

Unmaking Japanese Food: Washoku and Intangible Heritage Designation

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Abstract: “Washoku” (literally, “Japanese food”) was inscribed into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in December 2013, three years after the same designation was given to French, Mexican, and Mediterranean cuisines. One major criterion for inclusion into UNESCO’s Representative List, and a prime reason for the List itself, is cultural diversity: Inscribed heritage makes for a diverse cultural community that the world is obligated to recognise and protect. Although the cultural diversity among the world’s cuisines is inherent and self-evident, UNESCO had seen it fit to include national food traditions among the categories of official intangible heritage; Japanese food is the latest to be so designated. The paper is an examination of the application process that led to the inscription of “Washoku, the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” into UNESCO’s Representative List for intangible heritage. It identifies and analyses the major developments in the Japanese government’s application, primarily through the deliberations of the official committee tasked with completing the formal nomination dossier for submission to UNESCO. Data is collated from official documents, including minutes of committee meetings and field notes, with references also made to related research. While the ostensible intention for the inscription of “washoku” as intangible heritage was the preservation and protection of Japanese food culture, it was mostly motivated by political considerations that resulted in the creation of an image of Japanese culinary tradition that does not convincingly reflect cultural diversity in food, but instead hews to a standardised model of food heritage based particularly on official French food discourse. Japanese food’s inclusion into the intangible heritage designation system has ironically undermined the role it plays in contributing to food and cultural diversity in the world, and highlights problems that do not bode well for the marriage of food and official intangible heritage designation in general.

Keywords: Japanese Food, Washoku, Intangible Heritage

Introduction

In December 2013, Japan formally joined the ranks of Mexico, France, and several Mediterranean countries in having its national cuisine inscribed in the intangible heritage list of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Officially titled Washoku,¹ the “traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year,” Japanese food is now formally recognised in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.² It has for company “Traditional Mexican cuisine” (Mexico, inscribed in 2010), the “Gastronomic meal of the French” (France, 2010), and the “Mediterranean diet” (Spain, Greece, Italy, and Morocco, 2010, with Cyprus, Croatia, and Portugal added in 2013), as well as food and drink traditions such as South Korea’s “Kimjang, making and sharing kimchi in the Republic of Korea” (2013) and Turkey’s “Ceremonial Keşçek tradition” (2010) and “Turkish coffee culture and tradition” (2013).

Food and drink traditions, including national cuisines, were initially excluded from UNESCO’s intangible heritage designation system. In a 2008 report on food traditions’ potential for inscription, a UNESCO official was quoted as saying that “there is no category at UNESCO for gastronomy...I am afraid that the presentation of a dossier on gastronomy will not go any further” (Sciolino 2008). A mere six years after this declaration, however, the list for food and drink heritage is getting crowded. In 2013 alone, with Georgia’s “Ancient Georgian traditional

¹ *Wa*=Japanese, *shoku*=food; literally, “Japanese food.” In this paper, “Washoku” (with a capital W) refers to the official name of the intangible heritage under UNESCO, while “*washoku*” (in small letters, italicised) refers to Japanese food in general, as the term is commonly used in Japan.

² The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Below, Representative List) is a formal registry of the world’s cultural practices, customs, and traditions, “those intangible heritage elements that help demonstrate the diversity of this heritage and raise awareness about its importance” (UNESCO 2014). The Representative List was officially launched in 2003 and is considered a counterpart to UNESCO’s own registry for “tangible” cultural heritage, the World Heritage list.

Qvevri wine-making method” also approved for listing, at least five of the 25 newly inscribed elements in the Representative List represented a national food or drink tradition (UNESCO 2014). Food and drink heritage is now a legitimate category of intangible heritage under the UNESCO system.

What motivation underlies the desire for nations to inscribe their cuisines as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under UNESCO? What effects does the inscription process have on the national cuisine? This paper considers the case of *washoku*, and looks into the nomination process that led to its eventual inscription as intangible heritage. More specifically, the paper describes and analyses the deliberations of the “Exploratory Committee for the Registration of Japanese Food Culture as World Intangible Cultural Heritage” [*Nihon shokubunka no sekai mukei isan tōroku ni muketa kentōkai*] (Below, Exploratory Committee), the group of experts tasked by the Japanese government to (re)create Japanese food tradition into a category suitable for heritage nomination to UNESCO, as well as complete the official dossier—the formal documents required for the application—for the purpose.³ Through a discussion and analysis of Japan’s nomination, this paper aims to provide a critical view of food heritage within the context of UNESCO intangible heritage listing, and considers the effects of the inscription process.

Background

Although food has been considered as cultural heritage in scholarly work within the past two decades, a great majority of these studies have looked at food heritage as a tourism and community identity resource; prominent examples include Bessière (1998; 2013; etc.) among a significant number of studies found in major academic journals mostly on tourism studies. Works that discuss food as formally inscribed cultural heritage are still few and far between. A very recent and relevant example would be Tornatore (2012), which was an investigation of the political manoeuvring behind the successful inscription of the “Gastronomic meal of the French” in light of France’s stance on the intangible heritage listing system. Earlier works would also include Cang (2009) on the problematic issues surrounding heritage inscription for food traditions, Medina (2007) which outlined the potential benefits of listing the Mediterranean diet, and Mazatán-Páramo (2006) on the potential effects of Mexican food’s listing on the country’s tourism. Although the formal inscription of food as intangible heritage by UNESCO has received considerable attention in news media, current interest in the scholarly community is largely latent and untapped.

In his study, Tornatore concluded that French food’s inscription demonstrated that France had become the “homeland of heritage itself” (2012, 363), as the country exerted dominance even over the intangible heritage designation process of UNESCO. As “the country of food and cookery par excellence” (2012, 342), France’s food heritage, that is, its stakeholders, practically dictated the terms for food’s inclusion into the Representative List. Of course, UNESCO was not the first context where French food tradition asserted its dominance. The exalted position of French food in the world’s culinary landscape has already been discussed elsewhere, notably in Ferguson (2001; 2004), which analysed, in detail, the “expansionary culinary discourse that relentlessly associates [good] food and France” (2001, 25). This perception had its roots in 18th-century France, developed within the country among the different social classes and later came to be held by many inside and particularly outside France, staying strong even today in the 21st century (2004). Ferguson called the dominating influence of French cuisine and tacit acceptance of such influence as a “perfect illustration of symbolic violence” (2001, 27) in reference to Bourdieu (1984), who used the term “symbolic violence” or “symbolic power” to signify the

³ The author joined all Exploratory Committee meetings as an observer and received copies of all the documents used in the meetings. Detailed minutes were made available by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) at their website (see MAFF 2014) (in Japanese only). In-text, the minutes are cited as “Minutes 1 (or 2/3/4, followed by page number).” All translations into English are by the author.

imposition of control by a dominating entity and the tacit or unconscious acceptance of such control by those so dominated.

Political manoeuvres by national entities within UNESCO's intangible heritage inscription system are hardly unexpected, especially considering that the Representative List itself was a product of UNESCO politics (Hafstein 2009). With the political play therefore as a given, this paper is primarily concerned with how such politics played out in the inscription process for one particular case of food heritage, that of Japanese food.

The application process for Japanese food's heritage inscription was launched at an official meeting held in July 2011, not too long after the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters that shocked Japan and the rest of the world in March of the same year. Although the application had been planned more than a year earlier (after France, Mexico, and the Mediterranean countries' successful applications), the intervening catastrophe was mentioned by government representatives and Exploratory Committee members as one major reason for the push for designation: Having Japanese food officially recognised as Intangible Heritage by UNESCO was seen as a way for the nation—particularly food producers and exporters—to recover from the disasters. In opening remarks that echoed the prevailing mood at the initial meeting, one government official said that “with the dearth of good news today, I am really happy that we are able to hold this exploratory committee meeting on the registration of Japanese food culture as World Intangible Heritage [sic]...and also show the world that Japan is a country with safe and secure food...as the recent nuclear accidents have caused great damage to the reputations of our food producers” (Minutes 1, 2–3).

In the composition of the Exploratory Committee, Japan made certain that all government ministries connected in some way to food production and consumption were represented: The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) hosted the talks, and it was joined by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Cultural Affairs Agency (Bunkacho)—the main channels to UNESCO—as well as representatives from the trade, tourism, health, and other ministries. Heads of national food, beverage and restaurant associations, top culinary schools and food research institutes, as well as academics, were also appointed to the Exploratory Committee.

Four main meetings were held (in July, August, September, and November) in which the primary topic of discussion centred on the actual content of Japan's application (i.e., the nomination dossier) for intangible heritage designation for its food. In other words, the Exploratory Committee was tasked, unwittingly perhaps, to create a formal definition of Japanese food heritage, and subsequently make it worthy of official UNESCO recognition.

Meeting One: Tentative Definitions for Japanese Food

After the introductions and opening speeches, government representatives introduced UNESCO's intangible heritage designation system and the three culinary traditions (French, Mexican, and Mediterranean) that had recently been recognised under it. The “Gastronomic meal of the French,” however, was explained in greater detail than the others, with the French government's approved nomination form being the only one translated into Japanese from the English. At the same time, South Korea's then pending application for the “Royal cuisine of Joseon Dynasty” for intangible heritage designation was also introduced, which prompted one committee member to comment that “if South Korean cuisine was recognized as a world cuisine,” it would “make the Japanese people even sadder” especially now that “South Korean cuisine is gaining ground against Japanese cuisine in Europe” (Minutes 1, 17).

Government representatives then produced and explained a rough draft for the nomination form. Tentatively titled “Japanese food culture [*Nihon shoku bunka*],” the application proposed a definition that delineated the following two major characteristics of Japanese food heritage:

1. It is based on the bounty of nature and puts an emphasis on ingredients' natural taste and seasonality. Although the traditional diet is centred around rice as the basic food, Japanese food culture makes use of more than 1,500 varieties of other ingredients.
2. Aside from being a daily necessity, food in Japan is also imbued with sacred functions, as many kinds of food perform important roles in traditional festivals, rituals and other special occasions.

Different committee members gave comments on this rough draft. Several representatives from the food and beverage associations, such as those for sushi and saké, proposed that their food and drink products be specifically mentioned in the main text of the nomination form. Other members also suggested incorporating descriptions about the unique aesthetics and health benefits of Japanese food into the formal definition. Not a few expressed concerns about the enormity of the task that lay ahead, agreeing to one member's comment that "the definition of Japanese food is not only obscure, as mentioned...but it is non-existent. Japanese food [as a system] encompasses a wide range" (Minutes 1, 23).⁴

Several suggestions were then made to narrow the scope and focus on one particular culinary tradition or system that could represent Japanese food culture. There was consensus that traditional Japanese food, indefinable as the concept may be, has already been losing favor even among the Japanese themselves who increasingly consume "Western" diets. The application for intangible heritage designation will be a prompt for preservation of the traditional diet and a means to stem its diminishing appeal, it was noted.

Meeting Two: *Kaiseki* as Representative Japanese Food

The application draft was revised on feedback from the first meeting and was given a new and more specific, if not unwieldy, title: "Unique and distinctive traditional Japanese cuisine centred on *kaiseki*."⁵ In the new draft, the initial two main characteristics of Japanese food that were introduced in the initial meeting evolved into four elements:

1. The use of a wide variety of abundant and seasonal ingredients,
2. A nutritionally balanced structure,
3. Distinct roles played by umami and fermented foodstuffs, and
4. Links to rituals and annual celebrations, as well as cultural expressions such as *mottainai* [wasteful] and *itadakimasu* [literally, I will receive].⁶

Kaiseki was considered the epitome as well as the basis of the idea of Japanese cuisine, and was touted as a prime example of Japanese food heritage. The focus on *kaiseki* was actually influenced by a proposal from the Kyoto prefectural government. Kyoto was the only local government entity represented in the Exploratory Committee, the place of honour mainly due to it being the first among local governments to have its culinary tradition (i.e., *kaiseki*, said to have originated and developed in Kyoto) officially declared as "Intangible Cultural Property" of the

⁴ The inscrutability and wide range covered by the concept of "Japanese food" was pointedly illustrated in some of the distributed materials. For example, one pamphlet from the MAFF titled "Ten fundamental Japanese dishes and drinks" contained a mishmash of food categories: Specific dishes such as "miso soup" and "tempura" were not differentiated from the broader food categories and were listed alongside "fruits," "Japanese tea and sweets," and "noodles."

⁵ The traditional Japanese *kaiseki* cuisine will require another lengthy paper to discuss. For present purposes, it is defined as an elaborate and aesthetically pleasing meal of seasonal dishes cooked in different ways and served in separate courses, a dining style that is derived from the formal meals served at tea gatherings in the Way of Tea (i.e., "tea ceremony") tradition.

⁶ *Mottainai* is originally a Buddhist term that is now a common expression in the Japanese language, used to express disappointment or regret especially towards an object (or person) that ends up not serving its actual purpose, for instance, when food is left uneaten and disposed. *Itadakimasu* is a cultural expression that is said before the start of a meal.

prefecture. Kyoto local government representatives had submitted their own draft proposal to the Exploratory Committee, which contained details on the structural concept of *kaiseki*, its identification with the above four elements of traditional Japanese cuisine, as well as its influence on other famous regional cuisines, including daily, home-cooked meals. It was a detailed proposal that the Exploratory Committee subsequently approved for use as a main reference text for the nomination dossier, with suggested revisions.

The meeting concluded with an announcement by the MAFF concerning a hastily planned and tightly scheduled “field investigation” to be conducted in France, for meetings with agricultural and cultural affairs representatives and other government officials, including food and restaurant association groups. Composed of ministry officials and some members of the Exploratory Committee, the Japanese delegation’s main purpose was to “inquire into the process that led to [French cuisine’s successful] registration, the difficulties [the French side] encountered, the points to be emphasised in the dossier, and other matters” (Minutes 2, 33).

Meeting Three: The French Influence

At this third session, much time was allotted for reports on the meetings in France. There was relief, coupled with a sense of pride, that the Japanese draft nomination elicited positive comments from their French counterparts. The use of *kaiseki* as the ultimate example of Japanese cuisine was met with approval, with advice from the French that it only needed to be defined more concretely to create a clearer picture of Japanese food culture. The four identifying characteristics of Japanese food (seasonality, nutritional balance, umami, and links to rituals and cultural traditions) as described in the proposed nomination were also considered important in building the case for Japan. All in all, the meetings in France were deemed fruitful, with the following three pieces of advice from the French that were deemed critical concerning the content of the nomination:

1. That the food must be described as an important tradition for the Japanese,
2. That *kaiseki* and its related forms are described as practices that are not limited to an elite group but are part of common food tradition and exists as a generally recognised cultural form, and
3. That no mention must be made of the commercialisation of food.

Although the Exploratory Committee was getting close to formalising the final draft of the nomination, there was concern that support from the general public was still insufficient with regard to Japan’s application to UNESCO. Since France did advise that Japanese food had to be clearly described as an important tradition for the Japanese, weak support for the nomination might undo its application, especially since UNESCO’s evaluation process was perceived to have become stricter in recent years. Other members did agree that there was still time to enlarge the network of food and beverage associations, schools, and other organizations to endorse their support for the cause.

Commenting on UNESCO’s evaluation process, one government representative previously involved in other nominations said that while indeed UNESCO had tightened its application procedures by limiting the number of nominations from each member country and forming expert committees to better oversee the process, the committees did not include food experts. In other words, the committees would most likely judge Japanese food heritage more on its merits as heritage rather than as food per se, and look more closely at its status as a cultural form in Japan. Under the circumstances, Japanese food stood a good chance for inscription.

It was then mentioned that for the same reasons, the South Korean application for its royal cuisine, then under evaluation by UNESCO, was a shoo-in for intangible heritage listing, not only because it was a distinct cultural form, but also because the nomination enjoyed public

support among both young and old who were said to also have general knowledge about this form of cuisine. The Japanese public could emulate the South Korean case with regard to its support for the nomination of its own traditional food as represented by *kaiseki*.

Meeting Four: Complete Overhaul and the Rise of *Washoku*

This final scheduled session saw a dramatic development. All the work done, including the conclusions drawn at and around the previous meetings would be overturned, all because of an unexpected turn of events. A few days prior to this fourth meeting in Tokyo, UNESCO held its Sixth Session of the Intergovernmental Meeting for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Bali, Indonesia, during which decisions were made on the member countries' nominations for that year (2011). Contrary to most expectations, South Korea's "Royal cuisine of the Joseon dynasty" was not inscribed into the intangible heritage list: It was "referred" back to the South Korean government, which in the language of UNESCO meant that although the nomination was not rejected outright, it was deemed unsuitable for intangible heritage listing.

UNESCO's decision was described in this final meeting of the Exploratory Committee as a "shocking event" (Minutes 4, 7), as they did expect success for South Korea. With the unexpected results complicating Japan's nomination plans, the discussions in this last meeting centred on refining, and if necessary revising altogether, Japan's draft nomination to make it pass UNESCO's scrutiny. South Korea's experience would be a major point of reference: Japan was determined not to make the same mistakes.

The discussions thus focused on the reasons for the non-inscription, with the main conclusion being that South Korea's royal cuisine was an "elite" cultural form that was not a common social practice: Joseon court cuisine as a tradition was "limited in scope, [an example of] high culture that most likely drew UNESCO to question its suitability as World Intangible Heritage [sic]" (Minutes 4, 8). This was a setback for *kaiseki* cuisine, which until this time had been brought forward as the ultimate example of Japanese food heritage, around which the formal definition of Japanese food was composed for the nomination dossier. Indeed, *kaiseki* in Japan today suffers from the same "high culture" image as Joseon court cuisine, as it remains a meal that is inaccessible for most Japanese and can only be had in the most expensive "traditional" Japanese restaurants.

Japan's draft application had to change, beginning with the title for the nomination form that unfortunately included the word *kaiseki*. On a suggestion from the committee chair, approval was given for the use of the umbrella term *washoku*. As a term used to distinguish local cuisine from "Western" food [*yōshoku*], *washoku* was seen to possess "cachet as a word to express traditional food culture" (Minutes 4, 11). It was subsequently pointed out that using an "actual word in the native language is a [good] technique" (Minutes 4, 12) in nominating a cultural tradition for inscription in UNESCO's intangible heritage list, since the native term contained cultural nuances that would appeal to UNESCO.

The term *kaiseki*, however, would have to be rescinded and be replaced with *washoku*. Although the four identifying characteristics of Japanese food culture that were formulated in the early stages would be retained in the formal definition, emphasis would be placed on the fact of Japanese food's close links to annual and traditional events. This link to tradition was previously noted by French officials at the recent "field investigation" as particularly characteristic of Japanese food. Since the same link was also made by the French for the "Gastronomic meal of the French" in their own successful nomination, the Exploratory Committee then decided to "revise their nomination form after the French model" (Minutes 4, 16). The result was Japan making the case for "Washoku, Traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese" in its final nomination form, with the following final and formal description of the cultural tradition:

Washoku is a social practice based on a set of skills, knowledge, practice, and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation, and consumption of food. It is associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature that is closely related to the sustainable use of natural resources. The basic knowledge and the social and cultural characteristics associated with Washoku are typically seen during New Year celebrations...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. Grassroots groups, schoolteachers, and cooking instructors also play a role in transmitting the knowledge and skills by means of formal and non-formal education or through practice. (UNESCO 2014)

Japan's gambit worked. At UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage session in December 2013 in Baku, Azerbaijan, "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year" was formally inscribed into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Discussion

Anyone who has lived in or visited Japan for some period of time would not fail to notice the great attention paid to the topic of food in many forms of media. At any given time, Japanese print newspapers and magazines, TV programs, and internet news outlets are inundated with features on food and drink on an endless variety of topic angles, from creation and production, to preparation, appreciation, and consumption.

The topic of heritage, especially "World Heritage," is also popular in Japan. This is evident, too, from extensive coverage in all forms of media. Developments concerning Japanese nominations and inscriptions into UNESCO's World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage lists are especially noted and successful UNESCO inscriptions inevitably become headline news.

For Japan, then, the marriage of food and heritage inscription facilitated by developments in UNESCO's system was therefore too much to resist. The application to include Japanese food into the Representative List was all but inevitable, especially after France, Mexico, and some Mediterranean countries succeeded in having their own food traditions so inscribed. And when South Korea, Japan's perennial rival in political, economic, and cultural matters, preempted its neighbour in the nomination of its royal cuisine from the Joseon dynasty, Japan was prompted to act fast.

The ostensible reason given for Japan's application was the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the resulting disasters: To receive UNESCO's recognition for Japanese food was a means to raise the battered nation's hopes, as the members of the Exploratory Committee mentioned constantly. However, equally frequent mention of South Korea's nomination and the rising status and image of Korean food in the arena of world cuisine throughout all the Exploratory Committee meetings indicated that the South Korean nomination was a big motivator for Japan. It was this sense of rivalry, and perhaps unease, that its neighbour may have outrun it on the race toward food heritage designation that became a major driving force for the Japanese application, the recent tsunami and nuclear disasters notwithstanding.

Before the application for Washoku, Japan had at least 13 other cultural traditions and rituals in a pending list of candidates for UNESCO nomination (Bunkacho 2014). All were, and still are, designated important cultural properties under Japan's own system for cultural heritage designation. Washoku, however, was not part of this pending list: It had not previously been recognised, much less designated, as heritage in any of the existing categories for official cultural properties in Japan.⁷

⁷ Washoku has since been officially designated, albeit belatedly, in 2012, as an intangible cultural property under the Japanese government's list of cultural properties.

As for the 21 Japanese cultural practices already inscribed in UNESCO's intangible heritage list, all had been officially designated as important cultural properties (intangible, folk-cultural or otherwise) before they were nominated for UNESCO inscription. Moreover, each of these 21 cultural practices represented a specific art form or tradition identified with a specific region (such as the Gion Festival in Kyoto) or a particular group of performers (like the Noh theatre or the Bunraku puppet tradition). Washoku was clearly an exception, since it was not an officially designated cultural property when it was initially considered for nomination, and neither was it identified with a particular region or group of practitioners.

Despite these limitations, however, Japanese food was able to "jump the line" and be nominated ahead of other nationally designated cultural traditions on the pending list of nominations for inscription. Being a previously unrecognised cultural property, it thus had to be formally delineated and defined, if not newly created, for which the Exploratory Committee was created in turn.

The Exploratory Committee accomplished their mission and produced a definition of Japanese food heritage that led to successful inscription. However, as seen above, the definition was radically revised during the last stages of the deliberations, from a culturally specific description of Japanese food tradition to a more generic definition that incorporates much of the terminology in UNESCO's official definition of intangible heritage. Indeed, Japanese food's definition is very similar to the official definition of "Gastronomic meal of the French," which also utilises much UNESCO terminology, to wit:

The gastronomic meal of the French is a customary social practice for celebrating important moments in the lives of individuals and groups, such as births, weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, achievements and reunions. It is a festive meal bringing people together for an occasion to enjoy the art of good eating and drinking. The gastronomic meal emphasizes togetherness, the pleasure of taste, and the balance between human beings and the products of nature... Individuals called gastronomes who possess deep knowledge of the tradition and preserve its memory watch over the living practice of the rites, thus contributing to their oral and/or written transmission, in particular to younger generations. The gastronomic meal draws circles of family and friends closer together and, more generally, strengthens social ties. (UNESCO 2014)

For either country's definition, if the few culturally specific terms (e.g., "gastronomes" in the French) are omitted and the terms "Washoku" and "gastronomic meal of the French" interchanged, one would have an approximate, if not perfectly acceptable, description of each other's food. In UNESCO's Representative List at least, French and Japanese culinary traditions have become each other's mirror, and the diversity these two contrasting food cultures represent is hardly evident.

Japan initially had a great opportunity to proclaim the distinctiveness and creativity of its culinary tradition during the process of defining *washoku* for UNESCO. Although defining *washoku* or the concept of "Japanese food" would not have been easy, the Exploratory Committee could have done better than hewing to the French example. There had already been several attempts at definition of Japanese food heritage by food writers and researchers on the subject (e.g., Andoh 2005; Harada 2005) before Japan embarked on its inscription quest. Some researchers were even members or advisers in the Exploratory Committee.

The characteristic elements of Japanese food tradition were clearly delineated by the Exploratory Committee in the initial stages. The use of *kaiseki* to illustrate Japanese food tradition was especially an inspired move: After all, *kaiseki* is the ultimate form of "culinary Japaneseness" that aims for the ideal of "aesthetic harmony between the food, the vessel, the setting and the season" (Cwiertka 2006, 112). It may represent the essence of Japanese food heritage, as it is "a gastronomic meditation on traditional aesthetics and, indeed, the very meaning of Japanese-ness" (Robinson 2011, 380). In addition, *kaiseki* has been—to borrow

UNESCO's own terminology in defining intangible heritage—"transmitted from generation to generation, and is constantly recreated by groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history" (UNESCO 2014). Despite these qualifications, *kaiseki* had to be abandoned in light of the fate that befell South Korea's Joseon Dynasty cuisine.

The Exploratory Committee had concluded that the elitism angle caused the downfall of Joseon's royal cuisine's bid for inscription. However, a review of the discussion on South Korea's nomination that was held at UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee meeting in Bali shows that the actual causes were more complicated. In the first place, the court cuisine of the Joseon dynasty was found to be a "revived" tradition, reconstructed in the late 20th century decades after the dynasty's end in 1897. It thus did not meet UNESCO's criteria for the heritage to have been transmitted from generation to generation and recreated in response to the environment, history, and so on, accordingly. UNESCO also found the royal cuisine to be limited in scope, although not because it had become a form of "high culture" as the Exploratory Committee in Japan surmised, but because it was not a regular and longstanding cultural practice per se, and neither was it generally recognised as such. The Exploratory Committee wrongly concluded that such forms of "high culture" did not qualify for heritage listing; it was lost to them that not a few of the Japanese cultural forms already inscribed on the Representative List of intangible heritage are elite cultural practices that represent "high culture" in contemporary Japan, such as the Noh theatre and Gagaku music.

The perception of elite cultural forms as not properly belonging to the intangible heritage system was an idea reinforced during consultations held by the Japanese with their French counterparts. This perception eventually killed *kaiseki*'s chance to represent Japanese food heritage. Instead, the food for New Year's celebrations was used as the main example, to better emphasise the link between food and other ritual or festive traditions as the French did with their "gastronomic meal." Which begs the question: Where in the world do people not eat special or traditional food during New Year's celebrations?

Notwithstanding its own rich food heritage, Japan could only submit to the French influence, thereby reinforcing the status of France as the standard to emulate on matters pertaining to food. Together with France's role as the "homeland of heritage," the Japanese experience attested to France's position as the *homeland of food heritage*, a tacit acknowledgment that has worked its way into the intangible heritage inscription process of UNESCO. This perceived authority—indeed, symbolic violence—of French food heritage was present throughout the entire application process for Japanese food. So much so that as a result, *washoku* ended up becoming a generic, watered-down version of its originally rich and culturally unique form.

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