which are pickled plum, salmon and cod roe, respectively represent three users' tastes; they like to choose different types of food that express their respective subjectivities. When people always select dishes representing identities they quietly critique gender expectations of izakaya patrons and suggest that there is a greater acceptance of personal freedom among people in Japan. Different professional identities are converted as one common identity— “diners”—in Midnight Diner. The “fusion” of culture pictures brings the story closer to the audience as if to say that “everybody eats on an even keel.” [10]. The izakaya thus becomes more than just a place for eating; it can be used as a means to create empathy between people from different backgrounds.

4. The positive impacts of izakaya culture

The positive role played by izakaya in Japanese society is reflected at several levels. In terms of its individual-level impact, they play a stress-relieving role which supports the maintenance of good psychological wellbeing and reduces mental illness potentially caused by over-stress. They also have a social role, at the same time, meets peoples' emotional requirements and encourages more harmonious relations among individuals. On the one hand, from a more general societal perspective,

izakayas contribute to reducing social tensions and enhancing cohesiveness among members of society by acting as a “third place”, izakaya fill the space between family (private world) and workplace (public world) in a way that can provide a flexible support to the stability of social structure.

In addition, izakaya business helps grow other industries too and contributes greatly in the Japanese economy. Izakaya culture is also part of the tourist attractions for Japan, which will attract tourists from all over the world wishing to participate in this unique social and food event thus promoting the spread of Japanese culture abroad.

5. Conclusion

The izakaya is one of the uniquely Japanese places for eating and drinking that have played an integral role in the social history of Japan: as a critical “third place.” Between everyday social spheres like the family, the workplace, and the neighborhood, is a grey area in between private life and public space. In this way, izakaya are not only places where can unwind from life’s pressures or simply feel good about being with other people; izakaya are also crucially important as a medium of both cultural inheritance and economic growth.

The following analysis shows how the izakaya’s three main functions as (a) “buffer zone” against social pressures, (b) “social lubricant,” and a “vehicle” for culture transmission, together constitute an important grassroots support base for the smooth operation of Japanese society. The good social value of izakaya is therefore widely recognized in Japan as well as abroad.

The emergence and development of izakaya culture is the product of a combination of factors in Japanese society including its social structure, culture, and their daily life. Taking TV series *Midnight Diner* as an example, this paper will enrich our knowledge about the operation rules and cultural features behind Japanese society from the perspective of izakaya culture, which not only gives this paper precious data about food habit and sociocultural evolution, but it is also a source of knowledge about their interaction. Going forward into the future, as Japanese society itself changes further, izakayachips will probably change accordingly in some ways but it is highly likely that they would continue to play a pivotal role and have an irreplaceable significance for Japanese society in general.

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