

Japanese *Konbini* Minimarkets: Unique and Universal Character, Regional Characteristics

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Abstract

Based on the analysis of statistical and information sources, academic publications, and the authors' personal experience, the article analyzes the peculiarities of Japanese minimarkets that rank among amazing Japanese inventions, creations, and practices and have become an integral part of the Japanese way of life and a trademark of the country. In the academic literature, there have been no comprehensive works focused on this phenomenon so far, and their regional peculiarities, especially the geography of stores operated by different chains, are almost completely neglected. The purpose of this article is to highlight the key academic discourse, to characterize the unique character and universality, which, in fact, constitute the phenomenon of *konbini*, as well as to identify their regional features.

The study clearly shows that these stores, which came to Japan from the United States in 1973, have been completely transformed and are constantly evolving, changing the store concept and presenting a globally unique phenomenon. It describes the characteristics of the leading chains of these stores in their endeavor to gain even greater popularity among consumers and the innovations that have emerged in recent years, including those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Studying the phenomenon of *konbini*, the authors, on the one hand, note their transformation into an important element of social infrastructure, that meets the needs of modern society and is especially

necessary in the context of rapidly progressing aging of the population, and, on the other hand, their certain negative impact, especially on the younger generation.

The paper features an analysis of the regional characteristics of these stores and the cartographic material illustrating them. It is revealed that, within prefectures, the location of *konbini* correlates with the number of inhabitants (the number of stores is proportional to the population of municipalities), and each of the 20 *konbini* chains operating in Japan is located in its own specific area. The authors conclude that *konbini* facilitate the development of the country's regions as a whole, and their role in Japanese society cannot be overemphasized. The Japanese experience can be relevant to other countries, including Russian chain stores.

Keywords: Japan, *konbini* minimarkets, social infrastructure, way of life of the Japanese.

Introduction

For a long time, Japan has been shrouded in an aura of mystery and uniqueness. It is well known that, throughout its history, this country has absorbed all things new, interesting, and advanced, obtaining something unique as a result. The whole world knows Japanese rock gardens and ikebana; the tea ceremony is also associated with Japan, as well as some other cultural phenomena, although their prototypes originated in the neighboring countries. This is probably due to the synthetic nature of Japanese culture (formed under the spiritual and aesthetic influence of different religions [Sarkisov (ed.) 1996, p. 157]), and the ability to bring everything to perfection.

Similarly, the numerous amazing Japanese inventions, creations, and practices include undoubtedly unique chain minimarkets – *konbini*, which are one of the most highly-demanded retail niches in Japan. The concept of such a store was developed in the USA, but it was Japan that created its unique model. This is a 24-hour store, transformed beyond

recognition to make it convenient for people and constantly changing to meet new needs of Japanese society. This is a phenomenon that has no analogues in the world.

Konbini are of interest as a unique type of stores, which, in Japan, have in fact turned into basic social infrastructure, activity centers for local communities, and even an element of pop culture. These franchised stores have changed the way of life of the Japanese, making their lives more comfortable, and also influencing food culture and service provision. Having become one of the country's hallmarks, Japanese *konbini* operate in Hawaii, Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, South Korea, and other Asian countries. The analysis of the phenomenon and regional features of *konbini*, that have become a customary part of Japanese life, can undoubtedly be of interest to Russian chain stores, that increasingly position themselves as stores within walking distance.

The Japanese *konbini* progress, transforming to meet the changing needs of both people and businesses and responding to the needs of individuals with increasingly diverse lifestyles, which, in fact, explains their viability. This gives rise to a new discourse in the analysis of the phenomenon and influence of *konbini* in society. The extent of their influence is shown, for example, by the fact that the coach of the Japan national football team found the reason for the poor performance of his players in their devotion to *o-bento*¹ from *konbini*. In 2021, the rapper *Miyagi*, who claims that, in the atmosphere of *konbini*, “you become consanguineous with what is going on,”² created a “Konbini Confessions” YouTube channel. A popular Japanese writer *Takahashi* Gen'ichiro pointed out that *konbini* are, in fact, *konbiniensu kyōkai*, i.e., “convenient churches,” emphasizing that it is “convenience” that is the religion of Japanese society. In this regard, it should be noted that, back in the second half of the 1980s, there was a popular expression in Japan – “*sabisu no kajo kuni*” (“country of excessive service”). Indeed,

¹ Food packed in a box.

² ‘Konbini Confessions’ captures the late-night antics of city dwellers. *Japan Times*. September 17. 2022.

it is hard to find another country with such easily available amenities. Washizu Ryoku, an expert in marketing and freelance writer, citing Max Weber's *The City* (in Japanese, "*Toshi-no Ronri*", or Logic of the City), writes: it is really interesting to note that, in urban life, when human relations are scarce, people go to *konbini* in search of "healing" as the lost place of communication, which is close to the role played by church in Western societies [Washizu 2008, p. 156]. Of interest are studies that contain criticism of *konbini*. According to a number of Japanese researchers, *konbini* in Japan act as substitutes for mother and family: available 24 hours a day, including a variety of food offers, they have become "more convenient than a mother" and can raise children [Miura 2005, p. 112], undermining the traditional foundation of the family. It is also emphasized that, when people can get what they want at any time, they become eager to get everything they want immediately. Associate Professor Tanaka Daisuke of the Japanese Women's University says that *konbini* not only create lonely and isolated individuals, but also require a new kind of relationship, different from the group affiliation typical of the Japanese [Tanaka 2015]. *Konbini* are also criticized for being a strong "stimulant" for young people, promoting "all-nighters." One study has even identified a connection between the bright lighting characteristic of *konbini* and their signage and pupils' poor academic performance at school [Ayukawa 2003].

Western researchers are also studying *konbini*. We cannot but agree with Gavin H. Whitelaw that *konbini* are not only a business format, but also a social and cultural one – "an everyday zone of social activity, economic transactions and cultural translation" [Whitelaw 2008]. He also clearly proves that customers of *konbini* appreciate and increasingly rely on the convenience of the services offered there, citing the results of a survey in which 70 percent of the respondents say that, without *konbini*, their life would be uncomfortable [Whitelaw 2018].

What Are *Konbini* Minimarkets

Konbini offer everything one needs in everyday life around the clock: from a variety of products and ready-to-eat meals, various drinks (including beer and alcohol), cosmetics and hygiene products up to socks and ties, batteries and umbrellas, magazines and books, etc. – everything and anything one can imagine. In addition, thanks to the advancement of information technology, they provide a variety of services: paying bills, booking and purchasing tickets (for transport and for various events), photocopying, scanning, printing, servicing bank cards, receiving parcels and sending letters, etc. They also have free Wi-Fi and bathrooms.

In other words, such stores are about meeting the new lifestyles and expectations of everyone, striving to meet the growing needs of customers and companies. They perfectly match their name (derived from the English word *convenience*) – these are really convenient stores that constantly offer not only new products, but also new services that can help out in any situation at any time. Without exaggeration, a *konbini* minimarket is more than just a store: it is a small world that provides modern people with everything they need. Moreover, the world is rapidly changing, meeting ever new needs and aspirations of all potential customers. Depending on the time of year, they offer interesting specialties according to the season and the main holidays. When summer comes, a lot of confectioneries containing fresh fruit, as well as the traditional *matcha* green tea appear on store shelves. Even foreigners who have visited Japan recall the *konbini* with a nostalgic feeling: the *onigiri*³, the *meronpan*,⁴ etc. And, for example, the famous Japanese football player Nakata Hidetoshi, who also played in foreign clubs, admitted in an interview that one of the greatest difficulties for him during a long stay abroad was the absence of *konbini* there, and

³ *Onigiri* – a small round or triangular rice bun with a filling wrapped in dried seaweed.

⁴ *Meronpan* – “melon bread” – a sweet melon-flavored bun, in the making of which melon is not used.

the media once mentioned that, immediately after landing at the Narita airport, he hurried to a *konbini*. [Nishimura 2004, p. 46–48].

Japan, that was significantly inferior to the other G7 countries in terms of the number of foreign tourists, has increasingly been striving to make their stay in the country more comfortable since the beginning of the 21st century. And the number of *konbini* participating in the tax-free program has been increasing, as well as the number of ATMs that also service foreign credit cards. During the most disastrous earthquake in Japan's history, which occurred in the northeast of the country in 2011, *konbini* played a major role in supporting life in the affected areas, providing drinking water, food, and toilets to those who could not return home [Tsuchiya 2016].

In the rapidly aging Japanese society, *konbini* are increasingly in demand as convenience stores and as home delivery services (orders are taken by phone, which is convenient for working people who pick up their order on their way home after work). This trend was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, when the reduction of human contact and visits to public places became a significant factor, and the demand for contactless delivery increased dramatically. In recent years, at an increasing number of *konbini*, people have been able to sit down at a table to immediately eat the ready-made dishes they bought. Thus, *konbini* intensify competition in the restaurant industry, as coffee shops and eateries are losing their customers, who are tempted by the taste of coffee for 100 yen, which is quite good for the average consumer. And, as D. Tanaka aptly put it, they have created “a 24-hour space in which people can lead an individualized social life. This is a place where you can go in and out without buying anything, without worrying about other people's eyes.” [Tanaka 2015].

In 2016, Murata Sayaka wrote the novel *Convenience Store Woman*, which became an international bestseller; the book has also been translated into Russian. The author shows that these shops make it possible to lead a comfortable life for those people whose ideas about it differ from what is recognized as “normal” in society. The heroine opposes the unspoken social norms existing in society – she has been

working at a *konbini* store for 18 years and is not going to get married and have children or change her job and her lifestyle. The following phrase clearly illustrates her way of thinking: “This is the beginning of a new day, the time when the world wakes up and the gears of society begin to move. I’m one of those gears spinning in a circle. I’ve become an active part of the world, rotating in the time of day called morning.”

According to Prof. Ronald Saladin, *konbini* are a reflection of Japanese society. These stores show how social life works in terms of interpersonal relationships, habits, norms, values, etc. However, what happens when someone doesn’t fit in the Japanese notions of common sense? S. Murata not only shows and reveals the deep structures of Japanese society and generally accepted norms, but also speaks about the life of people who do not meet generally accepted expectations. This novel is “a call for creating a more ‘human’ society, allowing those who do not fit into it to find their niche in it.”⁵

In the second half of the 1990s, *konbini* turned into vital infrastructure (*seikatsu infura*), which can be compared to water, gas, and electricity supply. Later they began to be called social infrastructure (*shakaiteki infura*) – along with banks, hospitals, and post offices. *Konbinis’* high adaptability and ability to “be all in one” for many people contributed to this status – they perform not only the functions of a traditional supermarket, but also provide information, entertainment, and public services in one place. While initially *konbini* were frequented by young people, later they gradually became more and more popular with more mature people. With the “silver tsunami” rapidly gaining momentum in all regions of Japan, *konbini* are increasingly taking into account the needs of older people which are the fastest growing segment of the consumer market. They offer food that is more suitable for older people, arrange the goods they need on the lower shelves, set up tables so that they can

⁵ Murata Sayaka’s Convenience Store Woman. Discussing Gender Identity and Society in Contemporary Japanese Literature <https://www.dijtokyo.org/event/murata-sayakas-convenience-store-woman-discussing-gender-identity-and-society-in-contemporary-japanese-literature/>

immediately sit down to have a snack or relax, and deliver goods to their homes. For example, back in 2005, the 7-Eleven chain noted a trend for the growing number of customers over the age of 50, and, according to the data provided by Takemoto,⁶ the number of such *konbini* visitors increased 16-fold in 1989–2013, reaching 5 million per day.

The Rise of *Konbini* in Japan

In the commercial statistics of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, *konbini* as a business category are defined as self-service shops that sell food and drinks, have a sales area of 30 m² to 250 m² and work 14 or more hours a day. There are currently 18 *konbini* chains operating in Japan. Their history dates back to the mid-1970s. Fifty years ago, in 1973, the U.S. 7-Eleven chain opened its first store in Japan, and in 1981–1991, their number doubled, amounting to about 40 thousand. In the early 1990s, it was already a full-fledged industry with new technologies, an ever-expanding assortment and recognizable symbols. Thus, *konbini*, which emerged as convenience stores, turned into a retail business with a huge sales volume: in 2020, their trade turnover (\$93 billion) approached that of supermarkets (\$118 billion).

In 2014, *konbini* domestic market exceeded 10 trillion yen (\$83 billion) for the first time, with 3 companies accounting for about 80 percent of the market: 7-Eleven, FamilyMart and Lawson.⁷ In 2022, *konbini* nationwide sales reached a record level of 12.2 trillion yen, although their total number decreased from 58.4 thousand in 2020 to 56.2 thousand. In 2021–2022, the number of customers

⁶ Takemoto, Ryota. Japan as a Society Dependent on Convenience Stores. Is Survival without Convenience Stores Impossible in the Era of Super-Aging? <http://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/archives/society/pt20160318011754.html>

⁷ *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*. July 22, 2015.

increased by 0.6 percent (but, compared to 2020, it is slightly less) and amounted to 15.7 billion. Obviously, this is largely due to the dramatically decreased number of foreign tourists because of the pandemic.⁸ The average cost of purchases per customer increased by 2.8 percent, reaching 715 yen.⁹ As of late March 2023, the most of the outlets (in thousands) are owned by 7-Eleven (21.3), FamilyMart (16.5), and Lawson (14.6), i.e., more than 90 percent. Over 1 thousand stores belong to three more chains: the fast-growing Minishop (1.9), DailyYamazaki (1.3), and Seicomart (1.2).¹⁰ The *konbini* that are present in the Japanese market differ in their business approach and have striking distinctive features, including their effort to contribute to solving social and environmental problems and their adherence to the concept of sustainable development. Of course, all the stores are interested in attracting customers, and, to this end, each chain uses innovations in gastronomy and in service provision. For instance, Lawson intends to be a store that is “adored by all shoppers from children to adults” and strives to offer the highest quality products as well as entertainment content. One of the flagship products in the MiniStop range is a successful soft ice cream made from milk from Hokkaido. Seicomart, whose first store opened two years earlier than 7-Eleven, is less known, because, besides Hokkaido, it operates only in two more prefectures: Ibaraki (82 outlets) and Saitama (10 stores),

⁸ The first half of 2023 saw a trend towards the restoration of the tourism industry in Japan: over 10.7 million foreign tourists visited the country in 6 months.

⁹ Japan Convenience Store Sales Hit Record High in 2022. *Yomiuri shimbun*. January 21, 2023.

¹⁰ [2023-Nenban] konbiniensusutoa no tenpo-sū rankingu [Convenience Stores: Ranking by Number of Stores (2023 Edition)]. <https://www.nipponsoft.co.jp/blog/analysis/chain-conveniencestore2023/> Keizai sangyōshō shōgyō dōtai tōkei chōsa [Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry Commercial Statistics Survey]. <https://www.meti.go.jp/statistics/tyo/syoudou/result-2/index.html>

but, in recent years, it has been in the lead in terms of customer satisfaction.¹¹ A distinctive feature of the stores of this chain is the manufacture of more than 1 thousand products under its own Secoma brand, and they notify in large letters about the use of local ingredients from the island of Hokkaido. They offer a wide selection of wines, and one can even buy a whole bag of local rice.

Faced with an oversupply of the market, increasing global competition, and a shortage of labor, the largest *konbini* try to introduce other innovations in order to remain competitive. For instance, back in 2015, Lawson implemented a system in which artificial intelligence in the head office advises store managers and experienced employees on product management issues in all stores, and now intends to serve customers using remotely controlled avatars – placing monitors at self-service cash desks and in the aisles. This makes it possible to employ people with disabilities who can work from home.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on *Konbini*

The COVID-19 pandemic became a major factor in global development, affecting most countries of the world and having a serious impact on both people's lives and businesses. The Japanese strategy of combating the new infection, which proceeded from the peculiarities of the geographical location, national character, mentality, as well as the established rules of conduct, has shown its viability. Although, back in the spring of 2020, during the first introduction of emergency situation in Japan, because of the absence of prohibitive measures, fines, and punishments, the Western press called that strategy the most “toothless” in the world, its effectiveness is beyond doubt [Belov, Tikhotskaya 2020], since the situation in Japan in 2021 was much more satisfactory than in many other countries.

¹¹ Here's Why Seico Mart Was Crowned the #1 Convenience Store in Japan. <https://www.tsunagujapan.com/seico-mart-crowned-number-one-convenience-store/>

At the same time, the government's constant appeal to citizens to exercise self-control and not leave home without urgent and pressing needs led to a reduction in the opening hours of various stores and to a lag in the level of monthly sales from supermarkets, which continued to work in the previous mode, as well as to the closure of 376 minimarkets of all the chains in the country as a whole. Lawson suffered the greatest losses – 238 stores, as well as MiniStop – 193. At the same time, the two other major chains opened new stores: FamilyMart – 177 and 7-Eleven – 25. With rising sales in supermarkets (and with a sharp drop in department stores), *konbini* experienced a recession for the first time. The reason for the drop in sales at *konbini* was that, for cooking at home (especially when people were urged to go shopping only once in three days), it is much more convenient to purchase goods in supermarkets or small wholesale stores, where the choice is much larger and prices are lower. In addition, when switching to an online mode of operation, people began to spend more time at home and order groceries with home delivery from nearby stores, and the largest decline in the number of stores was seen in those chains where home delivery was less developed or absent. And, in general, *konbini*, whose sales were mainly related to the convenience of purchasing various ready-to-eat dishes on the way to work, lost their competitiveness. Their response was, first of all, the expansion of the product range in residential areas through the supply of fresh vegetables and frozen products that had not previously been sold there, as well as traditional Japanese dishes *natto*¹² and *tofu*.¹³ For example, at Lawson, sales increased by 52 percent in April – December 2020. But, in the context of the pandemic, *konbini* mainly saw an increase in sales of sweets and alcoholic beverages, and, in response to the change in demand, they abandoned the universal arrangement of goods on the

¹² *Natto* – a dish made from fermented soybeans, sticky and viscous, very healthy due to the content of useful minerals and vitamins, but with a peculiar taste and unusual smell.

¹³ *Tofu* – a soy product with a high content of high-quality protein and essential amino acids.

shelves and began to take into account the location of the store (among residential buildings or along roads). For example, 7-Eleven installed additional dessert shelves in stores located among residential buildings. To stimulate sales of drinks, they began to be experimentally placed not behind glass as usual, but on open access shelves, and many stores started to place snacks that go with drinks next to them. The stores that thus changed the arrangement of goods increased their sales, and not only through sweets and alcohol.

Konbini's response to the desire of people to leave their houses less often was also a change in the system of home delivery of goods ordered via the Internet. For example, Lawson uses Uber Eats and other delivery systems in 1,500 stores across the country.¹⁴ Of course, goods become more expensive in this case than when buying in a store, but, in the context of the pandemic, the number of users of such services, nevertheless, increased dramatically.

Another consequence of the pandemic was the fact that, as part of the efforts to reduce waste and losses, the trend of selling products with a short shelf life at discounted prices became popular, which was previously typical only for supermarkets. While previously complex procedures were necessary to discount goods in the *konbini* chains (for example, filling out invoices by hand for each such product), in the new conditions, the chains simplified the process. For instance, FamilyMart sticks only a barcode, and Lawson, with the consent of the customer, analyzes the history of their purchases and, at about the time when this customer usually arrives, transmits information about discounts on goods to their smartphone. In 2021, in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the FamilyMart and Lawson minimarkets began using operator-controlled robots created by a small startup company to place goods on store shelves. The advantage of using them is that one operator can simultaneously do this in several stores [Tikhotskaya, Omata 2022]. In February 2021, the Lawson chain announced its

¹⁴ A U.S. company that provides food delivery services ordered over the Internet. It originated in 2014 and has been operating in Japan since 2016.

intention to sell medicines as well. And, in July 2022, it was reported that, in some *konbini*, Japanese residents who received at least two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine could print out their vaccination passports.¹⁵

Features of *Konbini* Location

Konbini can be found across Japan – from the cape of Soya, the northernmost tip of Japan (Seicomart store in Wakkanai), to the southernmost one on Ishigaki Island (in the eponymous city), which is located about 400 km southwest of Okinawa Island (FamilyMart). Each of the *konbini* chains has its own niche and occupies a certain area in Japan. Standing out among all the chains are three: 7-Eleven, FamilyMart, and Lawson, the largest both by the number of stores in Japan and in terms of revenues. *Konbini* of these chains are distributed throughout Japan.

All three leading chains are present in all 47 prefectures, although 7-Eleven, the leader in the number of stores, achieved this more slowly than the others, opening its first store in Okinawa Prefecture only in 2019. (Lawson in 1997, and FamilyMart in 2006). Seicomart, the sixth largest in terms of the number of stores, is almost exclusively a local chain with more than 1,000 outlets in Hokkaido and 92 more in two other prefectures.

An analysis of statistics reflecting the distribution of the leading chains by the number of stores across the country shows that there are clearly three groups of regions. The first group includes the regions where only one *konbini* chain prevails (Hokkaido, Kanto, Shikoku, and Okinawa). The second group comprises the regions where there are two leaders (Tohoku, Chubu, Kinki, and Chugoku). The third group is characterized by the fact that one or another of the three leading chains

¹⁵ COVID vaccine passports to soon be printable at Japan convenience stores. *Japan Times*. July 22, 2022.

(Hokuriku, Kyushu) dominates in different prefectures. While 7-Eleven holds the lead in most Kyushu prefectures, FamilyMart stores prevail in Kagoshima Prefecture (the number of 7-Eleven and Lawson stores is almost identical, and there are no other chains at all); Lawson is the leader in Oita. And in the Hokuriku region, three of its four constituent prefectures have different leaders (*Fig. 2*).

Within the prefectures, the location of *konbini* is fully correlated with the number of residents: the number of stores is proportional to the population of municipalities. Each of the chains constantly monitors the movement of the population, and also takes into account the changing tastes and needs in individual localities. The density of *konbini* (the number of stores per 10 thousand people) gives an idea of which of the regions of Japan has an excess of stores and which has a shortage of them (*Fig. 3.*), although, in general, the differences are small: from 3.4 to 5.59. First of all, the highest density is seen in the northernmost and southernmost regions, Hokkaido and Okinawa, respectively. A higher density of *konbini* is observed in Eastern Japan, particularly in the prefectures of Yamanashi and Tokyo. On the other hand, in Western Japan, the Kinki region has the lowest density, primarily the prefectures of Nara, Shiga, and Hyogo. In the Kyushu region, Nagasaki Prefecture has an equally low density. The conducted analysis of statistical data¹⁶ shows that the number of *konbini* has increased mainly in Okinawa (by 30 stores), as well as in Western Japan (and mainly in the prefectures of Hiroshima (19) and Osaka (15); and more than 5 stores – in Oita, Saga, Okayama).

In Eastern Japan, there was a decrease in the number of *konbini* in all prefectures, with the exception of Tochigi and Iwate, where there appeared two and three new stores, respectively. The largest reduction affected the prefectures included in the Metropolitan Region (Kanagawa) or adjacent (Shizuoka and Ibaraki) to it, as well as Aichi Prefecture. The only prefecture in which the number of *konbini* remained unchanged was Tottori, known for their high density.

¹⁶ Todofuken deta ranking. https://uub.jp/pdr/m/c_12b.html#2

The minimum distance from one *konbini* store to another in Japan as a whole is 528 meters.¹⁷ In urban areas, the distance between them varies from 50 m to 200 m, and the concatenation of them forms certain infrastructure – both commercial and social, where customers can use the services of any of the chains.

Regional Product Diversity

Japan is famous for its national cuisine, and, in 2013, its traditional cuisine was included in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Japanese cuisine, which is known all over the world, is a collective image of dishes from different prefectures. Each includes ingredients specific to a particular area and is proud of its special dish or product. The main factors determining the formation of local cuisine are geographical location and natural resources (since freshness and seasonality of the products consumed are of paramount importance in Japanese cuisine), as well as specific historical factors and processes that took place in the region. And it is the geographical location of the region that is the most important factor determining the originality of the national cuisine in different parts of the country. *Konbini* seek to respect the culinary preferences of the people in the part of the country in which they are located and use ingredients typical of the territory. Therefore, in *konbini* located in different prefectures, one can find unique products and ready-made lunches that are not sold anywhere else. The main product of Japanese cuisine is certainly rice. Rice cultivation is widespread throughout the country, and self-sufficiency is 98–100 percent (the leading prefectures are Niigata and Hokkaido). Wheat is also found in the dishes of almost all prefectures, but its self-

¹⁷ Takemoto Ryota. Japan as a Society Dependent on Convenience Stores. Is Survival without Convenience Stores Impossible in the Era of Super-Aging? <http://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/archives/society/pt20160318011754.html>

sufficiency, on the contrary, is extremely low (less than 20percent). Hokkaido is also the leader in wheat harvesting. There is a wide variety of different types of noodles: *udon*,¹⁸ *ramen*,¹⁹ and *soba*²⁰ are also among the main dishes of Japanese cuisine and are especially popular in the regions of Hokkaido, Tohoku, and Hokuriku, which traditionally grow wheat and buckwheat. Due to the different geographical location of the prefectures in these regions, the complementary ingredients are different. For instance, the further a territory is from the seacoast, the more often one can find noodles with the addition of vegetables or meat.

Konbini in different prefectures offer ready-made lunches based on noodles and imported raw food, but, at the same time, they take into account the preferences of residents of these territories. For example, in *konbini* in the prefectures of Niigata, Nagano, and Hokkaido, buckwheat noodles are sold without additional ingredients (except for sauce and spring onions), which is not found in other prefectures. And, in Fukui Prefecture, a piece of fish or tuna chips are added to it.

Onigiri is the most famous component of Japanese fast food, sold in all prefectures, but each has its own variations. The most typical ingredients for all *onigiri* that are sold in Japanese *konbini* are *natto*, tuna, roe, salmon, shrimp, and plums. In Hokkaido, the *onigiri* range is wider: with several types of salmon and roe, as well as a mixture of rice, sesame, and *wakame*.²¹ A specific feature of *onigiri* in Hokkaido is also their size: like *sushi*, they are twice as big as regular *onigiri*. In the Chugoku, Kanto, and Shikoku regions, *onigiri* are made with the addition of Japanese seasoning *shiso* or pieces of *tofu*, pickled plums, and chicken. The Kanto region has the largest diversity of *onigiri* compared to the rest of Japan. The range is especially wide in Tokyo

¹⁸ Wide wheat noodles.

¹⁹ Thin wheat noodles.

²⁰ Buckwheat noodles.

²¹ Brown algae widely used in Japanese cuisine.

Prefecture. All the *konbini* chains send small lots of their products from different prefectures to Tokyo, where any regional products are in particular demand among tourists.

The distinctive feature of almost all Okinawan dishes is pork. The preference for this type of meat among the inhabitants of Okinawa was formed during the existence of the Ryukyu state, which actively traded with China and Korea for many years and adopted the culinary preferences of continental Asia. From China also came sweet potatoes which are less fastidious to growing conditions and more resistant than rice to the effects of typhoons that constantly hit Okinawa, which became a real salvation for the residents of the region. After the Second World War and until 1972, Okinawa was under the control of the United States, and, under the influence of the U.S. military, dishes different from Asian cuisine appeared in the prefecture.

On the Ryukyu Islands, with their nearly tropical climate, which is not typical for the main territory of Japan, there grow pineapples, mangoes, papaya, and guava, from which desserts and sauces are prepared, and they are also added to rice. The exotic pumpkin-related goya fruit, sometimes called bitter melon, is very popular. As a result, *konbini* in Okinawa offer a wide range of dishes with both pork and pineapple and mango desserts throughout the year. And, in general, ready-made lunches, drinks, sweets, and fruit sold in Okinawan *konbini* are not found anywhere else in the country.

A wide variety of crops are grown in Japan throughout the year, and every month different types of fruit or vegetables are sold in the stores, as well as dishes made from seasonal fruits.

The most popular and often bought berry in Japan is strawberries; their season falls on January – May,²² and, during this period, they grow almost everywhere in Japan, as they are cultivated in greenhouses. Some *konbini* chains, such as 7-Eleven, Lawson, FamilyMart, and Seicomart have their own farms, which grow strawberries, among other things. The rest of the companies buy them from local farmers

²² The Japanese word for strawberries is *ichigo* (*ichi* – one (or first), *go* – five).

or import them from China. In Japan, the leaders in strawberry production are Ibaraki and Shizuoka Prefectures.

Sakura is a famous symbol of Japan, and with its blossoming comes the season of collecting its petals. From March to May, all stores begin selling products containing sakura petal juice, including sakura tea, which has a very short shelf life and an original taste that not everyone can appreciate. Particularly popular are desserts and drinks. During the sakura blossom season, a large number of tourists come to Japan from around the world, for whom everything related to sakura is a souvenir. Therefore, there is a great demand for products with this taste in stores. Sakura blossoming begins in the southern territories and moves to the north of the country, and, by early May, sakura begins to bloom in Hokkaido. Until the end of the sakura blossom season, *konbini* sell a large number of desserts with its addition. Some of the chains also produce sakura ice cream. The most popular dessert during this period is the sakura cake that consists of a biscuit base and a layer of jelly on top with the addition of the juice of petals and sakura flower. They are extremely tasty, although they look very much like a simple lump of dough. Melon, unlike strawberries and sakura, is a regional product, so its products are more common in just a few prefectures. It can be called one of the symbols of Hokkaido, the largest producer of melons in Japan. From June to August, there is a huge variety of melon desserts in all the *konbini* in the region. Melon-flavored ice cream is especially popular, as well as soda and KitKat branded sweets, which can be found not only in the company's branded stores in Hokkaido, but also in *konbini* located near the main attractions of the cities in the region. Ibaraki Prefecture is also one of the leaders in melon cultivation, but there, unlike Hokkaido, the melon brand is not developed.²³ One of the most famous melon-flavored products is the above-mentioned *meronpan*. Some Hokkaido *konbini* make special melon buns that cannot be found anywhere else.

²³ Gilbreath, Aaron. The thing about Japanese convenience stores is that they're awesome. <https://thesmartset.com/conbini-life-kyoto-japan/>



Fig. 1. Lawson in the town of Kawagoe (view from outside and inside).
Sources: Photos by T. Omata (left) and I. S. Tikhotskaya

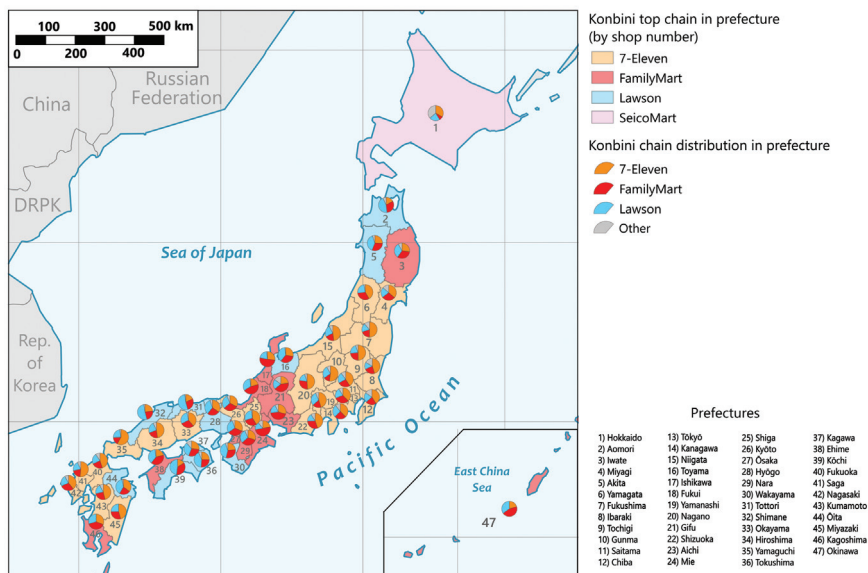


Fig. 2. The leading chains by the number of stores and the share of the three largest chains in Japan's prefectures
Source: Compiled based on the data of the Japanese Bureau of Statistics, the Mapfan Internet resource, and calculations by M. A. Petropavlovskaya

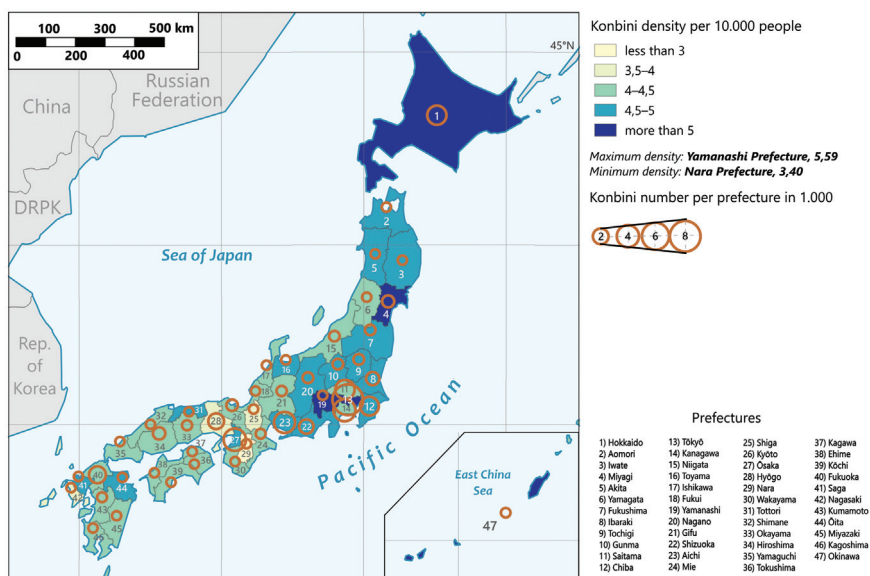


Fig. 3. Density of konbini by Japanese prefectures

Source: Compiled based on the data of the Japanese Bureau of Statistics, the Mapfan Internet resource, and calculations by M. A. Petropavlovskaya

Conclusion

Konbini, which the Japanese borrowed, like many other things throughout their history, turned into unique stores that have become an integral part of the Japanese way of life. The large number and high density make them different from all other stores. The services provided at *konbini* are becoming ever more diverse and greatly facilitate the daily life of the Japanese. According to Nihon Keizai Shinbun, the parent company of 7-Eleven Japan, Seven & i Holdings, by public recognition, took the first place in the ranking in 2015, surpassing the popular giants such as Ajinomoto, Toray, or Toyota. The possibility of purchasing ready-made dishes that you can take with you or immediately reheat has also changed the Japanese food culture.

The Japanese *konbini* can be called another Japanese phenomenon, since they could only have emerged in a country like Japan, where careful attention is given to creating amenities in everyday life, providing a variety of services that ensure household needs “outside home.” At the same time, they change both eating habits and social values of the Japanese. Having become an indispensable element of infrastructure in Japan, they evoke nostalgia not only among the Japanese who live abroad, but also among foreigners who have visited Japan. *Konbini* are not just a successful commercial retail format, but, according to Peng Wang’s apt expression, it is a social microcosm and something that ensures a connection with Japan and nostalgia for it [Wang 2019].

Konbini use skillful placement strategies. Within prefectures, their number correlates with the number of inhabitants: it is proportional to the population of the municipalities. New stores appear, first of all, in cities with the highest population density, and are located within walking distance from the place of residence or work of as many potential customers as possible. Each of the 18 *konbini* chains occupies a specific area within which their stores are developing. They are compact and provide the opportunity to buy everything that can be needed in everyday life in a short time, and, unlike supermarkets, they are not associated with moving around a large space or standing in line at the

checkout for a long while. The number of these convenience stores is increasing every year, and this is due to the fact that the need for them is growing. In today's Japan, the aging of the population is progressing rapidly: the proportion of people over the age of 65, for whom it is vital to have this kind of social infrastructure nearby, has approached 30 percent. In this regard, *konbini* is increasingly positioned as “walking distance” stores, and the question is already being raised about the need to open more stores, especially in those areas where the proportion of the elderly already exceeds 30–35 percent of the population. It can be said that *konbini* as a retail format capable of responding quickly to the changes taking place in modern Japan, represent a reflection of the problems of modern Japanese society and, at the same time, their solution, significantly facilitating the lives of all Japanese: older people, single people, working women, housewives, as well as the increasing number of *kaimono nammin* (“shopping refugees”).

The last group is defined by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan as people for whom making everyday purchases is difficult due to the lack of nearby shops and transport networks, that is, they include all those people “experiencing inconvenience due to the lack of shops within walking distance” [Takemoto 2016, p. 8]. It is obvious that depopulation, which has already pervaded all the prefectures of Japan, will further increase the number of *kaimono nammin*, and, accordingly, the role of *konbini*. Unlike other publicly accessible types of social infrastructure, such as medical facilities or gas stations where people with certain needs are served, *konbini* are visited by everyone, regardless of age, gender, profession, or nationality. *Konbinis'* help to women in performing their traditional role of *ryōsaikembo* (good wives and wise mothers) in modern Japanese society is also indispensable (although housewives who use *konbini* services are often criticized). And as the 2011 catastrophic earthquake showed, the highly commendable provision of necessary services by these stores during natural disasters is extremely in demand, and their role is irreplaceable.

Konbini are not only constantly expanding the range of services they provide, but also have a noticeable impact on Japanese society: they

change the rituals of nutrition, contribute to a wider spread of a new lifestyle called *ohitorisama* (people living alone and relying only on their own resources, as opposed to the mutual assistance that is traditional for Japanese society, which often occurs for reasons independent of a person, including in old age), to the transformation of social values, and to the emergence of new concepts, such as *gaishoku* (eating out), *nakashoku* (ready-made food purchased at a store), and *naishoku* (food prepared at home). Another noticeable phenomenon in Japanese society, not least in connection with *konbini*, is *koshoku* – family members eating separately for various reasons.

Konbini take into account the preferences of prefectural residents and produce dishes that match the cuisine of a particular region, trying to create products that would be unique and sold only in one place. The companies developing them focus on agriculture in a certain area, producing limited products and purchasing raw materials mainly from local farmers; there are also chains that grow the necessary products on several farms in different parts of the country. The ready-made lunches that are sold in Okinawa or Hokkaido are different from those sold in other prefectures. Almost every prefecture has a product that is associated with their territory and has its own brand – *meibutsu*, a good example of which is, for instance, the above-mentioned Hokkaido melon. Cuisine, agriculture and trade are closely linked, forming a chain of several components in which one helps the other to develop. Obviously, *konbini* meet the interests of the regions' development on the whole. In other words, the role of *konbini* in Japanese society cannot be overestimated.

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