

JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI: A CIRCUIT OF SHOKUNIN

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JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI: A CIRCUIT OF SHOKUNIN

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<https://doi.org/10.21512/lc.v17i1.8444>**ABSTRACT**

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The research looked at David Gelb's 2011 documentary, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, from the shokunin concept's perspective. Referring to Hall's circuit of culture, the research focused on two interrelated links within cultural studies: production and consumption. Production and consumption referred to the sushi culture. Shokunin was defined as mastery of one's profession or artisans. The film reflected this concept through the character, Jiro Ono, who dedicated his life to excelling in making sushi. The method applied in the research was qualitative. The data were drawn from the film's cinematography which referred to the camerawork, and *mise-en-scène*, which referred to everything on the film frame, as part of the film studies method applied. The findings show that in terms of production and consumption of sushi within the circuit of culture, the film has shown the interrelated meaning of sushi culture: that in the context of Jiro Ono's sushi, sushi becomes more than just food, but through its complex production and consumption process, sushi culture becomes a representation of ancient Japanese concept, shokunin, which emphasizes on discipline, perfection, beauty and of course, hard work, and sacrifice. These findings are supported by visualizing the production and consumption through the film's cinematography and *mise-en-scène*.

Keywords: shokunin, production, consumption, film studies, cultural studies

INTRODUCTION

In the tradition of cultural studies research, the circuit of culture has become an inseparable part of the field. The circuit represents corresponding links among representation, production, consumption, distribution, and regulation which later produce shared meanings. Cultural studies is an inter-discipline interested in cultural practices where contestation and negotiation over meaning are at stake (Ang, 2020). The research focuses on applying cultural studies in film, particularly a 2011-American documentary about centuries-old Japanese food, sushi, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, directed by David Gelb, who recently also conceptualized the Netflix series, *Chef's Table* (Leer, 2022). The research aims to understand how, as seen from the lens of Hall's circuit of culture, the culture shares its meanings through Japanese shokunin. The research focuses on two interrelated links: production and consumption. The production here refers to 'the production of meaning' (Arvind, 2019) in the context

of sushi production, while consumption refers to how sushi is consumed. The production and consumption of meaning related to the shokunin concept are supported by film studies through the element of cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Cinematography is camerawork that includes camera choice, placement, and movement. While *mise-en-scène* refers to everything the audience sees inside the frame, including color, props, costumes, sound, actors, acting, dialogue, etc. These two elements help support the revelation of meaning through visualization.

Shokunin is craftsmen who strive to perfect their craft and life, thereby creating art (Dempsey, 2015). It is a mastery of one's profession, and it is evident in the film that Jiro embodies this concept. Thus, although the film was produced in 2011, the concept of shokunin remains an essential aspect of the lives of Japanese professionals. It also offers a valuable lesson about how and what it takes to excel in one's work. The research fills the gap in the interdisciplinary studies combining cultural and film studies on the

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chosen film. One research that discusses the element of sushi consumption is by Nakayama and Wan (2019), who conducted a cross-cultural analysis based on Yelp reviews on sushi consumption. The discussion of the film from the perspective of film studies and the two elements of cultural studies has never been done before, thus making the research one of its kind.

Although it originally came from China, sushi, introduced to Japan in the 7th century (Kulawik & Dordevic, 2020), is undoubtedly one of the most famous cuisines in the world that most people know come from Japan. Globally, sushi is considered a healthy meal because it has low calories and low amounts of fat and cholesterol (Dordevic & Buchtova, 2020). Began as simple and quick-read food, sushi has gained fame through technology that has accelerated the globalization process, bringing together customer tastes and turning local to universal flavors (Andriyani & Hidayat, 2021). The simplicity rests in the final product of traditional sushi, which contains two major elements: fish and rice. Baumert and Fukuda (2021) have stated that, "It is customary in Japan, among chefs and families alike, to say that fresh fish will be 'first eaten raw, and then grilled, and finally stewed,' in a slow transition that distances it from its original state because of the impossibility of conserving the flavor of raw fish products due to natural decomposition." It means eating fish raw is the best way to fully absorb all its flavors. Much research has been done showing recommendations and the advantage of consuming fish which is known for its nutritional values, "... being an important source of proteins, essential fatty acids, minerals, and micronutrients." (Neus et al., 2021). Sushi remains popular, although there are risks of eating raw fish, especially for those who never have had one before, such as the disease called 'tingling throat syndrome' that causes by a moving worm inside one's lungs after consuming raw fish (Eskild & Aarhus, 2019). *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* depicts another perspective of the sushi world: the complexity and long tradition of sushi production and consumption.

The research is expected to contribute to the variety of cultural studies analysis on film in general and the discussion of the film specifically as one of the best documentaries on food culture.

METHODS

The method applied in the research is qualitative. Firstly, the researcher watches the film multiple times to gain a deeper understanding. Secondly, the researcher focuses on the film's cinematography and *mise-en-scène* to find required data regarding the topic discussed, i.e., the *shokunin* concept as seen from the consumption and production of the circuit of culture. After the data are collected, it is then processed to produce findings regarding the topic. Finally, a conclusion is drawn, and a future research suggestion is offered.

An interdisciplinary article combining cultural

and film studies requires a deep understanding of the two theories. The circuit of culture chosen is production and consumption. Production and consumption in this context do not refer to the production and the consumption of the film but the production of sushi by the craftsman and how the consumers consume sushi, which is the object in the film. Thus, the research looks at how the film helps produce the meaning of the production and consumption of sushi that pertains to the concept of *shokunin*. As for film studies, the aspect of cinematography refers to the camera movement, including where the camera is positioned and how it is moved. This camera placement and movement play an important role in providing meaning through visualization. For example, a close-up shot of sushi will offer a detailed texture of the food while giving a sense of closeness to the audience. *Mise-en-scène* refers to everything the audience sees in the frame, including dialogue, actions, sound, color, etc. This research mainly looks at special effects such as slow-motion to emphasize certain scenes or fast-forward to show the passing of time. Besides that, the dialogue and action of the characters are also significant in providing visualized meaning to the audience. The cultural studies and film studies theory are applied to understand how the film reflects the *shokunin* concept.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Jiro Dreams of Sushi is a documentary film showcasing a Japanese sushi maker family in Tokyo. In particular, the film focuses on the patriarch of the family, an 85-year-old Jiro, one of the best sushi chefs in the world. The film revolves around the everyday life of Jiro and his son in excelling in the sushi world. Even though the restaurant is small, located in a subway station in Tokyo's Ginza section, and only sits ten people, it has been awarded a three-star Michelin award, the highest accolade a restaurant can receive. The three-star Michelin restaurant equals exceptional cuisine and premium price, which explains why the waiting period takes months as the restaurant is so popular. A Michelin-star restaurant is assessed based on meal experience, brand credibility, trust, and service quality (Kiatkawin & Sutherland, 2020). The latest news on the restaurant informs that in 2020, the restaurant lost its Michelin star because they no longer accept public reservations. The pandemic is probably one of the factors in play.

Nevertheless, to be awarded such a prestigious cuisine award is proof of excellence in food production technique and taste. The path to greatness requires hard work, discipline, and repetition, and this is where the concept of *shokunin* comes in. *Shokunin* is defined as 'craftsmen', but in the sushi world, sushi chefs are also called *shokunin*, which skill comes through the repetition of making and eating relatively standard forms of food using long-established techniques and ingredients (Holt & Yamauchi, 2019). In another definition, *shokunin* also refers to the professional

cook of Japanese cuisine (Maurice, 2014). Dempsey (2015) has argued that the character Jiro Ono, a sushi chef, possesses traits that reflect the *shokunin* concept: passionate, persistent, disciplined, curious, imaginative, courageous, humble, and selfless. In other words, the sushi chef presents himself as a master, preserving the elite status of both the chef and the cuisine (Clark, 2017). In the film opening, Jiro Ono (Figure 1) expresses his life philosophy that accurately reflects a *shokunin* concept, "Once you decide on your occupation, you must immerse yourself in your work. You have to fall in love with your work. Never complain about your job. You must dedicate your life to mastering your skill. That is the secret of success and is the key to being regarded honorably" (Gelb, 2011). Ono's dialogue as part of the *mise-en-scène* reflects the nature of a sushi chef, which includes being disciplined, passionate, and persistent. The film, through visualization, supports and emphasizes these traits to bring understanding to the audience about the concept of *shokunin*.



Figure 1 A Close-Up Shot of Jiro Ono, the *Shokunin* (Gelb, 2011)

To understand the shared meanings of the sushi culture through the concept of *shokunin*, it is imperative to look at the contribution of the film elements: cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Visually, the film frames the consumption and production of sushi efficiently and directly through the two film elements. The film opens in a series of slow-motion shots showing a hand wearing a glove opening a door, then the shot changes into a shot of the gloves being taken off and then shifts to a shot of a small sushi restaurant (Figures 2 to 4).



Figure 2 A Close-Up Shot of a Hand Opening a Door (Gelb, 2011)



Figure 3 A Close-Up Shot of a Hand Taking off the Gloves (Gelb, 2011)



Figure 4 A Shot of a Small Sushi Restaurant (Gelb, 2011)

The first three shots (Figures 2 to 4) provide an important clue to the audience: the significant role of hands in producing sushi. The art of sushi-making undoubtedly requires the finesse of the hands. The gloved hand symbolizes hard work as it refers to hands that work. Figure 4 shows that the restaurant represents the 'sushi world' where sushi chefs produce and showcase their 'art' for the customers to appreciate and consume. From the element of cinematography, the film uses many close-up shots. Close-up shots give more intimacy between the object and the audience because the expressions and emotions are visible when the object is people, and they give details in texture and often raise appetite when the object is a thing such as food (see Figure 5). Close-up shots also psychologically increase viewers' cognitive empathy (Lankhuizen et al., 2020). In this way, the film manages to draw the audience to feel involved in sushi production.



Figure 5 A Close-Up Shot of a Sushi (Gelb, 2011)

From the element of *mise-en-scène*, the film uses slow-motion and time-lapse shots to show sushi production. The slow-motion technique stretches the time to move slower, which can only happen in the movie. This technique aims to generate emotional feelings. This is what the film wants to achieve by shooting the two important objects, Jiro Ono and the sushi, in close-up shots to emphasize the details and their significance so the audience can see how they relate to the concept of *shokunin*. The second technique used is time-lapse shots that shorten the time and, at the same time, emphasize the long duration of sushi production from its preparation process to its serving on the table. The passing of time through the time-lapse shot technique gives the audience an understanding of the intricate and lengthy process of sushi production that may only take seconds to consume when the sushi is ready. On the other hand, the slow-motion technique combined with close-up shots provides the audience with a closer look at the detailed process of sushi production.

In another scene, the film visualizes how Ono's apprentices must massage an octopus for almost one hour (Figure 6) to ensure that it has a soft texture and to bring out the fragrance of the octopus.

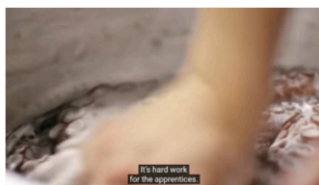


Figure 6 A Close-Up Shot of an Apprentice's Hand Massaging an Octopus (Gelb, 2011)

Like the octopus' massage, the apprentices perform a similar thing when preparing the rice. They perform the same tasks over and over for weeks before moving to the next step of making sushi. Before they reach the *shokunin's* standard, they will keep doing the same duty. This master-apprentice hierarchy and repetitive procedure are something common in the tradition of *shokunin*. What is vital to the *shokunin* is the quality of food served, not the price; as Ono explicitly mentions, "*Shokunin* try to get the highest quality fish and apply their technique to it. We do not care about money" (Gelb, 2011). These visualizations through *mise-en-scène* and cinematography emphasize the persistent and disciplined nature of the *shokunin*. In other scenes, the long-tiring process of sushi making is visually described in a normal tempo accompanied with detail elaboration from the interviewees, for example, in the scene when Yoshikazu, Jiro Ono's older son, has to prepare the seaweed wrappers for the sushi which informs the audience the meticulous

process of smoking them sheet by sheet (see Figure 7).



Figure 7 A Shot of Yoshikazu Smoking the Seaweeds (Gelb, 2011)

The interview of Yoshikazu, while he is performing his duty, provides detailed information from his dialogue and visualization of what he is doing. The alternate shots of Yoshikazu's face and what he does emphasize the delicacy of sushi preparation that is part of the *shokunin* tradition.

As a *shokunin*, Jiro is often framed through a medium close-up with his hands folded while scrutinizing every detail of his interns' and son's performance. The film also visually shows the long chain of production that begins at sea when the seamen catch the fish to be delivered to the then-famous Tsukiji seafood market (as of 2018, the market is moved to Toyosu and named Toyosu Market) and how difficult and sometimes frustrating it is to find good ingredients for the sushi. These visual examples are ways for the film to connect sushi production with the spirit of *shokunin*. *Shokunin* emphasizes, among others, discipline and expertise through repetition. As evident in that example, the film shows these traits through its repetitive shots of similar actions and explicitly through the interview of some characters. For example, Yoshikazu informs the audience that Jiro never skips work unless he is sick, during a national holiday, or goes to a funeral. Jiro clearly states that he never feels satisfied with his skills and is still looking for perfection even in his eighties. He is ninety-four today and is still active in the restaurant watching over his son, who will take over the business.

From some of these examples, it is evident that making sushi is not merely a mechanical or technical process in the context of production. Far from that, producing good sushi is a life mission, an ongoing and never-ending process of perfection. It requires sacrifice, good cooperation, and commitment. In other words, producing good sushi is a way of life. The concept of *shokunin* influences these processes deeply. Indeed, not all sushi chef applies a similar concept in producing good sushi, but Jiro, with his *shokunin* spirit, has set a very high standard for other sushi chefs to reach. However, his success is not without sacrifice. Being a devoted *shokunin*, the film also tells about how Jiro admits he is not a good father, to the point when his children do not recognize him as their

father. Being a *shokunin*, Jiro rarely has a ‘normal’ life, a life choice he takes to reach the highest standard as a sushi chef. Thus, producing good sushi for him is not a job but a life, and his dedication has won him not only acknowledgment, awards, and prestige, but more importantly, he manages to influence others, especially his sons and interns, to commit to the life of a *shokunin*.

The second aspect is the consumption of sushi. While the audience thinks that consuming sushi is just like consuming any other food, Jiro, as a *shokunin*, delivers a different message on how eating sushi means more than just putting sushi in the mouth and swallowing it. In the spirit of *shokunin*, Jiro explains that consuming sushi requires certain rules and rituals, including discipline and harmony. The customer is to eat the piece of sushi in one bite; biting it in half or leaving some is not acceptable, and it is to be eaten within seconds after the chef serves it in front of them (Holt & Yamauchi, 2019). Even the process of reserving a table requires patience and a long wait; customers are required to reserve months before eating at Jiro’s restaurant (Sukiyabashi Jiro) in Ginza. The fact that the restaurant only seats ten people signifies that profit is not the main purpose of Ono.



Figure 8 Jiro Ono “Performs” in Front of his Customers (Gelb, 2011)

What is more important is the satisfaction of the customer and their experience of eating sushi in a *shokunin*’s way. The film visualizes this through close-up shots of Jiro Ono performing his ‘art’ (Figure 8) in front of the customers and watching the customers enjoy the sushi he makes. Although the restaurant has an exclusive atmosphere, Yoshikazu claims, “We are not trying to be exclusive or elite. The techniques we use are no big secret. It is just about making an effort and repeating the same thing every day” (Gelb, 2011). His comment confirms that profit is not the main thing, but customer satisfaction is, and the repetitive action is mentioned as a part of the *shokunin* concept. The small size of the restaurant supports the idea of *shokunin* because the space for eating sushi matters not simply for the preparation and eating of the food because it is where the customers and *shokunin* form a gathering (Holt & Yamauchi, 2019). It means that the smaller the space, the better it is to create intimacy between the sushi chef and the customers. For common customers,

as the film tells, eating sushi at Jiro’s place is tensing and almost intimidating, which is a clear sign of the aura of *shokunin* in the restaurant. Being disciplined is not only from the *shokunin*’s side but also from the customers, who are demanded to follow the strict tradition of consuming sushi. One of the interviewees, a culinary expert, explains in detail how he never feels disappointed every time he eats at Jiro’s place and often feels the tense atmosphere while eating. Jiro’s younger son, who owns a sushi restaurant elsewhere, explicitly mentions that some customers choose to visit his restaurant because the atmosphere is more relaxed compared to that of Jiro’s. As for the price, a minimum of around \$300 price tag is worth the money and trip because the customers know that they are only served the best sushi by the best chef. Another proof of *shokunin*’s concept of consumption is when the film visually describes the serving and consumption of sushi as a symphony concert, as one of the interviewees says that the meal is divided into three movements: classic items such as tuna or kohada in the first movement; the second movement is the fresh catch of the day or the seasonal; and the last movement is the traditional such as sea eel, kanpyo, and egg. Jiro meticulously keeps thinking about what sushi to be served and how and to whom they are served. For example, he usually measures up the customer’s physical body to calculate how much rice he should prepare, or when he notices that a customer is left-handed, he will serve the customer in a way that will comfort the customer. Consequently, consumers are not supposed to eat as they like but must follow the procedure. Jiro explains that a customer can pick the sushi with a chopstick or their hands and that sushi must be eaten whole, not cut. These details reflect the value of *shokunin* in which the customers need to appreciate the beauty, the balance, and the harmonious ways of consuming sushi.

His fame as a *shokunin* sushi chef is internationally acknowledged, and many important figures have dined at Jiro’s place; for example, previous U.S. president Barrack Obama has dined there with the Japanese prime minister during one of his visits to Japan. It is understandable why the Japanese Prime Minister takes Obama there, not only to introduce him to traditional Japanese food and delicious sushi but more importantly to introduce Obama to one important virtue of the Japanese people: their perseverance and commitment to reach perfection, which is indeed something to be proud of.

The film is closed with a close-up shot of Jiro Ono inside a fast-moving train (see Figure 9). He is seen to be smiling, and then the film ends. The final scene inside a moving train suggests the fast-moving and advancing Japan, while Jiro Ono symbolizes the old tradition. His sitting on the train at the end of the film means that he will keep on moving and not merely stay still in pursuing his dream: perfecting the sushi production as long as he can while at the same time preparing his son to continue the tradition.

The findings show that production and consumption in the context of Japanese sushi culture

are closely intertwined and inseparable. Moreover, the meticulous and disciplined process of production is passed on to the next generation, which will ensure the quality of the food and the satisfaction of the customers. Regardless of the spreading of the sushi culture worldwide that may degrade the production quality, the strong-rooted concept of *shokunin* will prevail through people like Jiro Ono, who maintain the high quality of sushi production and preserve the Japanese sushi culture.



Figure 9 Jiro Ono Inside the Moving Train in the End of the Film (Gelb, 2011)

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, in terms of production and consumption in the circuit of culture, it is clear that the film has shown the interrelated meaning of sushi culture. In the context of Jiro's sushi, it becomes more than just food through its complex production and consumption process. Sushi culture becomes a representation of the ancient Japanese concept of *shokunin*, which emphasizes discipline, perfection, beauty, and, of course, hard work and sacrifice. The concept of *shokunin* is visually supported by the film's cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. From the cinematography, the film uses many close-up shots of the main characters, the production process, and the sushi. There are also many alternate shots between the characters and the activities they do to show the delicate process of producing sushi. The effect of close-up shots is a closer intimacy between the audience and the objects on film, which provides the audience with a deeper understanding of sushi culture and the *shokunin* concept. The close-up shots that are sometimes repetitive emphasize the nature of the *shokunin* concept: repetition for perfection and strict discipline. From the element of *mise-en-scène*, the film uses dialogue, slow-motion technique, and time-lapse shot technique to emphasize the concept of *shokunin*. The dialogue gives the audience first-hand information from the characters about the virtue of *shokunin*. The slow-motion technique is used to dramatize sushi production and immerse the audience into the world of sushi and the *shokunin* concept. The time-lapse shot technique is used to emphasize the long duration of sushi production, which makes the audience appreciate the production and consumption process. After watching the documentary, the audience

is expected to have a completely different perspective on sushi production and consumption. Sushi is not only food but a passion, a lifelong effort to perfection, hard work, and a way of life. For further research, a complete discussion of the circuit of culture in this film can be done, especially in the aspect of representation, regulation, and distribution, which will enrich and broaden the findings in the research.

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