

The scope for developmental dynamism after Geographical Indication specification: The case of Japanese kaki

Naoko TAKAHASHI¹, Hart N. FEUER²

Abstract – Japan is a country that has a considerable history of marketing historical agri-food products, with Geographical Indication (GI) emerging as a recent trend. One of the most iconic and illustrative cases is the production of persimmons, or kaki. With many varied GI registrations, kaki regions constitute a “spectrum” of divergent approaches to specifying product characteristics, permitting various technologies, and accommodating contemporary economic realities. The case studies presented in this paper, surveying diverse hoshigaki (dried persimmon) GIs ranging from micro-production areas to relatively large-scale regions, illuminates an emerging form of heritage governance, in which the policy goals and intentions can be impacted by the product specification choices of some actors. We evaluate how regional stakeholders’ divergent views of terroir are sanctioned by authorities, undermining the spirit of an entire GI policy and threatening patrimony.

Keywords – Geographical Indication, persimmon, Kaki, Japan, heritage governance

INTRODUCTION

While branding and trademarks have encouraged agri-food producers to nominally differentiate and characterize their products, the *sui generis* geographical indication (GI) systems that have become more commonplace worldwide thanks to European advocacy demand more detail and, in turn, incite more debates about identity, continuity and. While producers certainly considered important factors, such as the provenance of ingredients, suitability of mechanization, permissibility of food additives, and uniqueness of the agroecosystem, GI obliges them to explicitly define these factors along certain criteria in GI books of specification. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), which introduced the Japanese *sui generis* GI system in 2015, has nominally followed the European criteria for specification but producers are given considerable leeway in the extent to which they codify terroir (Gangjee, 2017). The outcome of this flexibility is visible in the wide range and inconsistency of specification approaches adopted in the numerous hoshigaki (dried persimmon) GIs.

Japanese kaki has such a distinguished reputation that the term ‘kaki’ has become common parlance worldwide. The intense seasonality, broad varietal diversity, subtle organoleptic properties, and aesthetic form of hoshigaki are potent distinguishing factors.

However, kaki production has evolved heterogeneously in both subtle and fundamental ways, leading to divergent approaches to product specification. This divergence illuminates an emerging form of heritage governance, in which strategic behaviour by some producers may undermine the global utility of the GI policy (Belletti et al., 2015). The wide permissibility in codifying production specifications in applications, and the wide space for later dynamism questions the very notion of heritage and the spirit of GI initiatives.

METHOD AND DATA

This paper investigates four Japanese GI hoshigaki registered at the time of the most recent survey (June/July 2020). Two hoshigaki sites were studied in autumn 2018, including open-ended interviews with producers, GI management groups, and retail staff. As secondary sources, books of specification from MAFF and a range of publicly available documents were analysed (marketing, websites, other agri-food certifications). Our investigative goal was to triangulate how stringently the applicant establishes the linkage to the terroir and justifies accommodations for contemporary economic and technical conditions.

SURVEY RESULTS

Since our research objective poses a question about the extent to which applicants agree on GI standards to maintain authenticity while keeping space for dynamism, we elaborate the three most critical terroir dimensions: geographical, physical, and technical.

Geographical dimension

Geographical features necessarily coincide with GI conception but may not be emphasized or precisely codified to retain flexibility. Commonly, ecological conditions such as climate, variety, and soil are referenced, as they relate to agricultural production and processing. However, geographical aspects of kaki agriculture have become subsidiary to processing. Climate is referenced consistently for the drying step (e.g. low humidity, breeze, temperature swings) but rarely about its effect on agriculture. Meanwhile, soil and ecological conditions are not often paid attention to despite the relative ease to acquire scientific data.

¹Naoko Takahashi is a research fellow at the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE-JETRO), Japan (Naoko_Takahashi@ide.go.jp).

²Hart N. Feuer is Associate Professor of Rural Sociology in the Graduate School of Agriculture, Kyoto University, Japan (feuer.hartnadav.4e@kyoto-u.ac.jp).

Physical dimension

The physical description of GI kaki typically converges on superficial appearance, such as colour, shape and weight. Organoleptic information usually emphasizes their sweetness because but few subtle flavour characteristics are sought out for representation. All the Kaki production regions set a quality standard about weights and appearance. The largest site, Ichida Kaki has more flexible written standard, in which the final products must fulfil its “mandatory standard”, as well as more than three out of five “comparative standards” to qualify as a GI. Meanwhile, smaller production areas have adopted a strategy of less explicit GI rules, preferring instead to control their quality a peer- and self-monitoring system.

Physical features are explained as attributed to the kaki variety and processing methods. Local and unique varieties tend to be more clearly specified. Only Higashiizumo no Maruhata uses a basic Kaki species for raw material. Hoshigaki productions surveyed feature from 200 to 1000 years of history. Historic description includes other trademarks and awards obtained and the facts like offered to the emperor, which was one of the most honourable representations.

Table 1. GI Hoshigaki Production (as of July 2020)

| GI Name | Ichida | Noto Shika Koro-gaki | Dojo Hachiya | Higashi izumo Maruhata |
|------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Registration | Jul. 2016 | Oct. 2016 | Dec. 2017 | Dec. 2019 |
| Number of producers | ~1800 | 135 | 68 | 16 |
| Cultivation Area (ha) | 260 | 84 | ~10 | 15 |

Technical dimension

The technical standard constitutes a consensus between producers and certification managers. Processing steps for hoshigaki can be basically divided into four steps: peeling and dehulling, sulphur fumigating, drying, and massaging. However, each production area has slight differences; for example, Higashiizumo no Maruhata has no sulfur fumigation, while Dojo Hachiya adds one more step—brushing the surface with a rice-hull broom after massaging, which represent a symbolic traditional custom.

The allowance for machine farm use is significantly dependent on cultivation scales (see Table 1) and choice of appropriate technology. For example, the largest Ichida Gaki production recommends mechanization to homogenize quality and improve efficiency. In turn, relatively small sites allow only no, or only primitive gadgets such as a fan. Middle large production areas like Noto Shika Korogaki, are moderately strict. However, labour-intense standards in extremely aged Japanese agrarian regions that are struggling to find successors may hesitate to lock themselves into strict standards. Stakeholders therefore must try to balance public disclosure that help to preserve accumulated knowledge but also maintain space for young entrepreneurialism.

CONCLUSION

Japanese agri-food producers, who by now have a long and varied history of branding, are in a strong position to critically reflect on, and elicit, the marginal benefits of this new European GI scheme. However, some characteristics of the *sui generis* GI model of certification, particularly the fixed product specifications and public disclosure of standards, are potentially at odds with the branding instincts of many producers. While hoshigaki have a long history in Japan, their development has also been marked by incremental technical evolution, rationalization of processing, and toleration of idiosyncratic practices, rather than unthinking perpetuation of tradition. The advent of the GI system in 2015 presented a dilemma for highly reputed hoshigaki regions by requiring explicit and transparent specification of production practices among members of producer groups whose success had formerly relied on developmental dynamism.

Importantly, the historical success of Japanese hoshigaki has depended on a singular focus on outcome rather than inputs. Even in the specification of a persimmon variety, which is nominally an input, the focus is on the variety’s contribution to the shape, texture, and aesthetic of the final product. As a consequence, typical terroir elements, such as the soil and ecological conditions, are left mostly unarticulated in GI books of specification, while factors that influence processing, such as texturization, climate for drying, and physical quality assessment, are more explicitly referenced. Furthermore, the GI producer groups inscribe their specifications in ways commensurate with their production scale to ensure sufficient space for developmental dynamism. The larger producer (Ichida Gaki) adopted a model of “comparative standards” to retain flexibility, while smaller producers leave more vagueness in their standards while relying on high in-group solidarity to discipline and monitor production quality.

With a nearly perfect record of obtaining GI certifications, the wide range of approaches to specification is indicative of considerable strategic behaviour and self-awareness of the standards “game” by producers. The toleration of such strategic behaviour has implications for the integrity of the GI policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We thank the Lotte Foundation of Japan and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (Grant No. 21K14924) for providing funding for this research.

REFERENCES

Belletti, G., Marescotti, A., & Touzard, J.-M. (2017). Geographical Indications, Public Goods, and Sustainable Development: The Roles of Actors’ Strategies and Public Policies. *World Development*, 98, 45–57.

Gangjee, D. S. (2017). From Geography to History: Geographical Indications and the Reputational Link. In: I. Calboli & N.-L. W. Loon (Eds.), *Geographical Indications at the Crossroads of Trade, Development, and Culture: Focus on Asia-Pacific*, pp. 36–60. Cambridge University Press.