



## Japan as a Society Dependent on Convenience Stores

# What Attracts Me to Japan's “*Konbini*”

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### Thinking about American Culture from an Outside Perspective

I am a cultural anthropologist and my research focuses on convenience stores (*konbini*) in Japan. When people ask me what I study and I say, “konbini,” I often get odd looks. It is not the kind of topic that people expect an anthropologist to take interest in. But *konbini* are an engaging place to think about Japan and the dynamics of culture. As research site, they are infinitely fascinating.

I was born and raised in a small coastal community in Massachusetts. The convenience stores in my hometown are, as is common in America, really gas stations. Growing up, I wasn't interested in these stores and they played relatively little role in my day-to-day life.

In college, my major was Soviet Studies. From August 1991, I spent my junior year studying Moscow. One thing that initially struck me about life in Moscow was shopping and, in particular, the state-owned department store, GUM. GUM was like no retail environment I had ever experienced. It was located in a beautiful building that resembled a museum. To buy an item required customers to queue up three times. First, you queued at a counter to inspect an item. Next, you stood in line at a register to pay for the item and get a receipt. Finally, you returned to the counter, lined up again and exchanged the receipt for the product you had purchased. By shopping at GUM, I finally appreciated what “self-service” meant. In America, self-service is so taken for granted in places like department stores and supermarkets that it seems natural. In the Soviet Union, however, this was not the case.

Another unforgettable experience was a Russian friend's wedding. The venue the couple chose for their reception was McDonald's. For them, and many residents of Moscow at the time, McDonald's was a symbol of a new, modern Russia. I was initially shocked that a mundane institution in American life could take on such a different use and meaning in another society. A corporate headquarters in America



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did not manufacture the value Muscovites found in McDonald's. Rather, it was Russian people who were applying these meanings, uses and understandings to this fast food restaurant.

The early 1990s were a turbulent time in the Soviet Union. Russian society underwent significant economic and cultural change. My time there made me more conscious of American culture and how aspects of American culture are interpreted and transformed beyond America's borders.

Following my year overseas, I returned to my university where I developed an interest in Japan thanks to a Japanese woodblock artist who gave some lectures in a class I took my senior year. I applied to the JET Program with hopes of teaching English in Japan after graduation. I was accepted to the program and lived in Yamagata Prefecture from 1993 to 1996. I taught English at two rural junior high schools in the towns of Matsuyama and Hirata, which have since merged with the city of Sakata.

My first encounter with the "konbini" was in Yamagata. While on the JET Program, a string of major convenience store chains opened stores near where I lived and I started to visit these stores on occasion. Unlike my experiences with GUM, convenience stores felt strangely familiar to me. From the front counter with its cash register to the refrigerators, shelves, and parking lot, the konbini was a space that I intuitively knew how to use. I felt more at home in a Japanese konbini than I did in a Soviet department store.

One aspect of konbini convenience was that Japanese wasn't required to use them. Conversation with staff was usually unnecessary. Konbini were also clean, orderly and filled with services like copy machines, bathrooms and ATMS. They were a great place just to kill time. My appreciation for Japan's konbini grew when I went back to the United States during the summer. I took one look at the convenience stores I had grown up with and felt deep disappointment. The American versions were inconvenient by comparison. There were few new products. All they seemed to offer was gas, milk, cigarettes and junk food. American convenience stores were actually boring.

A major shift in my thinking about convenience stores came as a Master's student at Harvard. I took a class with James Watson, an anthropologist and author of *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*. Professor Watson studied the localization of McDonald's in East Asia. For me, the convenience store in Japan offered an even more complex and intriguing example of the dynamics of globalization than McDonald's and I wrote a paper about it.

## Choosing a Subject for My Doctoral Thesis

Although the convenience store model may have originated in the United States, since its introduction to Japan it had undergone significant changes that culturally embed it in Japanese neighborhoods and society more broadly. Such a transformation is visible not only in the range of products and services that konbini offer, but also things like store owners' practices, consumer patterns and people's assumptions. To understand this process of transformation requires an ethnographic approach. I made konbini the subject of my dissertation research as an anthropology Ph.D. student at Yale University.



Initially, I read all that I could about konbini. Most of the material focused on the distribution system, data management, and consumer-oriented discussions about products. Less examined, however, were the lives of people who actually own, run and frequent these stores. Instead of positioning myself in a chain's office headquarters, I chose instead to work behind the counter as a clerk. By cleaning, stocking shelves, running the cash register and interacting with people day in and day out, I hoped to more fully appreciate the cultural significance of the konbini in contemporary Japan. I was fortunate to receive a Fulbright grant to support my study and carried out eighteen months research from 2004 to 2005. In total, I worked at three konbini in urban Tokyo and rural Yamagata.



Gavin Whitelaw stocking onigiri while conducting research as a *konbini* clerk.  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF GAVIN H. WHITELAW

Clerking at a konbini was not as easy as I had thought. The job required knowledge and speed. One store where I worked in Tokyo was in a business district next to a subway station exit. Daily sales sometimes topped 900,000 yen. Customers flooded into the store during morning rush hour. Initially I



was so nervous working the register that sweat would drench my body and drip from my brow on the products I was ringing up.

The konbini embodied on-the-job training. Learning to be a clerk required making many mistakes. During the morning rush one day, I knocked over a money counting tray and showered the area around the register with 50,000-yen worth of change. Without uttering a word and still helping customers, my coworkers helped me pick up all the loose money on the floor and counter. They even retrieved the coins that had fallen into the trash. From a konbini worker's perspective, actions speak louder than words.

The konbini's convenience is dependent on more than just products and store location. The people who work behind the counter, stocks the shelves and place the orders are crucial. Yet in spite of how essential these stores now are and how powerful the industry has become, konbini work remains one of most under appreciated and poorest paid within the service industry. My firsthand experiences behind the counter were essential to understanding the human dimensions to the konbini as a social institution.

I completed my doctoral dissertation, titled *At Your Konbini*, in 2007. I chose to use the Hepburn romanization for "konbini" because it, too, reflects how a foreign term, like "convenience store" is linguistically localized and transposed through the Japanese language.

## Turning Konbini into an Exhibition

Contemporary Japanese popular culture today is typically associated with such topics as "otaku" culture, idol groups like AKB48, anime, gaming and "cosplay." In truth, konbini are also a form popular culture, but people often don't think of these stores in such terms. Faced with this challenge, I wondered what might happen if the konbini was put on display in a museum where culture is recognized and respected. This idea led me to plan a 2013 exhibition entitled "*Mingei* and the Material Life of Japan's Konbini."

The venue for the exhibition was International Christian University's Hachiro Yuasa Memorial Museum, which houses a collection of mingei, or folk craft, gathered by the university's first president, Hachiro Yuasa. The exhibition was divided into two sections that focused on "Mingei" and "Konbini." The former featured a selection of shop signs, cabinets, moneyboxes and other items from the museum's collection that dated from the 1600s (Edo period) through to early twentieth century (start of the Showa period).

The "Konbini" section contained range of objects from actual convenience stores: signs, magazine racks, a cash register, display shelves and even uniforms. Many of the items, like trashcans, brooms and worker's uniforms were from "behind the counter" and thus less noticed by customers. No actual products were on display. The aim of the exhibit was to have people see the material world that supports konbini consumption. I wanted to convey the role that these material objects play in giving the konbini its strength. These objects rely on the people to use and operate them so that the store system functions effectively. By putting mingei and konbini material culture together in one space, the exhibit subtly asked visitors the question, "Will the konbini be considered mingei 300 years from now?"



The exhibition proved very popular. I gave a number of guided tours. Overseas students from Africa took part in one of these tours. They were surprised and intrigued by Japan's konbini and wonder if the konbini might serve as a model for modernizing small stores in their own countries.

I have written papers and given presentations on konbini and I always appreciate the reactions I receive. Although many people have used convenience stores, they rarely consider them in a cultural context or as part of a larger social system. Foreigners who have spent time in Japan are very familiar with konbini, and that adds an extra layer of interest in my research. There is a tendency to think that anthropology must focus on the exotic or what is radically different about a certain culture. My work on konbini allows me to complicate such ideas and challenge notions about what "culture" is or is not.

I am currently carrying out research into the relationship between konbini and food culture, particularly food waste. Often konbini foods fail to be bought by their sell-by date get thrown away. This generates a significant volume of waste and is often pointed to as one of the negative aspects of konbini culture. Based on my research, however, this issue isn't as simple as it seems.

In Japan there is a deep-rooted moral aversion to the wasting of food. In konbini, people will go to great lengths to lessen the amount of food that gets discarded. Storeowners may take unsold obento home for their families to eat or even give them to the homeless. There are obviously regulations about this, but stores often have their own "local rules." Konbini chains headquarters are also looking into various ways to tackle the waste issue, such as collecting unsold food products for use as fertilizer or feed for livestock.

## The Continued Survival of "Papa-mama Stores"

The konbini performs an important role as a social space within modern Japanese society. A wide range of people use them. In the stores where I worked, people came in just to kill time before meeting friends or catching the train home. Once a woman ducked into the store to get away from a stalker.

Parents now turn to the konbini when sending their children out on their first shopping errand. One day while I was working, a child who looked to be about four years old came in to buy something. She was barely tall enough to reach the counter. The store manager carefully placed the child's change in a separate bag and said in a friendly voice, "Be careful with that." On another occasion, an elderly woman thanked me when I wrote information on a package delivery slip that she was struggling to complete. In certain ways, konbini continue to fill the roles that local stores have always played.

In the United States, local, family-run "mom-and-pop" stores are disappearing. In Japan, the same is also true. Konbini contribute to the decline in small, family-run business. Yet it can also be argued that konbini have helped keep small, locally situated shops central to daily life in Japan.

Konbini are still evolving. Stores offer an increasingly complex array of services. The profile of the typical konbini franchisee is undergoing significant shifts and patterns of ownership are changing. There is no doubt that the relationship between konbini and society will continue to develop as well.

The convenience store in Japan is a cultural institution. It is similar and yet distinct from convenience stores found in other parts of the world. When the Great East Japan Earthquake struck in March 2011, konbini played an important role throughout the affected area. This point underscores not only how different konbini are from their American counterparts but also how integrated and integral this breed of small shop is to the function of Japanese society today.

When Tokyo hosts the 2020 Olympics, foreign visitors will likely to turn to konbini to meet their needs and they will return to their home countries having tasted the kind of support that these small shops provide. I suspect global interest in konbini will only continue to grow and deepen as a result.

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