

Sushi Reverses Course: Consuming American Sushi in Tokyo

寿司逆流—東京におけるアメリカ風寿司

Rumi Sakamoto, Matthew Allen

Sushi Reverses Course: Consuming American Sushi in Tokyo

Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto

Introduction

Sushi, not long ago a quintessentially Japanese product, has gone global. Japanese food, and sushi in particular, has experienced a surge in international popularity in recent decades. Japanese government estimates that outside of Japan there are over 20,000 Japanese restaurants, most of which either specialize in sushi or serve sushi (MAFF 2006; Council of Advisors 2007).¹ Some estimate the number of overseas sushi bars and restaurants to be between 14,000 and 18,000 (in comparison, the number of sushi restaurants in Japan is estimated to be around 45,000) (Matsumoto 2002: 2). Sushi stores today can be found across Asia, the Americas, Europe, Russia, Africa, Oceania and the Pacific. The phenomenon has accelerated rapidly since the turn of the millennium.

While sushi's global expansion has attracted the attention of Japanese and global media (Kato 2002; Matsumoto 2002; Tamamura 2004; Ikezawa 2005; Fukue 2010) and a number of scholarly works address sushi's global popularity and its transformation outside Japan (Bestor 2000; Ng 2001; Cwiertka 1999; 2005; 2006),² little scholarly or journalistic work exists on one important facet of sushi's recent global growth — namely, the return home of transformed sushi to Japan, at times in barely recognisable forms. This paper offers an analysis of this “reverse import (*gyaku yunyū*)”

phenomenon and its specific expression in what we refer to as “American sushi” in Tokyo as a contribution toward assessing culinary globalisation. The nascent American sushi trend brings into relief aspects of Japan-US relations that are seldom articulated in the context of discourse about food – in particular the continued symbolic dominance of the US in Japanese eyes;³ and it also is emblematic of how Japan engages aspects of globalisation, in this case fetishising a mundane product that has become something new in its reimported form. By focusing on this relatively recent phenomenon we also aim to contribute to and complicate the contemporary arguments that characterise cultural globalisation as a unilineal process of hybridisation, often through localisation.

Using the cases of two high profile “American” sushi restaurants in Tokyo, we show that the Japanese reflexive consumption of “America” demonstrates that the sign of otherness remains a significant factor in framing domestic consumption. The return “home” of the transformed product that is at once both familiar and exotic occupies a different symbolic space to the ideas formalised in the so-called “McDonaldisation” (Ritzer 1993) of global production, which dominates much of the thinking about globalisation of culture. While McDonaldisation may entail efficient, standardised and controlled forms of cultural hybridisation such as the teriyaki chicken burger, American sushi in Tokyo presents a different type of hybridisation characterised by the playfulness and unpredictability of its production and consumption. To draw this point out, we employ the concept of “fetish”

and offer a reading of cultural globalisation that is not just about products expanding out from a centre to the periphery where they are modified, but is also about producing and consuming a fetishised object of desire that has accumulated extra social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977) as it has crossed and re-crossed national borders. As we will see, the marketability and desirability of American sushi in Japan comes primarily from its symbolic (that is, fetishised) value (we will discuss this in some detail later).

Before examining American sushi, however, it is important to locate this phenomenon within the historical context of sushi both in Japan and its expansion to the rest of the world, especially to the United States.

Sushi, Japan and the US

Edomae sushi, or Edo-style sushi, associated in Japan with the origins of sushi, is said to have been created in Edo in the mid nineteenth century. Although there were many other, earlier forms of sushi developed in Japan, and in other parts of East and Southeast Asia, *edomae sushi* retains its iconic place as the forerunner of the current *nigirizushi*. Its premise, a rather simple one, was based on sticky rice balls loosely held together with a mixture of vinegar and sugar, topped with a thin slice of raw fish. This is the basis for most contemporary sushi, though outside Japan *makizushi* (rolled sushi wrapped in *nori* seaweed and filled with a range of different ingredients including raw fish) and *uramakisushi* (rolled sushi with *nori* inside) have become more popular.⁴ In Tokyo however, and in most parts of Japan, the most commonly eaten sushi is overwhelmingly *nigirizushi*.⁵

The greater Tokyo area consumes a great deal of Japan's sushi. Moreover, it is the market leader in food trends. In the city there are numerous tiny, highly rated and exclusive sushi restaurants, where expensive and difficult to obtain ingredients are put together into

beautifully crafted delicate food.⁶ Indeed, there are many different types of sushi available in Tokyo: *ma* and *pa* sushi stores, often suburban, or located in entertainment districts, which make much of their income from home delivery; *kaitenzushi* (sushi often made by robot, and served on a conveyer belt); *wafū* (Japanese style) restaurants with sushi bars; family restaurants that specialise in *moriawase* (selection of different fish) sushi; drive-in take-out sushi; upmarket sushi chain stores; street side sushi vendors; *depa-chika* (department stores' basement food halls) sushi, supermarket and convenience store sushi; and there are the reverse import (American) sushi, which this article highlights.⁷ Tokyo aside, sushi is available in Japan in every village, town and city in many forms, and is widely consumed by most people.⁸

Sushi's emergence in the United States was initially linked to Japanese diasporas in places like Los Angeles and Hawaii. Although the non-Japanese population found the premise of raw fish and rice unappealing, Japanese food, including sushi, became available in major centres in the early twentieth century, starting with Japanese immigration and settlements in the 1920s, particularly on the West Coast. It was not until the 1970s, though, that sushi's popularity grew among non-Japanese. This was influenced by a number of factors including the rise of Japan onto the global economic stage, which led to an increasing number of ambitious Japanese chefs arriving on the West Coast, and also to increasing numbers of Japanese expatriate businessmen and their US colleagues eating out in their new, Japanese-run restaurants (Corson, 2008: 44-7).⁹ Other factors that contributed to the late 1970s and early 1980s expansion of the sushi industry included the West Coast counterculture movement, organic and health food movements, diet crazes, high-profile actors and media 'personalities' proclaiming their love of sushi, combined with Japan's economic growth and increased visibility around this time

(Cwiertka 2006: 182; Issenberg 2007: 97; Bestor 2000: 56). Over the next two decades, sushi in the US became a fashionable food for sophisticated consumers and even a status symbol for some. In Bestor's words, "from an exotic, almost unpalatable ethnic specialty, then to *haute cuisine* of the most refined sort, sushi has become not just cool, but popular" (Bestor 2000: 56-57).

A second wave of popularisation took place in the US in the 1990s, where sushi's market grew from primarily being a fetishised, exotic food for the wealthy, to also becoming a cheap, accessible populist food. Takeout sushi from supermarkets and fast food outlets proliferated,¹⁰ and immigrants from East and Southeast Asia entered the sushi business in large numbers. The introduction of *kaitenzushi* (conveyer-belt sushi) and sushi robots from Japan¹¹ made sushi cheaper and even more accessible. Today the sushi industry in the US is large, growing, diverse, and idiosyncratic. Almost any conceivable form of sushi is available in the US, from supermarket refrigerators stocking \$5 take-out *uramaki* with artificial crab stick and mayonnaise fillings to \$200 servings of fatty tuna at an upmarket restaurant like Nobu's in New York, with almost everything in between. The popularity and visibility of sushi has also opened the way for other cheap and fast Japanese food such as noodles and curry.

The US has provided a prototype for contemporary global sushi.¹² Certainly many of the more adventurous and imaginative rolls have originated there. It is the home of various *uramaki* (reverse rolls) – rolled sushi with *nori* inside and rice outside – which became popular in the 1990s because many Americans did not like the "chewy" texture of *nori* on the outside of their sushi. They preferred it on the inside.¹³ Using new ingredients, various rolls were created in the US and spread to the rest of the world: California Roll with imitation crab, avocado, and mayonnaise, Caterpillar Roll with

sliced avocado on top, Rainbow Roll with multi-coloured slices of fish and seafood on top, and Spider Roll with fried soft-shell crab are some of the US classics. There are even a few kosher sushi bars for Jewish customers who do not eat seafood without fins and scales (i.e. crab, octopus, squid, eels, shellfish etc.), with supervising rabbis in the kitchen (Lii 2009: 1-2).

Sushi comes home: Rainbow Roll Sushi and Genji Sushi

Consider the American sushi restaurants in Tokyo, that is, restaurants that flaunt their Americanism in carving out a place in the market of the world capital of the sushi kingdom. They employ a fusion philosophy, using Japanese products and "tradition," while incorporating foreign influences from successful overseas sushi enterprises into their new style sushi to suit the palates and the egos of their customers. The sushi that is served in these new-wave American sushi restaurants (mostly roll sushi with ingredients other than raw fish) is both similar to, and distinctively different from most sushi available in Japan. It is this difference that is emphasised – the foreign flavours of something that is similar in style to the everyday sushi available in Japan, yet is quite different in taste and concept.¹⁴

We have chosen two of these restaurants, Rainbow Roll Sushi and Genji Sushi New York, because while they occupy quite different market segments (the former is a moderately upmarket restaurant while the latter is more casual and inexpensive), both are owned by large corporations which have strong links with the US, and both trade on the image of the US as a marketing device. That is, both foreground the US as the origin of their concept to sell their product as an object of fetishist desire for consumption among young, predominantly female consumers, and to promote the consciousness of consumers finding something new, international and interesting in these

original iterations of sushi, something not previously experienced in Japan. The more upscale Rainbow Roll Sushi deploys America as a symbol of cutting-edge sophistication, whereas Genji Sushi New York promotes its products relying on the image of wholesome and organic food supported by “health conscious New Yorkers” (GSNY website).



(Source)

Rainbow Roll Sushi was established in 2001 by WDI, a company that brought Kentucky Fried Chicken, Hard Rock Café, Spago and other successful US eateries to Tokyo. Yoko Shibata, who started Rainbow Roll Sushi, is a Japanese woman who at the age of 30 returned from the United States, and decided to set up an “American” sushi restaurant with a “rich and casual” atmosphere (Kato 2002: 218-19). The restaurant specialises in exotic sushi and offers other mostly Japanese cuisine, including salads, vegetable and meat dishes, as well as expensive foreign and domestic wines and beers, and desserts. In particular the use of unusual combinations of ingredients in the production of sushi, the high class menu and the interior decoration lead customers to assume that the product is special. Rainbow Roll Sushi is aimed at the top end of the market, in particular at wealthy, trendy young

Japanese.



(authors’ photograph)

Genji Sushi New York is a chain restaurant franchise with 83 outlets in the US East Coast and the UK according to its website. It is aimed at the middle of the market, especially targeting the lunchtime office crowds, and focusing on take-out and delivery. Introduced into Japan in March 2008, it projects itself as “contemporary, casual, stylish” with the modifier “beautiful, delicious NY roll sushi” on its website, and on its menus. This is emblematic of the focus of the restaurant chain; modern, clean, fast, food that emphasises style, health and convenience, and also incorporates both English and Japanese on the menu to ensure the foreignness of the product is emphasised.

Rainbow Roll Sushi is located in trendy Azabujūban on the second floor of a building, which houses an Italian pasta restaurant on the ground floor. The entrance is discrete, built from concrete slab finished with a very rough glaze. Waiting staff, both men and women, dressed in black T-shirts and trousers greet diners, and escort them to tables. In fact, the “industrial chic” décor is consistent throughout

the restaurant. Bare minimalism is the organising theme, and there are few decorations and table ornaments; indeed, grey concrete is the dominant styling motif. There are booths of concrete in stylish industrial style on the first floor, with high backed western-style seating.



([Source](#))

There is a substantial central table made of backlit marble, around which perhaps 20 diners can be seated, there are semi-enclosed split-level zashiki (Japanese-styled tatami mat booths) that overlook the central table, and there are seats available at a sushi bar. With the dim lighting, the panopticon-like views from the central dining table over the restaurant, the monochromatic décor, the Latin American sound track, and the subdued but lively buzz of conversation from the partially sound-shielded booths, the restaurant would not be out of place in New York, London, Rio or Sydney. Staying with the theme of discreet sophistication, most of the food preparation is conducted behind the sushi bar, in a kitchen that is not visible to customers. Sushi chefs do make sushi at the bar, but they produce only rolled sushi; the more exotic sushi that involves items like seared scallops, cooked prawns, etc. is made in the kitchen, as it is in most sushi restaurants.



Rainbow Roll Sushi's spider roll ([Source](#))

The pricing of the menu is about average for upmarket restaurant dining in Tokyo; omakase (degustation) menu is available at 5,300 yen per person and the average price of sushi rolls is around 1,400 yen.¹⁵ The drinks list is extensive; indeed the range of *shōchū* and sake, and the long European wine list emphasise both the fusion nature of the restaurant theme, and also perhaps the *izakaya* (casual restaurant/bars, where drinking is the main focus) roots from which part of the fusion evolved.

Genji Sushi New York is quite different. From the outside the message of a fusion restaurant is very clear. With its lime green NEW YORK SUSHI sign brilliantly illuminated, it is in fact a fusion of a fusion. Located in Roppongi – hence accessible to many foreigners as well as younger Japanese – it is in a restaurant mall in the basement of trendy Roppongi Hills. It is built in light coloured timbers, with rounded ceiling mouldings imitating the inside of a railway carriage, is brightly lit, painted cream and lime green, with frosted glass panes surrounding the seated area.



Note the quotation marks around “sushi” and the emphasis on New York in the signage (authors’ photograph)

All seats are non-smoking, which is rare for a Japanese restaurant.¹⁶ There is a takeaway glass-fronted display with salads, sushi sets, and other “healthy” foods displayed. The signage is in English only, and the items on the menu, written in English, have descriptions in Japanese. The menu includes a vast array of fusion sushi and *donburi* (rice with topping) – California Don, Tuna and avocado Don, Genji seafood salad, etc., with prices set at modest levels. The average cost of a single meal “set” was around 1,000 yen. There were only two employees in the entire restaurant with seating for about 30, so service was negligible, reflected in the price of the food perhaps.



Some of the sushi available at Genji’s counter (authors’ photograph)

Staff were dressed in white chef’s uniforms with the Genji Sushi New York mark prominently displayed on their breast pockets. They also wore black baseball caps with the company logo visible. Staff spoke no English, perhaps unsurprisingly, as the company is focused closely on the Japanese market, rather than the expatriate market. The image of what they were selling – cosmopolitan “New York” sushi to Japanese clients – was the major marketing point, and this was emphasised by the décor, the menu, and by the food available.

Reading the local and the global

While Rainbow Roll Sushi and Genji Sushi New York still serve some “traditional” sushi (Rainbow Roll Sushi in particular boasts a sushi counter reminiscent of older, more “traditional” sushi establishments where customers watch their sushi being made in front of them), their main selling points are the image of the US as a fetish for either fashion, health, or difference, which is manifest in unfamiliar combinations of ingredients in highly sophisticated presentations. Such product differentiation enables them to locate themselves within the generic sushi market, while selling things that average sushi restaurants rarely incorporate

into their menus in an environment that is quite dissimilar to most sushi restaurants in Japan. Clearly, too, the names of the respective restaurants are relevant in determining their clientele and their products: Rainbow Roll Sushi, written in English and in katakana, unsurprisingly makes and sells a large range of unusual roll sushi. In addition to “standard” American sushi like California Roll or Dragon Roll, they offer an array of original roll sushi with interesting and unexpected combinations of fillings such as fried aubergine, shrimp, jalapeno mayo, raw beef, kim-chee, in very unusual combinations.



Rainbow Roll Sushi's dragon roll (Source)

Rainbow Roll Sushi consciously foregrounds the signifier “America” in embracing the reverse import philosophy. Its bilingual website describes itself as “a brand new dining space launched from America” and states that American roll sushi “completely throws off the preconception of sushi” with the use of non-traditional ingredients. Japanese sushi, it asserts, was “transformed and expressed in a revolutionised [sic] way in California, made itself into the limelight [sic] of New York, the state for cuisines from all around the world.” With a large selection of California wine and

cocktails and stylish interior that its website says is “reminiscence [sic] of a bar in New York,” it differentiates itself from traditional sushi restaurants, establishing an identity as an American-style “unique” and “playful” sushi dining bar (RRS website). It is designed to fit a customer who is curious, creative, not conservative, nor wedded to tradition. This perspective was reinforced by the manager, who informed us that many customers have read about the restaurant in food magazines, women’s magazines, and in newspapers, and have been curious to see what the “fuss” is all about (interview). Observing customers consuming the food, it was noticeable that there was considerable exchange of items among diners, and many exclamations of excitement and claims of “*omoshiroi!*” (“interesting/different”) as people tasted the unusual combinations of ingredients.

The emphasis is on originality, trendiness and frivolity, and customers animatedly discuss the highly original rolled sushi in particular: spider roll (1,250 yen): made from soft shell crab, cucumber, Japanese radish, carrot, lettuce, fat rolled, and served with *ponzu* (citrus based source); *Anago sugata* roll (1,450 yen): a fat rolled sushi with sea eel, cucumber, carrot, and *kanpyō* (dried gourd strips) – a fusion of traditional Japanese ingredients with western vegetables; or scallop and avocado spicy mayo roll (1,200 yen): also a fat rolled sushi with scallop, asparagus, tempura prawn, cucumber, avocado, red pepper, mayonnaise, garlic chips, with a spicy miso glaze. Such iterations of sushi demonstrate the playfulness with which the concept of fusion food is produced and consumed. Customers have a wide range of sushi and other dishes from which to choose, and many of these are quite original fusions, such as *tataki* (seared) beef roll, *ikura* (salmon roe) and smoked salmon roll, an avocado and raw tuna stack, or tempura, asparagus and avocado roll. A survey of online restaurant reviews by customers also confirms that this restaurant’s appeal is in its difference from

standard sushi restaurants in Japan.



Rainbow Roll Sushi's tuna and avocado stack (Source)

Clearly, though, the rhetoric notwithstanding, the restaurant is not conceptualised as purely American either. In an interview with a Japanese journalist, its creator Yoko Shibata maintains that Rainbow Roll Sushi aims not to directly import American sushi but to “pursue the originality of ‘roll sushi in Japan’” and that she wanted to prove that “although roll sushi was born in America, its original came from Japan” (Kato 2002: 220). According to her this is achieved by adding some original elements to American roll sushi, and she further suggests that subtle adjustment of taste and presentation in sushi is something “only Japanese can do” (Kato 2002: 220). National pride and desire for the foreign are thus subtly balanced in the creation of American sushi at Rainbow Roll Sushi. While it has an American “flavour” it also retains a sense of Japanese engagement with the medium.

Genji Sushi New York also has a large selection of American-style rolled sushi (California Roll, Philadelphia Roll, Rainbow Roll), with some “standard” *nigirizushi*, complemented with

some *donburi* (rice with in this case rather unconventional toppings) items such as California-don (raw tuna¹⁷ and avocado) or *donburi* with organic green onion and raw tuna salad. Genji's main selling points are that it is “New York” sushi – it is the sushi that people in New York eat – and that the food it sells is healthy and stylish. In a slightly ironic twist, the chain has employed the same marketing strategy employed overseas to sell this overseas variant of sushi to Japanese; that is, it has emphasised the “healthy” aspect of eating their particular kinds of sushi to an extent almost never seen in Japan. Arguably, within Japan sushi is not perceived as particularly “healthy.” Rather it can be perceived as convenient, cheap, accessible, familiar, or expensive, distinctive and bought for special occasions etc. But the population generally does not need to be educated to eat sushi (ultimately it is simply a matter of choice, unlike in other nations, where marketing strategies may involve educating customers that eating sushi is a rational, healthy, and economic choice).



Genji's seared salmon rolled sushi with salad (authors' photograph)

Although Genji is marketed as “‘sushi’ from

New York” (the use of English and the quotation marks around the word sushi indicating that their product is foreign, not traditional, sushi), their menu is somewhat different from that offered in the New York branches. Genji in the United States, which places a strong emphasis on “all-natural ... environmentally friendly ... highest quality *Japanese inspired* cuisine,” offers its customers choices of white, brown, or multi-grain sushi. And while the latter two were introduced into the menu in Tokyo in 2009, they may appear exotic/strange to the Japanese palate. In Japan, the health discourse and the concern over the “obesity epidemic” are not powerful enough to persuade most consumers to eat sushi with brown, let alone multigrain, rice. White rice still is the staple,¹⁸ and the recent craze over the health benefit of low-GI whole food in the West has not challenged white rice’s supremacy in Japan. Another type of sushi not on Japanese Genji’s menu, but on overseas menus, are rolls such as “Tokyo roll” that contain multiple types of fish/seafood in a single roll, a practice uncommon in traditional sushi in Japan. On the other hand, Japanese Genji sells roast beef and *takana* (pickled vegetable) rolls. These are not sold in New York outlets, where no meat is seen on the menu. This is probably because, with Japan’s generally low meat consumption, people are not overly concerned about the risk of saturated fat in meat products, whereas in the US “no meat” may be more immediately equated with “health.” It seems that, thus, the reality of the “‘sushi’ from New York” is that it is “Japan-inspired American health food” that has been re-Japanised and reintroduced to Japan as something “genuinely” American.

While interviews with staff at Genji suggested that many customers are young office women interested in the healthful properties of the food, Genji Japan in 2009 was not yet convinced its customers would eat multigrain rice sushi. Presumably this was too much of a stretch for their Japanese customers, so multigrain rice

currently is not offered. However, the company’s marketing emphasis on the healthy nature of its products seems to strike a chord with consumers as something interesting, American and different. Situated in the basement food precinct of a very upmarket part of Roppongi, it is surrounded by expensive boutique food retailers, ranging from delicatessens that sell imported European foods to niche retailers of pastries, specialist cafes, and high end restaurants. Roppongi is well-known to foreigners too, and it was noticeable that there were many foreigners in the precinct throughout the course of our study there. The restaurant’s location among other “foreign” restaurants and stores that sell foreign foods is no coincidence; it clearly aims to link its idiosyncratic health discourse with America as the origin, in contrast to the marketing of the American branches of Genji which emphasise the health discourse and the Japanese influence.

In these kinds of refracted movements, transformations, and representations, questions of “origins,” “authenticity” and “ownership” take on new dimensions. And in this reflexive movement back to Japan, the transmogrification of sushi as a new object of fetishist desire *within Japan* is driven by the signifiers of “New York,” foreignness, and exoticism. And the consumption of it is driven by curiosity and playfulness.¹⁹

Engaging globalisation: locating American sushi

How then, can this new form of sushi be located within the current literature on cultural globalisation? While it is tempting to see globalisation as a euphemism for Americanisation, many authors now view cultural globalisation as multilateral and complex movements among plural origins and plural destinations. Concepts of hybridity and creolisation have become central to current discussion of globalisation, which emphasise

the creative and often unpredictable interactions between the local and the global, problematising the idea of globalisation as homogenisation that informed early accounts of globalisation (Canclini 1995; Appadurai 1996; Hannertz 2000; Pieterse 2004; Kraidy 2005).

In terms of challenging the idea of globalisation as Americanisation or westernisation, Asia has come to occupy a significant place. Phenomena such as Japanese anime fandom outside Japan (Kelts 2007) or the popularity of Bollywood movies outside India (Rao 2007: 57-58) have been considered as “counter-currents,” in the sense of offering perspectives on how non-western cultures have impacted on the west and the world, including the United States.²⁰ Some writers have examined inter-Asian transcultural flows that bypass the west altogether, again underscoring the importance of Asia as a key player in today’s cultural globalisation at a time when Asia is recovering the position of centrality in the world economy that it had occupied prior to the nineteenth century (Iwabuchi 2000, 2004; Nakano 2002; Fung 2007; Arrighi, Hamashita and Selden 2003).

On one level, sushi’s global popularity constitutes yet another instance of “Asian” cultural influence in other parts of the world. Its transformation in different places due to the influences of local markets and cultures could be understood using hybridisation/localisation models, as an instance of a Japanese original inflected with some local flavour. For example, customers can buy curry sushi in Singapore, spam sushi in Hawaii, duck sushi in China, kim chee sushi in Korea, and teriyaki chicken and avocado sushi in Australia. Interestingly, though, it is American sushi that has come back to Japan, not versions from other parts of the world.²¹ Arguably this is because the experimentation with sushi as fusion in the United States from the late 1990s was successful and sophisticated enough to spawn imitators in other western nations, and now in

Japan. And it is this step – the coming home of the localised, Americanised product – that displays the explanatory limitations of these models of localisation and hybridisation.

American sushi, on which this essay focuses, illustrates how the global and the local interact in much more complex ways than one-off hybridisation between two elements. The “reverse-import” sushi, we have observed, was in fact a re-domesticated version of what is available in the US. That is, although Genji Sushi New York and Rainbow Roll Sushi profess to produce “American” sushi, what they are serving is fusion food that originated in Japan, moved to the US, was modified there for US domestic consumption, then was re-exported to Japan, where it was recontextualised, further modified and fetishized.²² In short, the so-called American sushi at these Tokyo restaurants is actually a modified Japanese version of American sushi.²³

The reverse import model thus complicates the relationship between origin and destination. It also problematises the assumption behind the hybridisation model that it is about mixing two separate elements. The concept of cultural hybridity (e.g. hybridity as mimicry; hybridity as syncretism) retains the notion of origin and destination, original and copy, local and foreign, all of which are seen as binary opposites. In the reflexive movement of reverse import sushi, however, these dichotomies seem less certain or relevant. When cream cheese and avocado sushi is served as “Japanese” in the US, and “American” in Japan, where is the origin, and where is the location of adoption? The case of American sushi enables us to understand the specific interactions between the local and the foreign beyond the simple model of two elements mixing into one. What we read from the American sushi movement is that localities cannot be defined as simply the “origin” and/or “destination” of a cultural artefact or practice. Rather, they contribute to the production of something that supersedes

both, or indeed multiple localities, with the product even returning to the point of origin in refreshing new forms.

Although, as we have noted, some authors have written about sushi's global popularity and its transformation outside Japan (see introduction) and others have looked at how "foreign" food has been adopted in Japan, the American sushi phenomenon in Japan has largely been overlooked. Perhaps more importantly the aspects associated with consumption have often been elided in the context of globalisation theory. That is, in the case of the consumption of American sushi in Tokyo, themes of playfulness and fetish are applied by customers, who are looking to something "different" or unusual.

Fetishising American sushi

We propose that American sushi's consumption in Japan can be understood, therefore, as a kind of playful fetish. We are using the concept of the fetish here as: "an artifice [...] It is the production of desire according to the double genitive: produced by desire and producing desire" (Jean-Luc Nancy 2001: 7). That is, we are concerned with the symbolic capital which is generated by the sign of the fetish. It is desire for the sake of desire. Indeed, it is arguable that fetishes in postmodern Japan are recurring forms of social capital.²⁴ Fetishism in contemporary urban Japan, and Tokyo in particular, is a constant motif in advertising, entertainment, and consumption in general. Blonde boy bands, flaxen-haired pop-singing idols, maid cafes, butler cafes, cos-play stores and costumers, gothic lolitas, mature women dressing as school girls in advertising, nudity, cuteness: these signs of the fetish are apparent everywhere throughout Tokyo public spaces – in subways, on billboards, in magazines, on taxis, on building sites, on shop hoardings etc. The fetish to desire the new sushi because it is new, American, individualistic and original is consistent with such cultural propensities.

American sushi has become something that has superseded the original incarnation, has been commodified as something that lies beyond the everyday experience of consumers, and has been marketed as an object of desire for sophisticated clients who want to try something different, challenging and new. American sushi is unlikely to become a "mainstream" product in Japan, but it has certainly differentiated itself in the marketplace from traditional sushi, and the fact that the restaurants we have focussed on are still in business suggests that their franchise-based market research was probably accurate – they will enjoy modest success in Tokyo's highly competitive food sector.

As we have discussed, American sushi demonstrates a specific type of transnational cultural interaction in which a hybrid cultural commodity returns to the purported origin to become re-hybridised. Sushi is not a ubiquitous transnational commodity that exists globally in identical formats, but rather has transformed itself and accumulated different forms and meanings as it has crossed multiple borders. The reflexivity of American sushi being sold as something consumed by Americans overseas, hence desirable to Japanese consumers at home, adds a new dimension of complexity to cultural globalisation.²⁵

It is clear that the image of America, particularly that of "New York" and "California", is very powerful for Japanese consumers, particularly for young, wealthy urban professionals with a sense of adventure. The attraction of consuming "America" in Japan is powerful, though of course the reality here can be read as America consuming Japan in the first instance by buying into the sushi fad. It could be that the prestigious names of California and New York, when attached to food that otherwise might not appeal to young Japanese, do indeed increase the appeal of such food for people who seek difference and something new.²⁶ Currently in Tokyo there are

many Korean run sushi stores in places such as Shin-Okubo that sell Korean-styled sushi, including kim-chee, though these are not marketed as creative and playful reverse import sushi; these are catering to both the developing Korean Wave, and the Korean tourist market in that part of Tokyo.²⁷ American sushi, or the re-engineered Japanese American forms, on the other hand, targets a different kind of consumer; typically young, Japanese, educated, curious.²⁸

We suggest that the American sushi phenomenon is partly to do with the branding – the fetish – of “America,” and partly a product of Japan’s desire for and consumption of (imagined) America. Moreover its symbolic value relies on the inherently hierarchical structure of self-other along the hackneyed east/west divide, though with a twist. This twist is that the fetish of consuming the otherness of America is contextualised within the form of sushi, which carries the signifier “Japan.” And it is consumed playfully, reflexively.

The foundation for the marketability of the American sushi we have looked at is that America – since 1945 Japan’s dominant other and a model, a goal of modernisation, and a source of pop culture to emulate²⁹ – has now embraced Japanese sushi as its own. Moreover, the form of sushi has become something quite different to what it was when it “left” Japan. The “reverse” in “reverse import” sushi takes on special significance because of the hierarchical relationship between the two nations. This is clear, for example, in WDI’s concept statement for Rainbow Roll Sushi that sushi has “captivated countless gourmet celebrities and executives” in America. Tokyo consumers of reverse import sushi are encouraged to identify themselves with imaginary US celebrities and executives with sophisticated tastes and a penchant for innovation and new sensitivity. This is certainly about consuming America, but not in the sense of consuming hamburgers, fried chicken and

apple pie, that is “authentic” America (whatever that might mean). Eating American sushi in Japan is about consuming a new kind of cool and hip food that embodies sophisticated, urban, trendy America that in turn adopts and adapts foreign cuisine as its own, while also retaining significant references to Japan’s status as the origin. This desire to consume the American perspective on sushi is reinforced by the proliferation of articles in popular magazines and newspapers, popular books etc in Japanese on the spread of sushi worldwide.

Conclusion

American sushi in Tokyo reflects the sophistication and unpredictability of global processes. Starting with an iconic Japanese dish and mixing elements of contemporary US and European influences, reverse sushi restaurateurs do not simply pay homage to other, foreign roots that their cuisine employs, but also redomesticate a product which has become internationalised. The two examples we cite can be seen as variations on a theme – that of transforming something that was originally Japanese into something that is simultaneously both Japanese and something else, and marketing it as something exotic and out of the ordinary.

But it is the unlikely nature of the food that has been re-imported (conceptually) that is most noteworthy here; it is the significance of *what* it is they are selling to Japanese people that stands out. That is, these restaurants use a global marketing strategy – the same sort of strategy employed to sell, for example McDonalds, Starbucks, Kentucky Fried Chicken, etc. – to sell “American” sushi to Japanese. In each of the above cases, concessions have been made to Japanese tastes, and menus invariably have “local” versions of what were once “American food items.” What we see in the American sushi movement is that global corporate models have

been employed to sell the redeployed, relocalised, and reinvented forms of sushi to Japan in more or less the same way that McDonalds has been localised for the Japanese market. The significance of selling sushi to young Japanese as an imported concept – a fetish in the sense that it is about a manufactured symbolic desire – cannot be overlooked, nor underestimated.

We think, then, that the marketing of sushi as “American” and “reverse import” in Japan adds a new dimension to the understanding of globalisation. As we have noted, the current literature on cultural globalisation typically emphasises products and ideas coming from increasingly diverse sources (mostly America, Asia, and Europe) that are modified (localised/hybridised/indigenised) in their new destination. The case of American sushi suggests a further dimension of global transformative processes; that is, it invites examination of how the relationship between the origin and the destination becomes more layered, more nuanced than current models suggest.

We have also noted that in the way American sushi is sold and consumed in Tokyo, there is a significant element of playful fetishist behaviour involved. In this respect this case differs markedly from such instances as McDonald’s in Japan (with their much discussed teriyaki burgers; less discussed are their fried potato with *nori* flavour, or croquette burger); these products were designed by large US corporations to specifically target Japanese who, they believed, wanted familiar flavours in alien food types with fast food convenience; that is Japanese influence inserted into a US-based product which retained the signifier “America.” In American sushi, the product with its own American branding has already become exotic – a Japanese product with American influences inserted – but it has retained the signifier “Japan.” So when it is consumed in Japan it is

as though consumers are eating the others’ versions of their own food. And consumers eat it with curiosity, playfulness, and at times even with irony, conscious that they are consuming others’ perceptions of something they are familiar with in its “authentic” Japanese form.

It is apparent that sushi is becoming increasingly sophisticated both overseas and in Japan, as it is adapted to new environments and tastes by chefs who demonstrate multiple culinary influences and agendas. In each of its iterations the signifier “Japan” is retained. And now sushi has come home to Japan in a new guise, which relies on overlaying the “Japaneseness” of sushi with the signifier “the US” in creating its chic appeal in Tokyo. The tight linkages between foreign, cool, hip, different, *omoshiroi*, and the new and original sushi labelled with “the US” as branding, are undeniable. This reverse movement, where products and ideas move from the “origin” to other destinations, and then return, transformed, to the “origin” replete with added meanings, illustrates a complex dimension of globalisation that has rarely been addressed. Interestingly, Japanese consumers seem to have embraced the new fetish of this American sushi. Perhaps this reflects the growing confidence of Japanese consumers to ironically and playfully consume the other’s version of something of their own as a fetish – a sign perhaps that globalisation processes may be becoming increasingly sophisticated over time and exposure to global forces.

Matt Allen is professor and head of the School of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, Australia, and a Japan Focus associate. Rumi Sakamoto is a senior lecturer in the School of Asian Studies, the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and a Japan Focus associate. Rumi and Matt are coeditors of [Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan](#).

Recommended citation: Matthew Allen and

Rumi Sakamoto, *Sushi Reverses Course: Consuming American Sushi in Tokyo*, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 5 No 2, January 31, 2011.

Endnotes

¹ The number of Japanese restaurants outside Japan could be considerably larger than the government's estimate; Mr Uesawa, from the Tokyo Sushi Academy, for example, informed us in a 2009 interview that there were more than 30,000 Japanese restaurants overseas, though the actual numbers were difficult to get and can be possibly even larger than this.

² There is increasing interest in Japanese food in English-language scholarship. See, for example, Rass and Assmann (2010) and Ishige Naomichi (2001) that examine the history of Japanese food, as well as Aoyama Tomoko (2008)'s work on Japanese food in literature. A few others have looked at how "foreign" food such as curry has been adopted in Japan (Morieda 2000; Cwiertka 2005). See Krishnendu Ray (2004) on Indian consumption patterns in US.

³ See Gavan McCormack's *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace* (2007) for a detailed discussion of what he refers to as the client relationship between Japan and the US, citing both the 1947 Constitution and the US-Japan Security Alliance as the foundations for the dependence of Japan on the US.

⁴ And this trend has since spread to the rest of the world. For example, *makizushi* now accounts for more than 75 percent of all sushi sales in New Zealand (Nick Katsoulis, owner of St. Pierre's Sushi, interview Auckland, 16 May 2008).

⁵ Sushi in Japan *does* include many forms of rolled sushi, but these are commonly seen as supplements to *nigirizushi*, which is far more popular.

⁶ These restaurants are often small, boutique sushi establishments, where the prices are not printed on menus and customers rely on the chef to provide them with what he (it is always a male who runs such stores) thinks is appropriate for the individual patron. This system is referred to as '*omakase*' (literally to trust in the chef's judgement) and is similar to the French idea of a *gustation* menu.

⁷ Although in places like Shin-ōkubo 'Korea Town' one finds Korean-owned sushi restaurants that sell *kimbap* (a Korean rice roll similar to *makizushi*, but without vinegar and with sesame flavouring, and commonly pickled radish and beef fillings), the reverse import sushi in Tokyo has been largely an 'American' phenomenon. There are a couple of French and Italian inspired sushi restaurants owned by Japanese, as well as a couple of branches of a high-profile Hong Kong sushi restaurant, but they mostly serve 'traditional' Japanese sushi plus some US-style creative sushi, rather than distinctively French, Italian or Hong-Kong inflected versions of sushi. One slightly different case is a 'Handroll sushi' café that opened in 2010 in Osaka, which serves 'Australian-style' handroll sushi (uncut roll sushi that are shorter and fatter than Japanese *hosomaki* roll, with a larger proportion of fillings like avocado and deep-fried chicken).

⁸ According to *The New York Times* (Tabuchi 2010), the restaurant business in Japan is in decline, and sales in 2009 dropped almost 3 percent from 2008 figures. Sushi businesses have also suffered, but there has been an increase in the number of successful low-end *kaitenzushi* (conveyer belt-served sushi) such as the 260 restaurant Kura chain, which uses a low-price, heavily-automated system of manufacture and delivery.

⁹ According to Hirotaka Matsumoto (a Japanese sushi restaurant owner who became a food researcher), the 1977 publication of *Dietary Goals for the United States* by the US Senate's

Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs was instrumental in creating the conditions in which the sushi boom took place in the US. The report warned readers of the unhealthy nature of the average American's diet, and recommended that Americans eat less meat and more fish. This, he argues, in combination with the idea that raw food is healthier than cooked or processed food, made sushi suddenly popular (Matsumoto 2002: 10-12). While such views need to be treated with extreme caution because the ascribed causality is rather over-simplified, health concern is perhaps a long term factor behind sushi's sustained popularity in the US.

¹⁰ Matsumoto estimates that the number of Japanese restaurants in the US increased from 3,300 in 1993 to 4,100 in 1995 and that the increase was largely due to the increase of fast food sushi outlets (Matsumoto 2002: 32).

¹¹ A sushi robot shapes rice into uniformly-sized pieces. Such a machine can produce up to 3,600 sushi pieces per an hour, and is much more economical than hiring trained chefs.

¹² Sushi's incarnation outside Japan, however, is often quite different from that within Japan. In China, one finds Beijing roll made with Beijing duck; in Hawaii, there is spam sushi; in Singapore, there is curry sushi; and in Australia there is smoked chicken and avocado – the most popular type of sushi. Check to see whether this repeats what is in text. According to the owners of Sushi Train restaurants in Sydney and Cairns, and a variety of other owners of sushi bars in Sydney, Australians consume more smoked chicken and avocado than any other single variety. However, raw salmon and avocado has become increasingly popular in recent years.

¹³ Interview with staff at the Japan Restaurant Organisation, Tokyo, 11 January 2009.

¹⁴ While the number of self-proclaimed "American sushi" restaurants is still very

limited (we have identified around 20 such restaurants with some online presence in Tokyo), US- style sushi – sometimes called "creative," "new wave," "fusion" or "fashion" sushi without professing to be American – is now served everywhere in Japan. In many *kaitenzushi*, as well as casual "sushi dining" and upmarket "sushi bars" and fusion restaurants, one finds avocado, cheese, mayonnaise, chilli pepper and other new ingredients alongside more "traditional" tuna and shellfish. While highly trained *edomae* sushi chefs and patrons of exclusive and traditional *tachino* sushi are likely to dismiss the new-style sushi, American-style sushi has definitely permeated the mainstream, becoming one of the factors behind the current sushi boom and opening the door to other foreign sushi restaurants such as "French," "Italian" or "Australian" (but seemingly never "Asian") reverse-import sushi shops. For the Japanese sushi industry, part of the attraction of American sushi is the higher profit margin of rolled sushi (up to 80%) compared to that for *nigiri* with raw fish (40-50% on average). With the increasingly competitive market and the uncertainty that surrounds the price and availability of raw fish such as tuna, even traditionally trained sushi chefs have begun to learn how to make American sushi. Sushi industry magazines now regularly carry reports on overseas trends and recipes for new and creative sushi, and American chefs are invited at seminars and cooking demonstrations for Japanese sushi chefs (Nikkei BP Net 2002). A number of recipe books that cover American-style rolled sushi have also been published.

¹⁵ All prices are as of 2009.

¹⁶ Currently Tokyo and other Japanese cities have policies that prohibit smoking in public places. According to one of our informants in Tokyo, these policies have led to a substantial rise in smoking within Japanese restaurants and bars.

¹⁷ While Genji uses raw tuna – by far the most popular ingredients for sushi in Japan – in their ‘California-don’, California Rolls in the US are typically made with avocado (a replacement of tuna), imitation crab or sometimes with cooked and tinned tuna (known as “sea-chicken” in Japan).

¹⁸ See Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1993)’s account of the importance of rice in the Japanese diet.

¹⁹ In interviews with customers at the Roppongi Genji restaurant, most said they were initially interested in trying the sushi because it was “*omoshirosō*” (appeared curious); others said that they liked the *funiki* (feeling/atmosphere) of the restaurant. There was a strong sense of curiosity evinced by the mostly young people we spoke with.

²⁰ Of course, Japan occupies an ambivalent position in the “west and the rest” scheme due to its early and thorough westernisation and becoming the only colonial power in Asia. We need to be careful not to treat Asian ‘countercurrents’ as one monolithic trend.

²¹ As we have noted, though, Korean sushi in its kimbap form, and with specifically Korean fillings is available in Korea Town – Shin-ōkubo – in Tokyo, for example, but in terms of a product specifically aimed at sophisticated consumers, American sushi has a particular “gloss” that appeals.

²² Rainbow Roll Sushi is even considering opening branches in New York, Paris and London (Kato 2002: 221). If this happens, this will add another stage to the already complex domestication-exportation process. It opened its first overseas branch in Taipei in 2009.

²³ What makes this process of domesticating the imported version of the domestic so fascinating in this context is that Japan has so readily mixed fusions into everyday cooking practices. Imported foods such as Italian, Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Korean, Thai, Mongolian and other

exotic restaurants are all domesticated to meet local tastes, as such restaurants are in most parts of the world.

²⁴ For concepts of social capital, see Bourdieu (1977) and Putnam (2000).

²⁵ Among obvious questions Japanese consumers could ask is: can you tell that it is “authentic” by the number of foreigners eating there?

²⁶ Presumably, too, for expatriates living in Japan, there is an air of nostalgia attached to restaurants with such names.

²⁷ The Korean Wave, driven initially by the popularity of Korean television dramas, has become more sophisticated today, and young pop idols from Korea have a new fan base among young Japanese women, primarily. The areas around Shin-Okubo are crowded with young women buying pop music, and accessories, and eating in Korean sushi restaurants.

²⁸ There are, however, a number of fashionable bars and restaurants, where sushi is served in combination with Italian or French food, usually with wine.

²⁹ It should be noted too that the US also maintains a very significant military presence in Okinawa and some other parts of Japan, strongly influencing Japanese politics and military strategy, a position that is very unpopular with sectors of the Japanese, and particularly the Okinawan, public.

Works Cited

‘About Genji’ *Genji Sushi New York*. Genji Sushi New York, n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2008. ([link](#))

‘About RRS’ *Rainbow Roll Sushi*. Rainbow Roll Sushi, n.d. Web. 15 Sept. 2009. ([link](#))

Aoyama, Tomoko (2008). *Reading Food in*

- Modern Japanese Literature*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun (1996) *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Arrighi, Giovanni, T. Hamashita and M. Selden (eds) (2003) *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Bestor, Theodore C. (2000) 'How Sushi Went Global.' *Foreign Policy* Nov/Dec: 54-63.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Canclini, Nistor Garcia (1995) *Hybrid Cultures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Corson, Trevor (2008) *The Story of Sushi: An Unlikely Saga of Raw Fish and Rice*. New York: Harper.
- Council of Advisors for the Recommendation of Japanese Restaurants Outside Japan (2007) *Proposal for Japanese Restaurant Recommendation Program (Draft) 16 March*. ([link](#))
- Cwierotka, Katarzyna (1999) 'Culinary Globalisation and Japan.' *Japan Echo* 26.3: 52-58.
- (2005) 'From Ethnic to Hip: circuits of Japanese cuisine in Europe.' *Food and Foodways* 13.4: 241-72.
- (2006) *Modern Japanese Cuisine*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.
- Fukue, Makoto (2010) *Nihonjin ga shiranai sekai no sushi* [world sushi that the Japanese do not know]. Tokyo: Nikkei shuppansha.
- Fung, Anthony (2007) 'Intra-Asian Cultural Flow; cultural homologues in Hong Kong and Japanese television soap operas.' *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51.2: 265.
- Hannerz, Ulf (2000) 'Flows, boundaries and hybrids: Keywords in transnational anthropology.' Working Paper, ([link](#))
- Ikezawa, Yasushi (2005) *Amerika nihonshoku wōzu* [Japanese food wars in America]. Tokyo: Asahiya shuppan.
- Ishige, Naomichi (2001) *The History and Culture of Japanese Food*, London: Routledge.
- Issenberg Sasha (2007) *The Sushi Economy*. New York: Gotham Books.
- Iwabuchi, Koichi (2002) *Recentering Globalisation: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- (ed.) (2004) *Feeling Asian Modernities*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Kato, Hiroko (2002) *Sushi, puriizu!* [sushi, please!]. Tokyo: Shūeisha.
- Kelts, Roland (2007) *Japanamerica; how the Japanese pop culture has invaded the US*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lii, Jane (1996) 'Three Restaurants Make Kosher Sushi (Hold the Shellfish).' *New York Times* 5 June. Web. 22 July 2009. ([link](#))
- Matsumoto, Hirotaka (2002) *Osushi, chikyū o mawaru* [sushi goes round the world]. Tokyo: Kōbunsha.
- (2007) 'The Internationalisation of Sushi.' *Food Culture* 15 (2007): 2-6. Web. 22 July 2009. ([link](#))
- McCormack, Gavan (2007) *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace*. London/New York: Verso.
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan (2006) *Japanese restaurants outside*

Japan, November. ([link](#))

Morieda, Takashi (2000) 'The Unlikely Love Affair with Curry and Rice.' *Japan Quarterly* 47.2: 66-74.

Nakano, Yoshiko (2002) 'Who initiates a global flow? Japanese popular culture in Asia.' *Visual Communication* 1 (2) 229-253.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2001) 'Two Secrets of the Fetish.' *Diacritics* 31.2: 3-8.

Ng, Wai-Ming (2001) 'Popularisation and Localisation of Sushi in Singapore: an ethnographic survey.' *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 3.1: 7-19.

Nikkei BP Net (2002) 'Sōsakuzushi o dōnyu suru mise gea fueru wake' [The reasons why many restaurants are introducing creative sushi] ([link](#)) Web. 2 August 2009.

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko (1993) *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, Robert (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rao, Shakuntala (2007) 'The Globalisation of Bollywood.' *Communications Review* 10: 57-76.

Ray, Krishnendu (2004) *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali- American Households*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

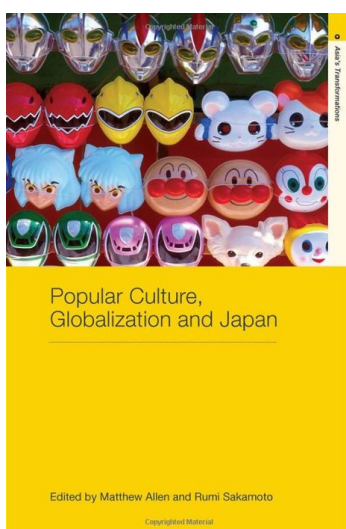
Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society: Revised New Century Edition*, Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.

Russ, Eric C. and Stephanie Assmann (2010) *Japanese Foodways, Past and Present*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Pieterse, Jan Nederveen (2004) *Globalisation and Culture*, Lanham: Roman & Littlefield.

Tabuchi, Hiroko (2010) 'For Sushi Chain, Conveyor Belts Carry Profit.' *The New York Times* December 31. ([link](#)) Web. 4 January 2010.

Tamamura, Toyoo (2004) *Kaiten sushi sekai isshū* [conveyor-belt sushi around the world]. Tokyo: Chienomori bunko.



Click the cover to order.