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Gyoza and family values

Yone Sugita February 13, 2008

Gyoza (Chinese dumplings) have been damaging the perpetually strained Sino-Japanese relations for the past few weeks. Nobody knows the exact cause of the food poisoning resulting from people eating frozen gyoza made in China; however, many Japanese just assumed that China was responsible and frozen and processed food made in China is inherently unsafe. Japanese media have been peddling this negative image of China since the issue became public in January.

China has been cooperating with Japan to discover the cause of the food poisoning and to resolve the issue. Rather than attributing blame to China without any substantiating evidence, and causing further damage to the bilateral relationship, let us sit back and reflect on whether it is our way of life that is the root cause of this problem.



The Law for Equal Employment Opportunity for Men and Women enacted in 1999, the abolition of the special income tax deductions for spouses in 2004, and the general social atmosphere have been leading married women to the mistaken belief that working for money outside the home is a good thing, a positive contribution to society, while staying home is a bad thing.

This misperception induces us to devalue family values. When a family has two breadwinners, the husband and the wife sometimes have two separate bank accounts, an unbelievable practice for someone who regards husband and wife as just one solid, solemn, and indivisible unit. They may also be "rational" in terms of division of household chores without considering placing the right people in the right jobs.

These "rational" people do not wish to waste time fixing meals. Low-priced calorie-rich frozen food is an excellent choice for them even if it contains unhealthy additives because it can be stocked in a freezer at home and all they have to do is to nuke it in a microwave. Instant meals are a must for a busy double-income family. Using frozen food can save time and money.

This is a "rational" choice; however, these "rational" people forget that home-prepared meals with love not only physically fill up the family's tummies but also satisfy their hearts and minds. I still remember how much I loved my grandmother's homemade "udon" (noodle soup) and my mother's curry and rice. Today's kids' first choice for dinner is pot noodles or frozen gyoza that we can easily find at nearby convenience stores.

When you come home very late at night, everybody at home is already asleep and you have to drag frozen fried chicken out of the freezer. Gradually, you get used to this way of life. However, just imagine that you find your spouse sitting up late, greeting you at the door, providing you with hot homemade miso soup and a bowl of rice when you come home after midnight. You will be moved and appreciate how wonderful your better half is. Nothing is more delicious than the miso soup fixed by your lifelong partner. This is the essence of family values that are intangible, warm, uncalculating, and seemingly irrational communication of heart with heart among family members. Neglecting these family values leads us to rely on frozen foods that may be hazardous to our health and may cause metabolic syndrome.

We now live in a very convenient world. Frozen food and factory-produced boxed meals can be found at any convenience store at any time. There are many family restaurants where you can enjoy meals at a reasonable price. They provide you with food and service, but they cannot give you the mental and spiritual satisfaction that all human beings need. According to recent newspaper reports, more and more Japanese people are beginning to cook meals for themselves without using frozen or processed food.

The gyoza incident is unfortunate. However, we may be able to gain something from this incident because it reminds us of the importance of family values. Home sweet home!

Yone Sugita is an associate professor of American history at Osaka University.

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