

# Savoring Authenticity: Food Consumption and Nostalgia in Japan

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**Abstract** The Japanese culinary tradition and contemporary food-related values are often characterised by an emotional and evocative tone that can be traced back to nostalgia, a global multidimensional phenomenon that blends cultural anxieties, sentimental values and sense of place. The desire to remember home through food consumption, as a valuable way of approaching the past, enables the construction or redefinition of ethnic identities, cultural boundaries and a sense of uniqueness. This paper offers some introductory reflections on present-day practices and affective aspects related to Japanese food culture from the point of view of their symbolic meaning in media narratives.

**Keywords** Japan. Food consumption. Symbolic meaning. Media narratives. Nostalgia. Anthropology.

Food constitutes an important link between culture and the environment in Japan: it belongs to both because it combines certain biological functions with culinary practices, symbols and values that historically have produced a complex cultural heritage, whilst also representing a privileged lens for the observation of the social, political and economic interdependencies between food production and consumption. Japanese cuisine (*washoku*, a term that encompasses both regional and traditional food) has now consolidated its popularity on a global level. While the Western discovery of *sushi* and *ramen* occurred in the 1980s, with the progressive spread of *sushi* bars and Japanese restaurants or take-aways in Western cities (Bestor 2000), Japanese *cuisine* really gained international recognition

in 2013, when it was added to the UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, thus unquestionably establishing it as a global food phenomenon (de St. Maurice 2017; Omori 2018).

The strategic importance of *washoku* is also highlighted by the creation of mass media 'identifying images' of food production, such as rice fields, rural villages or places of artisanal food production. At the centre of this cultural logic is the production and reproduction of culinary imagery functional to the policies of identity construction that have transformed *washoku* into a "particularly plastic form of collective representation" (Appadurai 1988, 3). *Umi no sachi yama no sachi* (treasures of the sea and mountains) is a popular expression to indicate the rich gastronomic heritage of *washoku*: rice (the basic 'cultural ingredient' of traditional Japanese cuisine), *sansai* (mountain vegetables and other produce, such as *matsutake* mushrooms, roots and wild fruits) and fish (tuna, bream, salmon and mackerel). Rice, in particular, marks a symbolic border that separates Japan from Asian gastronomic culture (China and Korea), including also ethnic minorities like the Ainu (Hosking 1996; Ashkenazi 2003). As Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney has observed,

rice fields have played an enormously important role in the identity of the self or in the identities of the Japanese. Thus, the symbolism of rice is forked: on the one hand, 'rice as our food', on the other, 'rice fields as our land', reinforcing each other. (1993, 4)

If *washoku* is therefore a typical 'total social fact', whose historical specificity is rooted in the cultural narratives of Japanese collective identity, its promotion also represents a means of international recognition, as it establishes a link with the global food market and entails a strong involvement of relevant interest groups in the agribusiness field and a tendency to commodify Japanese food practices. Among the countless economic interests at stake, it is necessary to also consider those linked to the tourism sector, in light of the growing importance of gastronomic tourism. Here the presence of 'authentic' food culture and local gastronomic traditions is seen to offer a deeper way of experiencing certain places, thereby significantly contributing to defining the social imagery of *washoku*.

The opposition between the enhancement of the food heritage of *washoku* and globalisation processes undoubtedly proves to be an important rhetorical strategy. At the same time, the global/local dialectic leaves several research questions open concerning the real protagonists of the political-economic competition that is being played out on the international scene - despite UNESCO's insistence on the centrality of local communities. However, beyond this complex debate, the turning point was undoubtedly the addition of *washoku* to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list, which has been re-

garded as an attempt to construct a national culinary culture in response to globalisation (Omori 2018).

The mass media has become filled with articles, news reports, and debates on *washoku*, praising it as suitably healthy and ‘gastronomically correct’, in line with the culinary paradigms expressed on a national scale. In other words, *washoku* has often been perceived as a safe way of protecting contemporary tastes against inauspicious xenophilic drifts and of providing a sort of new gastronomic orientation to encourage the cooking and consumption of this idealised, standardised food at home. Scholars, chefs and government officials, for example, have often worked together to promote *washoku no hi* (*washoku* day), encouraging students, teachers and families to set aside November 24th as a day to prepare and serve healthy Japanese food. Thus, *washoku* has gradually taken on the connotation of an ‘authentic’ food capable of reconnecting taste and traditions, recipes and seasons, appetites and health, local identities and citizenships, according to established customs part of the Japanese gastronomic heritage. According to Isami Omori,

The number of newspaper articles on the topic of Japanese food rapidly increased after the UNESCO registration in 2013 [...] [in which] the most frequently occurring words were ‘taste’, ‘heart’, and ‘rice’. [...] In the characterisation of Japanese food after the registration, time and place were critical elements rather than specific foods. This indicates that abstract words that could evoke nostalgia, such as ‘taste’, ‘tradition’, and ‘local’, were used more often than heuristic words, such as ‘cooking techniques’ or *nikujaga*, which was the most common home cooked Japanese dish according to several polls. Based on our results, we conclude that newspaper discourses created and shared a representation of Japanese food that could be proudly presented to the ‘world’. (Omori 2018, 440)

Unlike many other terms used by the mass media to indicate the Japanese culinary tradition, *washoku* would appear to indicate a more intimate sphere of meaning than terms like *nihon ryōri*. The semantic difference is that *washoku* indicates a ‘Japanese meal’, while *nihon ryōri* refers to any ‘Japanese dish’ (Masuda 1989, 1225), although both *washoku* and *nihon ryōri* are generally translated as ‘Japanese food’ or ‘Japanese cuisine’. However, on closer examination of the terminology, it is possible to note that *nihon ryōri* mostly indicates exclusive cuisine offered by restaurants, while *washoku* refers to the daily food of ordinary people, home cooking (Shibata, Yamada 2002, 1042) or people’s food (Rath 2010). In Japanese popular discourse, *washoku* constitutes a ‘grammar of sentiment’ strongly linked to the most intimate domestic environment in connection with cooking, food-related practices and domestic consumption.

The lending of a particular identity-defining value to *washoku* has in fact translated into a nostalgic feeling of irreparable loss of one's own identity, becoming part of the imaginary of *urusato* (old village or native place), a term that could be extended to the whole nation: *nihon furusato* (ancient Japanese village). As Jennifer Robertson has noted, at the center of this cultural logic is the production and reproduction of a nostalgic native narrative founded on the temptation to withdraw into the stylized and idealised world of yesterday:

A *urusato* can only be fully comprehended by observing both how the term is used ordinarily and how it has been appropriated by various members of, and interest groups in, Japanese society. The evocation of *urusato* is an increasingly cogent means of simultaneously fostering we-feelings and insideness at local and national levels. [...] The process by which *urusato* is evoked into existence is called *urusato-zukuri*, or home/native-place making. Ultimately, *urusato-zukuri* is a political process by which culture, as a collectively constructed and shared system of symbols, customs and beliefs, is socially reproduced. (Robertson 1988, 495)

While nostalgia is generally understood as an emotional reaction experienced when external or internal stimuli lead back to an ideal past moment or event that may belong to one's life experience (Divard, Demontrond 1997), the nostalgic emotions that emerge from an idealised past are focused on inanimate places, smells, tastes or sounds, discovered at the very moment in which these emotions are experienced (Hirsch 1992). This process of 'crystallisation' of nostalgia is expressed precisely by the term *urusato*, which implies both a temporal and spatial dimension fulfilled by identifying and supporting a common cultural worldview: *urusu(i)*, which indicates "the patina of familiarity and naturalness that objects and human relationships acquire with age, use, and interaction" (Robertson 1988, 495), while *sato*, indicates one's "natal household, a hamlet or village, and the countryside" (Robertson 1988, 495). Moreover, *urusato* is used above all today

in an affective capacity to signify not a particular place - such as a real 'old village', for example - but rather the generalized nature of such a place and the warm, nostalgic feelings aroused by its mention. (Robertson 1988, 495)

*Urusato* can undoubtedly indicate a rarefied dimension of nostalgic re-enactment with no historical foundation, but it is also true that this word, if placed in connection with other cultural contexts, acts as a powerful catalyst in the process of identity construction (Robertson 1991). The close relationship between *washoku* and *urusato* establishes a symbolic connection with food consumption, which

represents a metaphor of the self that recalls the socially constructed dimension of food closely linked to its ability both to act as a social catalyst and to define new identity horizons.

With regard to this last point, two examples may be enlightening. The first is the close connection between the nostalgic imagery of *furusato* and the city of Kyoto and its culinary tradition. Kyoto is often considered the cultural capital of Japan, from which traditional culture sprung; it has thus become the “hometown of the Japanese heart and mind” (*Nihon no kokoro no furusato*) (Brumann 2012, 49). This identification with the ‘authentic’ Japanese tradition also applies to the gastronomic culture of Kyoto (*Kyō ryōri*), which would be the source of much of what is now considered to be the quintessential Japanese cuisine (Rath 2010). Furthermore, in the mass media imagination, *Kyō ryōri* often assumes the role of a cultural stronghold apparently impervious to the processes of globalisation.

Kyōto’s status in Japanese gastronomic culture is clear in the “Bamboo Shoot Battle” episode of the now-classic Japanese TV cooking show *Iron Chef*. This episode occurs in the series’ second season and is the first time a chef from Kyōto appeared on the show. The narration and comments from the host and judges gloss the world of Kyōto cuisine as isolated, closed off, unchanging. In the introductory segments, Kyōto is described as “the ancient capital and cultural center”, restaurant *Ikumatsu* as “an eminent name amongst Japanese inns in Kyōto, a place of status and tradition established 182 years ago”, and chef Takahashi Munetaka as possibly the “true heir to authentic Kyōto style cuisine”. [...] “The top restaurants [in Kyoto] are closed to not only chance customers but also the media”, the character of Chairman Kaga dramatically declares, “But now they are opening their doors to us”. (de St. Maurice 2017, 39)

However, while it is true that *Kyō ryōri* is often considered the emblem of a kind of cultural particularism – a certain ‘Kyōto-ishness’ (*Kyōto rashisha*) – that contrasts with the process of erosion caused by globalisation, it is also true that many Kyoto chefs have strategically tried to actively reshape the local culinary culture and to control the Kyoto food industry on a global scale (de St. Maurice 2017). This wavering between different global-local culinary market policies is an example of the apparent contradiction that is part of the “conversation with both the state and the market” (Klein, Jung, Caldwell 2014, 19).

Beyond this dialectical tension between globalisation and local cuisine, it is clear that strong identity media alarmism persists. This is quite evident if we consider the cultural anxieties that have emerged in post-Fukushima Japan, in which food consumption and nostalgia have been linked to the neoliberal notion of self-help and to the neo-conservative sentiment of nation and tradition. Since the Fukushima

Daiichi disaster (*Fukushima Daiichi genshiryoku hatsudensho jiko*), the Japanese media debate has often focused on resilience projects and on criticism of the models of scientific prediction of nuclear disasters, promoting the return to traditional Japanese values, folk customs and the wisdom of previous generations (*senjin no chie*) (Koikari 2020). Again, the nostalgic rhetoric of *furusato* has become part of media debates focusing on the preparation of emergency meals, in which Japanese culinary culture (*washoku bunka*) is regarded as an indispensable resource in a context of crisis.

With much focus on Japanese tradition, one publication makes a surprising statement about food and resilience: after so much intake of seaweed as part of their basic diet for generations, Japanese bodies are “naturally” resistant to the effect of nuclear radiation. Sakamoto Hiroko is a passionate advocate of this return to Japan’s past. In her 2012 book *Daidokoro bosaijutsu* (Disaster-Ready Kitchen Techniques) coauthored with her daughter, the culinary specialist Sakamoto Kana, the mother-daughter pair argue that women can learn from the lifestyle of bygone days (*mukashi no kurashi*), when modern domestic conveniences were not yet available but housewives managed to make do with whatever they had. “Recalling what it was like merely forty years ago” women can figure out what to do in the modern-day context of disaster. [...] With a strong emphasis on tradition, they recommend that women cultivate a relationship with rural farming families and communities whom they can rely on as a source of food in emergency times. Japanese women must recover, rediscover, and reconnect with [...] *furusato* [...] as a way to prepare for the unknown and unpredictable future. (Koikari 2020, 56)

In conclusion, although there are undoubtedly strong gender implications in Koikari’s observation, there are also ethical and political implications related to the problem of food consumption and its role with respect to the wide range of meaning-making activities and discursive dynamics triggered by “disasters of the heart and soul” (*kokoro no shinsai*) in post-Fukushima Japan. As we have seen, *washoku* is a particularly rich medium for ethical orientations because it encapsulates tensions and contradictions in the management of the contemporary Japanese culinary heritage, and nostalgia further amplifies its cultural and symbolic value. As Plester has observed, “food becomes self and when we take food into the body we take in the world” (2014, 5). This is especially true in the case of *washoku*: its power lies in its direct embodiment of use value, which incessantly redefines new cultural horizons and socio-economic tensions, thus continuing to constitute a not-so-obvious interdisciplinary arena of inquiry.