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The myth of *washoku*: a twisted discourse on the “uniqueness” of national food heritages

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, Japan and Korea celebrated their first food culture registrations with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This paper first reviews the overall situation regarding *washoku*. Then, the *washoku* concept is analyzed and we argue that the idea is ambiguous. The *washoku* concept is contested and not necessarily clearly defined, but certain characteristics exist. The “uniqueness” is emphasized in the UNESCO registration while the reasoning or storyline for applications, such as relationships to nature, traditional preparations, community cohesion are “common” with other applications. The context of registration is frequently misinterpreted, and *washoku* has certain elements that are responsive to changes, despite its authentic and unchanged popular image. The ambiguity has both positive and negative aspects. It functions as a framework to enable groups with different interests or interpretations to participate in the process.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Food cultures historically change, and various discourses consider past and present food cultures. This study focuses on the *washoku* Japanese food culture by reviewing the relevant discourses to describe its historical and cultural characteristics. In particular, the discourses related to registration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Food Heritages as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Registration) are analyzed, and the ambiguity, embedded nationalistic characteristics, and *washoku*'s similarities to and differences from other national cuisines are identified. We argue that historical and cultural contexts need to be considered to implement the intergenerational transmission of food culture as well as the nutritional aspects of foods and their influences on the environment.

Various discourses emerged during and after the process of registration of *washoku*, and the concept remains contested. By

analyzing these discourses, this paper explores current understandings of and expectations for *washoku* in Japanese society. Registration of *washoku* could contribute to its branding. However, strict definitions of *washoku* cannot reflect its dynamic characteristics; moreover, it is difficult to present the expected attractiveness of *washoku* based on strict definitions. Even so, some extent of agreement on *washoku* is needed to transmit it as a food culture. In the following sections, specific discourses related to *washoku* and its registration are analyzed, and the characteristics of the registration are compared to that of other national cuisines.

1.2. *Washoku* characteristics

The definition of *washoku* is contested, and there is no clear standard definition. It is usually used to distinguish it from so-called Western or Chinese foods, although a set of common elements might exist for the concept. One such characteristic element is the large numbers of items served as *washoku*. From the perspective of ethnology, Freedman [1] found that Japanese people tend to prefer diverse foods. Furthermore, it has repeatedly been pointed out that the *ichiju-sansai* style (一汁三菜) is characteristic of *washoku*. The dictionary broadly defines it as food using fresh fish and vegetables, cooked to use the potential of its ingredients and containers (Utsuwa 器), and deeply related to seasonality and

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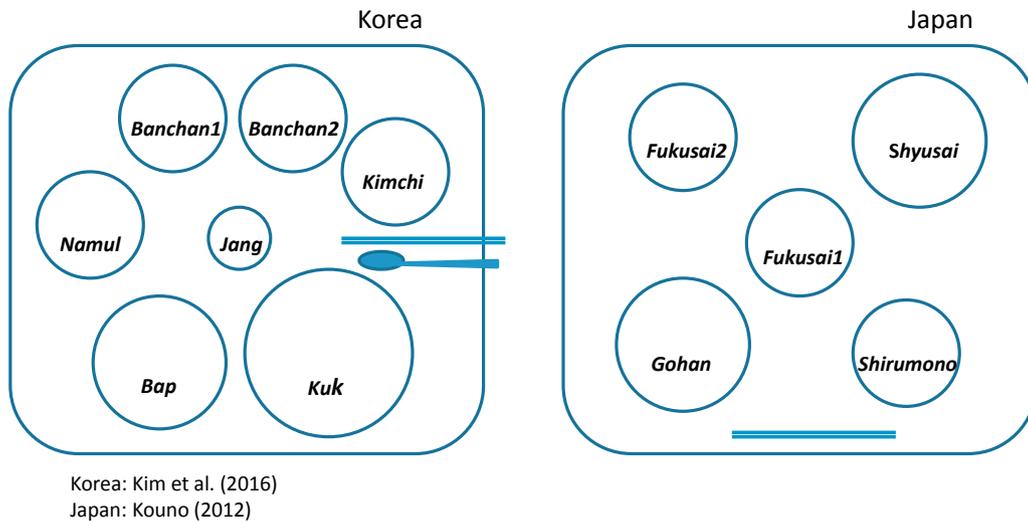


Fig. 1. General arrangement of dishes in Korea and Japan. *Note.* A few general descriptions are associated with *washokyu*. For example, *washoku* has more items in dishes or foods. *Washoku's* well-known composition is the *ichiju-sansai* (一汁三菜), which comprises a soup, rice, and three side dishes [a *shyusai* (main) and two *fukusai* or tertiary dishes]. The number of items and the structure of the serving style could be a common base of *washoku* at present (even with diversity and change). The food is served to locate the rice and soup in the front and the main side dish at the middle upper left [3]. The main tertiary dish or *shyusai* is located at the upper right.

annual rituals [2]. It is often defined in contrast to Western or Chinese foods (Fig. 1).

What is the status of *washoku* or related foods? The frequency of so-called *washoku* dining is approximately 60% in Japan [4]. Minari et al [4] created a classification and categorized the components of meals by style, including *washoku*, Western, and Chinese. For example, in their classification system, steamed rice was a component of *washoku* and bread was categorized as western. They calculated the frequency of *washoku* dining by counting the number of times its components were present in meals in a sample of

people in Fukuoka Prefecture in western Japan, which might have regional characteristics (Fig. 2). The Japanese government has reported that the general trend in food preferences is increasingly diverse and that an increasing proportion of citizens prefer food types other than *washoku* [5].

Thus, in Japan, the popularity of *washoku* does not seem to be increasing, although demand for *washoku* is rapidly increasing in other countries and regions. For example, in Asia, the number of restaurants serving Japanese cuisine increased from 10,000 to 27,000 between 2010 and 2013 [6]. In 2010, North America had the



Fig. 2. An example of *washoku* dishes. Photo by Shuichiro Kajima. In *washoku* restaurants, several small dishes are often served in addition to five basic dishes of *washoku*. Not only traditional Japanese cuisine, but other regions' cuisines including western-style ones can be served in current *washoku* restaurants.

most Japanese restaurants; however, in 2013, those in the Asian region exceeded this number. It is clear that the demand for Japanese cuisine is growing in Asia, but the lack of supporting statistical data should be noted. The trends in North America and in Asian countries are not trivial. In this context, the discourses on *washoku* could be considered in the wider Asian context, although in possibly adapted forms.

The *ichiju-sansai* style might not necessarily promote good health [4]. The numbers of items are decreasing in the Tokyo area [7], which confirms the general trends reported by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) [5] that *washoku* is not gaining popularity among young adults. Furthermore, there are other reasons that the government and private entities are interested in promoting *washoku* abroad, which are related to Japan's accelerating depopulation and shrinking demands. There is a sense of urgency that the *washoku* needs to be promoted and consumed abroad amongst producers, governments and media alike. In the following sections, the reasons are demonstrated by reviewing the Japan's brand strategy and the spirit of *washoku*.

2. *Washoku* registration as intangible cultural heritage

The decision to register *washoku*, the traditional dietary culture of the Japanese people, notably for celebrating the New Year, for Japan occurred with the decision to register *kimjang*, the production and sharing of *kimchi* in the Republic of Korea [8,9]. *Le repas gastronomique des Français* (the gastronomic meal of the French), Mediterranean diet and traditional Mexican foods were registered in 2010, and the Turkish ceremonial *keşkek* in 2011 [10–13]. The results of the decision were often quoted in the Japanese news, but the reasons for registration are generally unknown to the public. This paper reviews the reasoning and *washoku* registration process using official documents.

2.1. *Washoku* as a contested notion

The elements of *washoku* are described above, where we noted that it is neither possible nor useful to strictly define the term. It is a concept defined in contrast to Western or Chinese cuisine. However, other differences distinguish it among Japanese dishes. For example, it was conventionally believed that *nihon-ryori* (日本料理) are high-culture dishes ritually served at traditional restaurants, whereas *washoku* is served in private homes [14,15]. Matsumoto [16] used the term *nihon-ryori* in his book regarding the royal families.

Cwiertka [17] analyzed the concept from a historical perspective, focusing on the latter half of the 19th century into the 20th century, pointing out that the diverse regional diets were homogenized into *washoku*. In other words, *washoku* might have developed from dishes outside the home and was subsequently integrated into the home. To complicate matters, the *washoku* registration was initially intended to address high culture in Kyoto, with a strong *nihon-ryori* influence in its origin. Thus, it is difficult to distinguish between the two concepts because they both involve characteristics of high culture. Furthermore, the core spirit and principles do not change; *washoku* is adapting to society and changing over time [18].

2.2. Roots of *washoku* registration: Japanese branding and intellectual property

The foundation of *washoku* registration linking Japanese foods to Japan's branding strategy dates back to the early 2000s. The slogan, "intellectual property nation" (知財立国) was introduced, and a strategy was devised in 2002 by Juichiro Koizumi, the prime minister [19,20]. The strategy was characterized by inclusion of the

research institutions and soft power elements, such as content businesses and manufacturing industries (with the possible influence of American scholar, J. Nye who was popular in Japan at the time). The food *per se* was an element, but the food-related words were limited to protecting seeds and varieties at this initial phase. The Cabinet Office Intellectual Property Strategy Promotion Bureau concretely highlighted *washoku* in the national branding strategy in 2005 [21]. The MAFF commission to register *washoku* was established after the registration of the French cuisines.

2.3. Reason to register in Japan

The reason to register *washoku* was linked to the sustainability of natural resources and communities. The spirit of the text of the decision to register it was that the foods are "associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature that is closely related to the sustainable use of natural resources" and "practice favors the consumption of various natural, locally sourced ingredients such as rice, fish, vegetables and edible wild plants". Regarding the sustainability of the community, it was pointed out that, "the basic knowledge and skills related to *washoku*, such as the proper seasoning of home cooking, are passed down in the home at shared mealtimes". Thus, respect for nature and cohesive communities were emphasized in the official reasons (on the Japanese government's MAFF website [5]) for proposing the decision. In these explanations, ties to seasonality, geographical diversity, fresh and diverse food uses, and "respect for nature" were frequently used terms illustrated with rituals at paddy fields and harvest festivals for communal bonding. However, there was no consensus on the definition or agreement on its scope in academic contexts. The UNESCO decision demonstrates that seasonality, nature, community cohesion, and intergenerational transmission were the aspects of *washoku* used to determine registration [22,23].

2.4. Comparative perspectives on *washoku* registration

There are large overlaps among countries in the reasons to register national foods (Table 1). In particular, the French and *washoku* registration processes were similar. Initially, both of them aimed to register their cuisines as high-culture foods, and they involved cuisines from their mainstream cultures in the registration process [23,24]. In the *washoku* registration process, *kaisyoku* [会食] was the Japanese high-culture cuisine used to make the application [23]. In the French process, certain political activities were involved. For example, Sarkozy, French president at the time, aimed to use the registration process to obtain support from the agricultural sector where he was not particularly popular [24], and a relationship to nature was emphasized by the French.

The reason to register *kimjang* also related to community cohesion because the process requires group effort to prepare the food for winter when vegetables are scarce. Interestingly, registrations often advertise these cuisines as the achievements of "unique" national cultures, while the reasons for applying are very similar, if not alike, across countries. The relationship to nature, traditional preparations, and resulting community cohesion seem to be common factors among food-related registrations in the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

To this point, the five food-related heritages have been described, and the reasons for the decisions of the registrations of them have been summarized. The element of heritage is assumed, but the intergenerational transmission aspect appears in all five descriptions. The notion of "intercultural dialogue" is highlighted in European food heritage, but not emphasized in the East Asian descriptions. The differences in tone are noticeable, even in the reasons to register. The concept of "uniqueness" of a culture, rather

Table 1

Summary of the five criteria of food-related heritage.*

	<i>Le repas gastronomique des Français</i> (Gastronomic meal of the French) (2010)	Mediterranean diet (2010)	Traditional Mexican cuisine (2010)	Turkish ceremonial <i>keşkek</i> tradition (2011)	<i>Washoku</i> traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for new year celebrations (2013)	<i>Kimjang</i> , production and sharing <i>kimchi</i> in the Republic of Korea (2013)
R1	Has an active social role in the community intergenerational transmission.	Intergenerational transmission, particularly by families. Provides a sense of belonging and sharing. Provides locals with a marker of identity and a space for sharing and dialogue.	Central to community cultural identity. Intergenerational transmission.	A unifying social practice at Turkish festive events. Intergenerational transmission. Deepens the sense of belonging to a community.	Intergenerational transmission. Has an important role in strengthening social cohesion among Japanese people. Provides a sense of identity and belonging.	Intergenerational transmission in everyday family life. Encourages the spirit of sharing among neighbors. Promotes solidarity and provides a sense of identity and belonging.
R2	Greater visibility of intangible cultural heritage. A catalyst for mutual respect and intercultural dialogue.	Raises awareness of the significance of healthy and sustainable food practices in the world. Encourages intercultural dialogue. Testifies to creativity. Promotes respect for cultural, environmental, and biological diversity.	Enhances the visibility of intangible cultural heritage. Promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.	Promotes cultural diversity and human creativity by demonstrating shared ideas and promoting communication and inclusiveness.	Raises awareness of the significance of the intangible cultural heritage. Encourages dialogue and respect for human creativity and the environment. Promotes healthy eating.	Promotes the visibility of intangible cultural heritage. Enhances dialogue among communities nationally and internationally. Practices cuisine that make similar creative uses of natural resources.
R3	Commitment of the community. Reinforces its transmission, particularly through education. Encourages research and promotion.	Raises awareness, transmission, documentation, revitalization, and legislative actions. Emphasizes strengthening and cooperative mechanisms.	Consultations, research projects, and practical training.	Twofold approach by communities and the state. The nomination highlights their commitment to ensure <i>keşkek</i> 's continuity and transmission.	Protects and promotes <i>washoku</i> in all regions of Japan with research, recording, and raising awareness through education and cultural exchanges.	Formal education. Adoption of legislative provisions for its promotion and measures to mitigate industrialization of <i>kimchi</i> -making.
R4	Active and broad participation of communities throughout the country in debates and surveys. Many institutions and associations gave their free, prior, and informed consent.	Communities concerned in seven countries participated in the preparation of the nomination and gave their free, prior, and informed consent.	Practitioners participated actively in the nomination process and provided their free, prior, and informed consent.	Communities, practitioners, and other relevant institutions and associations participated in the nomination process and provided their free, prior, and informed consent.	Communities, individuals, research institutions, and local authorities participated in the nomination process in large numbers and the communities provided free, prior, and informed consent.	Korean communities at three different levels (public, local government, and academia) participated through surveys in the elaboration of the nomination and provided their free, prior, and informed consent.
R5	Inscribed in the inventory of intangible cultural heritage of France established by the Mission of Ethnology of the Ministry of Culture	The subject of research and documentation in each of the relevant states' parties. In one or more inventories in each state.	In the Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mexico maintained by the National Council for Culture and Arts.	Included in the Turkish National Inventory for Intangible Cultural Heritage, maintained by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2008.	Traditional dietary culture of Japan. Identified as intangible cultural heritage. Included in the Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan in 2012.	After a multiyear process of consultation, it was included in the State Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage maintained by the Cultural Heritage Administration in 2011.

* R1; the element constitutes intangible cultural heritage as defined in Article 2 of the convention. R2; inscription of the element will contribute to ensuring visibility and awareness of the significance of the intangible cultural heritage and to encouraging dialogue, thus reflecting cultural diversity worldwide and testifying to human creativity. R3; safeguarding measures are elaborated that may protect and promote the element. R4; the element has been nominated following the widest possible participation of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and with their free, prior and informed consent. R5; the element is included in an inventory of the intangible cultural heritage present in the territory(ies) of the submitting state(s) party(ies), as defined in article 11 and article 12 of the convention.

than its interchange with others, was highlighted after the decisions to register.

From this comparative perspective, it is clear that certain registration elements are similar and others are different. Generally, similar terms related to criteria frequently appear in the descriptions of all of the registered cuisines. However, local specific terms appear exclusively in the descriptions of the cuisines of Turkey, Japan, and Korea. For example, the terms include Turkish festive events, *keşkek's* continuity, *washoku*, and *kimchi*-making. By using these specific terms, the differentiation seems to be directed in the registrations and regional uniqueness is emphasized.

3. Current discourse on *washoku* registration in Japan

At the earlier media reports, these above contexts are frequently misunderstood, and Japanese food materials, technique, or cuisine cultures were regarded in the broadcasting as main reason for the registration. Another common misunderstanding is that registration is associated with particular lists of ingredients (similar to the Michelin Guide). Actually, registration relates to community and culture. In certain parts of the texts, nationalistic tones are found that connote international acknowledgment of Japanese culture [25–30]. The phrase “Endorsed by the UNESCO World Heritage” was often used in newspaper articles, books, and magazines. The exact subjects are actually the general assembly (that consists of the state's parties to the convention), but it is simplified as UNESCO. The representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity is abbreviated as “world heritage,” which is the same term used to indicate tangible natural or cultural heritage with images of national parks or buildings. In other words, vague contexts are abbreviated into simpler terms that function to evoke emotional reactions on the one hand and cause confusion on the other hand. For example, the Washoku Association of Japan was established on February 4, 2015, when application for the UNESCO decisions was made for the purpose of transmitting the *washoku* culture to future generations and to share its values across the nation. The association had 48 official members and 75 additional supporting members as of October 2016. The members mostly were large food or beverage companies, such as Ajinomoto, with a few transportation, travel, and advertising companies.

The *Washoku* Association of Japan published guidelines that explicitly state that it is “inappropriate in the spirit of the Treaty to display or to advertise individual food materials, cooking methods, dishes, styles or ceremonies as if they were listed as representing nature (of *Washoku* for the UNESCO).” In the general *washoku* discussion, there are concerns that the concept is misunderstood or misused in advertisements. One piece of evidence regarding this situation is that MAFF tried to introduce “correct *washoku*” in 2006 [14,31], but the effort was criticized and mocked as “sushi-police” activities. The MAFF [14] supported educational certification of authentic Japanese food and culture and established guidelines for certification of cooking skills for Japanese cuisine in foreign countries in 2016.

Another aspect of *Washoku* registration was unbalanced regional support. One reason for this might be that the potential beneficiaries of *washoku* registration are concentrated in the Kansai area, which includes Kyoto city. That unbalance might partially explain why municipalities in eastern Japan are the main promoters and supporters of *washoku* registration [32]. However, even among the supporters, opinions are divided on the extent of openness or flexibility of the *washoku* concept.

The interests of stakeholders further complicate the concept. The timing of linking *washoku* to branding Japan, including Japanese foods, coincided with the Japanese administration's prioritizing of Japanese food exports [14]. It is obvious in the current

Japanese discourses that *washoku* and its registration are believed to contribute to these exports. Several newspapers reported in 2017 with “casual relationships” that the *washoku* registration contributed to increasing exports of Japanese products. For example, Yomiuri [33] reported that the export value of Japanese green tea had increased by 14% (¥11.5 billion), which was caused by increased demand in other countries, such as the United States and Singapore, with significant interest in its health benefits. Japanese tea and sake are promoted by using regional-level certifications (ex. Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems) and product-level certifications (ex. Geographical Indication) [34]. It included a report of the Japan Tea Central Public Interest Incorporated Association, which argued that *washoku* registration contributed to the increase in exports to Europe where the export value was relatively small. Asahi [35] reported that the trend of increasing exports of Japanese agricultural products during the past three years related to the *washoku* boom was over. These reports describe *washoku* registration as the cause of increasing exports of Japanese products, although it should be noted that scientific verification of the influence of registration is needed. If the differences with other national cuisines were facilitated by registration, *washoku's* uniqueness could be acknowledged and interests in and demand for Japanese products could increase. Thus, registration seems to emphasize the “uniqueness” of *washoku*, although the description in the *washoku* application for registration are actually “common” storylines in other applications.

The ambiguities discussed above might be important umbrella concepts because registration is not required to specify regions, ingredients, or cooking methods, and the entire nation is supposed to share the benefits of registration. However, registrations of individual items and products are different regarding geographical indicators, even when the individual items are known ingredients of *washoku* or associated with its rituals. Prior to the *washoku* registration, the Japanese government applied only their existing national intangible heritages to the UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage. *Washoku* is still not a national intangible heritage registered by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Recently, the agency decided to regard other non-national intangible heritages, such as *sadou* and *bonsai*, as candidates for the application to the UNESCO [36]. The ambiguities of the intangible heritages including food heritages seem to be somewhat extended.

4. Discussion

Two aspects of the discourse on *washoku* registration were highlighted in the above discussion. We identified a twist in the *washoku* discourse that mainly exists at the international and national levels. At the international level for registration, the term has been described using common language and reasoning. It has intergenerational character, promotes bonding of the community and closer relationships to nature, and it raises awareness of intangible cultural heritage. However, the process transforms the concept by emphasizing uniqueness at the national level (with some imbalance in domestic regional support). The dichotomy of international and national levels is not simply about showing different characteristics of food cultures at the international and national levels using promotional or political reasoning. The underlying differences are the formal settings of the heritage and the dynamic realities of the food culture, which the institutional setting requires as unique cultural descriptions. These descriptions are generally static, whereas the heritage is in practice full of changes and contradictions.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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