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Impact of Covid-19 on GI in Japan —Provisional evaluation—

Washoku (Japanese food) was registered as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2013 against the backdrop of the rapid increase in foreign visitors seeking Japanese food. In the meantime, Japan is currently facing challenges caused by the depopulation of rural areas resulting from a decrease in the number of farmers as well as an aging population. This has caused a decline in the traditional lifestyles unique to each area and brought about the homogenization of food culture.

In light of these circumstances, "Geographical Indications (GI)" was established in 2015 to provide producers with a means of differentiation strategy to contribute to regional economies through the development of "food" and tourism. As of July 2020, there were 97 GI products registered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), and 11 GI alcoholic drinks under the umbrella of the National Tax Agency (NTA). In association with the GI system, "SAVOR JAPAN" was instituted to attract more visitors to rural areas (Panier de biens et services, Mollard, Pecqueur). Placing GI products at the core of regional promotion, the purpose of this policy is to link them with various goods from each region, including agricultural products, processed foods, local dishes, and landscapes, to improve the image of each region as a whole and attract visitors to rural areas. Until very recently, Japan kept setting a new record number of inbound tourists, with an increase in visitors to regional and rural areas.

However, with the spread of the new coronavirus pandemic worldwide, the number of inbound visitors to Japan dropped by 99.9% in April 2020 from the same month of the previous year. In response to the rapid spread of Covid-19, the Japanese government issued an emergency declaration in the same month, which had a great impact on society. The suspension of tourism, school lunches, and food service industries had a major impact on producers. In particular, GI products well known at home and abroad have been adversely impacted as there was a high demand for them in famous restaurants, department stores, and among foreigners visiting Japan. For example, due to falling meat prices, farmers with GI registered "Kobe beef" and "Tajima beef" have seen a negative impact on their livelihoods. With regard to "Japanese Sake," the producers of brewing rice varieties such as Yamada Nishiki, which is characteristic of a limited region, are suffering damage. Considering that Japanese farmers are aging, there is concern that they will be pressured to retire from agriculture due to such conditions. Meanwhile, on the other hand, "ordinary" foods are not suffering as negative an impact as celebrated foods. As school lunches are no longer provided and office cafeterias have been closed, most families prepare dishes at home using cheaper ingredients procured at neighboring stores. The high costs of celebrated GI products (production, monitoring, certification, promotion, etc.) may cause their sustainability to be brought into question.

While the government is being requested to provide support measures for such GI products, local municipalities are currently offering assistance to their producers, for example, by distributing product purchase coupons to local consumers. Note that the GI products enjoying popularity abroad and among inbound visitors are local historic specialties that have been carefully inherited in each region for many years. In this report, we will discuss the efforts currently being made to protect GI products in such a crisis.

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