

Veganism in Japan: How ‘soft’ activism is changing minds in a meat-eating nation

‘Veganism’ popularly refers to the practice of eschewing animal products such as meat, fish, dairy, eggs, leather and fur in diet and lifestyle. Veganism is on the rise. More restaurants are offering vegan options, supermarkets are selling more plant-based foodstuffs, and the word ‘vegan’ appears on all kinds of goods, from jeans to deodorant. Bloomberg Research estimated that the plant-based food market worldwide will have exceeded USD 162 billion by the end of this decade, and an increase in plant-based eaters in Australia, the UK and the USA speaks to a gradual normalisation of veganism in those countries.

However, veganism is still a marginalised practice, with vegans likely constituting less than one percent of the global population. Moreover, research on veganism is mostly limited to countries such as Australia, the UK, the USA, Israel and a host of European countries including Sweden and Germany. This is not to say that vegan movements are not active elsewhere; they very much are. Vegan and animal advocacy is progressing transnationally, in a variety of socio-cultural contexts. If veganism is to live up to its potential as a movement that can advance the rights of human and nonhuman animals together and play a role in climate change solutions, it is important to focus our attention on the work of vegan actors in a variety of socio-cultural contexts and dislodge Eurocentricity from the forefront of Vegan Studies and vegan activism.

What is veganism?

The majority of studies find that people go vegan due to concern for animals, their health or the environment, though human rights, reducing world hunger and religion have also motivated transitions to veganism. Overwhelmingly, however, animal rights is the most common motivation for veganism. Indeed, the term ‘veganism’ was born in 1944 when a group of vegans broke away from the Vegetarian Society to form the Vegan Society, asserting that vegetarianism was an inadequate response to the exploitation of animals in the egg and dairy industries. Today, the Vegan Society provides the most widely used definition of veganism, as a ‘philosophy and way of

living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose’. Over time, veganism has become intertwined with environmentalism, as the animal agriculture industry has been found to emit 14.5 percent of greenhouse gases globally and has been tied to a variety of other environmental issues, such as deforestation, biodiversity loss and water pollution. Additionally, scientific literature on the health benefits of plant-based diets and potential health risks of meat consumption, particularly processed red meat, have had some influence on diet. Vegan studies scholars have also drawn connections between veganism and other social justice movements, such as feminist and anti-racist movements.

Given veganism’s mostly altruistic goals and the progressive character of vegan studies, it is perhaps unsurprising that veganism is often deeply interwoven with the political left. Studies have demonstrated how most vegans are politically left leaning, with some conceptualising veganism as leftist praxis or a form of political solidarity. How veganism fits in with other movements is still a hotly debated topic; veganism does not neatly adhere to the category of ‘social movement’, given it is mostly an individual practice, usually loosely connected with communities rather than formal organisations. Furthermore, many people consume a vegan diet with the rather apolitical intent of improving their health. Because of this, some scholars have argued that veganism should be defined purely as a ‘practice’, with no direct connection to societal change. But there is also a complicated relationship between ‘dietary’ and ‘political’ veganism, where dietary vegans are more likely to embrace the political motivations of veganism once they have transitioned to a plant-based lifestyle. A more elegant solution may be to define veganism as a ‘lifestyle movement’. Coined by Haenfler, Johnson and Jones in their 2012 article, a ‘lifestyle movement’ ‘consciously and actively promote[s] a lifestyle, or way of life, as a primary means to foster social change’. Lifestyle movements are defined by three characteristics: they promote a lifestyle as a primary method of social change, they are structurally diffuse, and they centre on ‘cultivating a morally coherent, personally meaningful identity’. More broadly, veganism can be included in what international law professor and human rights activist, Richard Falk called a ‘global civil society’, ‘respectful of and celebratory toward cultural diversity, and mindful of human solidarity and planetary unity in the struggles against cruelty, violence, exploitation and environmental decay’, composed of actors across the globe with a shared commitment to various causes.

‘Plant-based’ histories

To complicate things, plant-based lifestyles—some with ideologies very similar to veganism—have existed in various regions across history. Vegetarian diets were promulgated by several Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras and Aristotle, and have also been practised in many Asian countries throughout history. For example, India is well-known for its low consumption of meat. Hinduism and Buddhism, two prominent religions in India, both have precepts that prohibit causing harm to animals. But in India, vegetarianism continues to be deeply intertwined with an oppressive class system and anti-Muslim sentiment where vegetarian diets are consumed by the mainly Hindu upper classes and are associated with purity and authority. This socio-historical context surrounding vegetarian diets has meant that the present-day vegan movement is often conflated with or co-opted by Hindu-supremacist actors, who use the movement as a means to oppress minority groups in India. Although such long-standing vegetarian histories demonstrate that veganism has origins in many countries across the globe, as vegan studies scholar Eva Haifa Giraud points out, ‘the abstention from animal products in specific religious and cultural contexts does not neatly map onto contemporary ‘veganism’’, and it is critical that these histories are not homogenised as proto-iterations of present-day veganism.

Similarly, Japan is a country with a long history of government-enforced meat bans. The first meat-ban, enacted in 673CE, prohibited the consumption of horses, dogs, chickens and monkeys, and was likely issued to promote rice cultivation and dissuade citizens from hunting during the spring and summer seasons. Other meat bans had various motivations, from economic to religious. However, when Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, who reigned from 1680 to 1709, enacted all-encompassing Buddhist non-injury edicts against animal exploitation (which were designed to protect everything from dogs to fish), they were highly controversial and rarely effective. In his book, *Animal Care in Japanese Tradition*, W. Puck Brecher points out that local Japanese religion typically encouraged good treatment of animals, in contrast with Judeo-Christian teachings, which have long been critiqued by critical animal theorists like Peter Singer, as contributing to oppressive notions of human ‘dominion’ over animals. However, meat and fish were continuously consumed throughout the bans, and to quote Brecher, ‘Animals’ instrumental value to humans continued to eclipse their perceived intrinsic value’. Japan’s history of ‘vegetarianism’ is situated within an economic context that made high-meat diets impractical, and a religious context that promoted vegetarianism, but failed to ban

meat-eating completely, which remained essential to human life. Furthermore, whilst the enduring tradition of Japanese Buddhist cuisine, *shōjin ryōri*, represents an example of ‘veganism’ in Japanese history and culture, *shōjin ryōri* has ever been a marginalised practice. Today, *shōjin ryōri* is eaten consistently by monks and served as haute cuisine at temples and specialist restaurants. Meat-eating has undoubtedly become the norm in modern Japan.

Veganism in Japan

According to a 2021 survey by online magazine Vegewel, 2.2 percent of the Japanese population ‘practises a vegan lifestyle’. These estimates exceed the one percent of the Australian population who self-identify as vegan, according to a survey in 2019. However, further surveys with standardised definitions of ‘vegan’ are needed. Kawano Haruko, founder and leader of vegan non-profit Vegeproject Japan, claims women, youth and students are the most represented groups in the Japanese vegan movement, similar to demographic compositions of vegan populations across the globe. However, Japan today is known among tourists and foreign residents as a difficult country to navigate as a vegan or vegetarian. Blogs and YouTube videos cite the ubiquity of fish, animal-derived gelatin, milk products and animal extracts in foodstuffs, as well as the scarcity of eateries that cater to vegan and vegetarian customers, as reasons why it is difficult to be vegan in Japan. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with the concepts of veganism and vegetarianism also present a challenge, as even the Japanese words for ‘vegetarianism’ and ‘veganism’ – *saishoku* and *kanzen saishoku* respectively – have variable interpretations. Academic literature on veganism in Japan mostly focuses on veganism as an issue for the tourism industry, in order to keep up with demand from foreign tourists. Indeed, during the Olympics in Tokyo in 2021, eateries and governments across Japan prepared plant-based menu items for the influx of potentially vegan customers. The vegan diet represents one strand of a need for ‘food diversity’ in Japan, alongside Halal, Kosher, and allergy-friendly diets, which are also not well-catered for at present.

Research on veganism in Japan is highly limited. Most previous studies are without peer review, published in university bulletin papers. However, these preliminary studies suggests that the social component of veganism seems to be the biggest issue for vegans and vegetarians in Japan. Graduate scholar Sumida’s 2011 study of eight vegetarians found that nearly all of them had experienced ‘interference’ in their diet from family, friends or co-workers, who believed that the vegetarian diet

was inherently unhealthy. Some participants only experienced negative comments, while for others, 'interference' meant being forced to eat meat at family gatherings. Another university bulletin paper found that vegans struggle with criticism from peers, isolation, and challenges in relationships with nonvegans. Pressure to consume meat at parties and company events presents an additional boundary to becoming vegan in Japan, especially as communal meat-eating has become an important part of Japanese work culture. As a result, many vegans forgo their dietary requirements when eating with others, to preserve human relationships. In Japanese, this is called *yuru vegan*, or 'loose vegan', but in English, we might call it 'flexitarian' or 'reducitarian'.

Kawano Haruko believes there is stigma against vegans in Japan. Indeed, influential Japanese online personality and creator of 4chan and 2chan, Hiroyuki Nishimura, is particularly outspoken in his critiques of veganism, calling it unhealthy, a 'fashion', and a 'religion'. Vegan YouTuber Taiki Kobayashi assesses this view as prevalent 'conformism' and a preference against change in Japan; as the old Japanese adage goes, *deru kugi wa utareru*; 'the nail that sticks up will be hammered down'. However, in her 2011 article, Sumida suggests that the issue could be a matter of 'common sense' norms around food, disseminated by the Japanese educational system. In Japan, the vast majority of elementary and middle schools implement standardised school lunches, or *kyūshoku*, which serve as a vehicle to educate children about manners and appreciation for their food. However, every student is required to eat the same meal, and vegan or vegetarian options are rarely, if ever prepared; Asakawa elementary school in Tokyo became the first school to regularly offer vegan *kyūshoku* in 2021. Whilst the idea that Japanese people value harmony above all else is pervasive in popular depictions of Japanese people and society, it is critically important to recognise that social dissent and countercultures are as much a part of Japanese society as they are of any other. Vegans in Japan represent one such counterculture, disrupting mainstream understandings of nutrition and dominant ideas about human-animal relationships.

What 'activism' means for vegans in Japan

Veganism is growing in Japan, albeit slowly. In addition to over 3,000 stores and eateries that provide vegan options, there are a number of vegan and vegetarian events, online and offline vegan communities, and several vegan non-profit organisations. For instance, Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) Vegeproject Japan focuses on expanding vegan options and raising awareness about veganism in Japan,

upholding that veganism is an important part of ‘a society that respects diversity, the environment, the lives of animals, and people’s health.’ It produces a useful ‘vegemap’ that lists eateries with vegan options in both English and Japanese, and awards vegan certifications to food products, both vital pieces of vegan infrastructure. Another NPO, Japan Vegan Community, hosts events for vegans and those interested in veganism and produces an online vegan magazine. It also maintains the website V Cook, which posts vegan recipes and information on how to meet nutritional requirements as a vegan. Animal Alliance Asia, an NPO that does work in Japan, helps vegans to be effective animal rights advocates, provides resources and information to organisations, and builds trans-national solidarity, with a mission of creating a ‘more diverse, inclusive and culturally-appropriate movement in Asia’.

To reduce the binary between ‘vegans’ and ‘non-vegans’, vegan organisations in Japan are promoting being vegan to the extent that it is ‘practicable and possible’. Whilst animal agriculture abolitionist vegans might frown upon approaches that condone meat-eating in any capacity, Nick Cooney, prominent animal advocate and founder of the Humane League, suggests a softer approach to veganism has been proven far more likely to create long lasting change. Indeed, hardline vegan activism, which is often ridiculed even in Australia where veganism is arguably more socially acceptable, may be even less likely to succeed in Japan, where veganism is still a highly marginalised movement. Japan Vegan Community encourages people who are interested in veganism to make vegan choices when they can, Animal Alliance Asia encourages participation in animal advocacy without demanding veganism as a prerequisite, and Vegeproject Japan focuses on increasing vegan options through partnership and education. The goal for the moment seems to be to *make space* for veganism in Japanese society. These actors demonstrate how a ‘soft’ vegan activism focused on building social connections and solidarity with adjacent causes, can make meaningful change in areas where veganism is entangled with complicated histories of animal non-consumption, or is not yet seen as a culturally acceptable lifestyle.

Veganism in Japan, for the most part, fits the definition of ‘lifestyle movement’: it uses lifestyle choice as a primary vehicle for social change, it is structurally diffuse, and involves cultivating personal and collective identity. However, with Japanese NPOs encouraging ‘loose veganism’, and preliminary studies suggesting that many vegans choose to keep their veganism private, or due to social pressures are unable to fully align their values with daily practices, the role of ‘identity work’ is perhaps

subdued in the case of veganism in Japan. These cases illustrate that conflict with cultural values can significantly influence adoption and maintenance of a strict vegan diet. Veganism in Japan, then, prompts questions as to how veganism might be defined beyond practice; perhaps veganism can be better understood, like feminism, as a 'continuum of orientations', rather than a binary group membership. In any case, if veganism wants to realise its potential as a global movement against 'cruelty, violence, exploitation and environmental decay', more emphasis must be placed on the 'practicable and possible' of the Vegan Society's definition.

Where to from here?

As it is estimated that globally we need to reduce meat consumption in wealthy countries by 75 percent in order to achieve sustainable food systems, plant-based diets are anticipated to play an important role in sustaining human life at current global population levels. In 2019, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) outlined 'dietary change' as a key climate change measure with promising effects, demonstrating that on average, vegan diets have the most potential for emission mitigation. Setting aside environmental concerns, industrial animal agriculture has bred animals to produce as much product as possible, at the expense of their health and natural lifespans. It disregards animals' emotions, their natural behaviours such as foraging, grazing and playing, often keeping them in cramped, faeces-covered cages for long periods of time, or even their whole life. It regards animals as objects that humans can own and profit from and discards them when they are mature enough for slaughter, or when they can no longer produce at the rate that we demand of them.

How we relate to the planet we live on and the other animals who inhabit it, is a global issue that requires transnational dialogue in which cultural contexts are acknowledged and diversity of perspectives are welcomed and celebrated. Further research on veganism in Japan is still desperately needed, but vegan actors in Japan are advancing the interests of nonhuman animals, through conversation, education, and encouraging change, however gradual.

Image: Vegan sushi rolls. Credit: Tony Webster/Flickr.