



Washoku Joins UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List

The Crisis of Washoku, and Our Commitment to the Future

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Washoku Receives Official Recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage

I breathed a huge sigh of relief late in the evening of December 4, 2013, when I heard that the listing for *washoku* was finally approved. It was two and a half years after the Investigative Commission started preparatory work for the nomination in July 2011, and the result of roughly a year and a half of evaluation processes since the Japanese government submitted the nomination to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in March 2012. During the waiting period, there were some suggestions that our proposal might not be adopted, so I felt immensely relieved when we heard in the end of October 2013 that the addition of washoku on the representative list was recommended unconditionally by the evaluation body. Roughly one month later, the registration of washoku was formally approved by the intergovernmental committee of representatives from the 24 states who were party to the convention in Azerbaijan (at 6:56 p.m. local time).

The nomination document must be submitted in English. As one of the authors of the original Japanese text, I have to admit the contents were extremely difficult to understand. First, the spaces provided to describe the reasons for the proposal and others were limited to 250 words each, making it difficult to provide a solid explanation. In particular, the respect for nature that we cited as a specific feature of washoku would be difficult to explain even with 10 times the number of words that were allowed. As a result, the text was hard to understand.

Japan's proposal was characterized by the assertion that washoku is a dietary culture borne by all Japanese people as a social practice. Unlike *Keşkek* of Turkey (wheat and meat stew served on ceremonial occasions) and the traditional cuisine of Mexico (ancient cuisine that mainly uses beans and corn), what we proposed as washoku is not a specific cuisine or dish, but it covers all the following: the form of our daily home meals (consisting of rice, soup, side dishes and pickles), dietary customs for annual events, festivals and ceremonial occasions that strengthen the bonds among people in local communities (such as *zoni* and *osechi* dishes), and local specialty dishes. A successfully listed precedent of this type is the gastronomic meal of the French, for which we heard that there was some argument over whether it agreed with the criteria of UNESCO's convention. Although it was not an easy path, the Investigative Commission decided that Japan should take a similar approach to the French. We racked our brains over how the nomination should be written. Finally, we decided to emphasize the customs



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A ceremony to commemorate the registration of washoku on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List was cohosted by the National Assembly on the Preservation and Continuation of Washoku Culture and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan (MAFF).

associated with the New Year, including *zoni* (*mochi* rice cakes boiled in vegetable soup) and *osechi* dishes as examples, assuming that a dietary culture based around New Year's celebrations would be more easily understood. Yet, the primary framework of the registered heritage is the entirety of traditional Japanese dietary culture as something that is wholesome and bonds family and community members together, based on the spirit of the Japanese respect for nature with an awareness that our diet depends on the gifts of nature and on the cultural elements supporting our meal.



A display of fat sushi rolls called *futomaki*, a traditional local specialty passed on through generations of farmers in Chiba Prefecture and prepared only on special ceremonial occasions.

The Definition of Washoku, and the Crisis of Washoku

As one of the persons responsible for the project, I was showered with questions after the registration. Most of these questions were aimed at how exactly washoku was defined. In my opinion, categorizing individual dishes (e.g., curry and rice, pork cutlets, and hamburger steaks), whether they are washoku or not, is not important to washoku culture. As mentioned before, as long as the basic form of the meal revolves around rice, soup, side dishes and pickles, it does not matter whether the side dishes are of foreign origin. Yet, if we must discuss details, I would rather not include *okonomi-yaki* (a pancake containing a variety of vegetables, seafoods and meats) or *tako-yaki* (grilled bite-size balls of batter with octopus as the main ingredient) in washoku. It is also somewhat questionable if *yakiniku* (grilled meat), which was recently introduced to our diet, can be included in the category of "traditional." What matters most, however, is not the definition of each individual dish, but the practice of eating foods in washoku style. Let's look at ingredients that support washoku. The natural environment of Japan is a cornucopia of foods. The country is surrounded by seas where warm and

cold currents converge. The mountains and villages receive abundant rainfall that provides clean and fresh water. Roughly 4000 varieties of fish, including freshwater fish, live in and around Japan. Shellfish and sea vegetables abound near the shores. As epitomized by rice, the blessings of nature harvested in the immediate environment of the Japanese constitute the basis of washoku. Today, however, Japan's self-sufficiency with regard to food supply is below 40%. The fact that Japanese people are not eating foods from Japan is nothing short of a crisis for washoku. It was reported by the media that nearly 14% of Japanese people surveyed said that there was no need to increase the country's self-sufficiency, as foods should be imported from overseas if they are cheaper. This figure shocked me. The preservation and continuation of washoku in tandem with increasing food self-sufficiency is also a movement to protect Japan's diverse natural environment.

Another concern is that 8 million tons of food are thrown away each year. Why do Japanese people waste so much food? It could be because our relationship with food has been weakened. If you grow vegetables in your home garden, and harvest more eggplants than you can use, do you discard them? As the fruits of a crop you have tended with much effort, you will naturally give them to your friends and neighbors, hoping they won't go to waste. Because of your strong relationship with the food you have harvested, you don't want to waste it. Contrast this with foods of unknown origin, where consumers have little idea where they came from or how they were produced. These consumables tend to be thrown away easily when the "best-before" dates have passed. This has resulted in a huge volume of discarded foods. The spirit of "*mottainai*," where we value and try not to waste food obtained in the immediate environment, is at the very foundation of washoku.



The basic form of washoku, called *ichi-ju san-sai*, consists of rice, soup, three different side dishes and pickles.

Passing On Umami, the Essential Element of Washoku Cuisine, to Future Generations

During washoku meals, Japanese people eat rice and side dishes together to enjoy their combined taste. Using sashimi as an example, filleted fresh fish is cleanly sliced using a long, single-beveled Japanese knife, and then served on a plate. The preparation does

not involve any of what is generally considered cooking, such as boiling or grilling, but requires a knife mastery specific to Japanese culinary arts. The main point is to make the most of the natural flavor and texture of the fish itself. When we eat it, we lightly dip it in soy sauce, to which we add *wasabi* (Japanese horse radish), to savor the flavor and texture derived from all these meeting together in the mouth. By adding plain rice to these, our appetite is enhanced. I stress this seemingly obvious point for a reason. Recently, children tend to eat plate by plate, finishing all foods on one plate and then moving on to the next. Traditionally, Japanese were taught in childhood that they should have a morsel of rice after each bite of a side dish, have another morsel of rice after a sip of soup, and avoid eating two bites of side dishes in a row. In other words, washoku meal elements are composed so that relatively plain-tasting rice and a rather stronger tasting side dish can be fully enjoyed when eaten together. This method of eating also allows us to savor the taste and texture of each ingredient, and relates to the healthy characteristics of washoku, with a good balance of proteins, fats and carbohydrates.

In terms of taste, one of most essential elements in washoku would be the fifth taste, called umami. This Japanese term is finally becoming an international word. Fermented condiments that are rich in umami support the savory aspects of washoku. I mentioned earlier that one important point of washoku is to make the most of the flavors of the ingredients themselves. In general, chefs in Japanese cuisine tend to avoid working with too many ingredients. What makes this possible is the existence of *miso* (fermented soybean paste) and soy sauce, both produced through painstakingly elaborate processes. Umami is at the core of Japanese cuisine. Recently, it has been getting more difficult to find umami being effectively used in home cooking. As an effort to instill true umami, members of the Japanese Culinary Academy (Yoshihiro Murata, Chairman) visit municipal elementary schools in Kyoto to let the school children experience dashi stock made with good *kombu* kelp and *katsuobushi* (dried skipjack tuna) shavings. Actually seeing children unanimously say how delicious the food was when they ate authentic dashi made by expert chefs reaffirmed the necessity of dietary education.

Registration on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List Is the First Step to Preservation of Washoku Culture

The registration of washoku by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage is truly heartwarming, and something that we hope will spark greater interest in Japanese foods in other countries. However, the most

important thing is to use this opportunity to help Japanese themselves take more pride in washoku, and to seriously consider passing washoku on to future generations. Among young families, washoku is now a kind of endangered tradition. They tend to stay away from washoku, citing such reasons as the work and time needed to prepare it, the high cost, and its unpopularity among children. Even dishes for traditional annual events are rarely prepared in these homes. What is worse is that mealtimes have been curtailed to the extent that the meals have become just a way to supply quick nutrition. On the other hand, there is booming interest in gourmet foods. People are enthusiastic about fad foods, and stand in long queues to dine in good restaurants. Home-cooked meals that fill the gap between these two extremes are important, and the inclusion of washoku in the intangible cultural heritage list will become the starting point for action to preserve them.



Nihon Zenkoku Kodomo Kyodo Ryori Summit (All Japan Children's Summit on Local Specialty Dishes) was held on Washoku Day (November 24th), hosted by the MAFF, and co-hosted by the Yomiuri Shimbun, NHK International, the National Assembly on the Preservation and Continuation of Washoku Culture, and the Japanese Culinary Academy.

We have designated November 24th of every year as "Washoku no Hi (Washoku Day). As the parent organization that promotes these movements, we established the National Assembly on the Preservation and Continuation of Washoku Culture in July 2013. For UNESCO's approval, it was required that the national government of Japan and grassroots groups commit to measures to protect the heritage of washoku. In fact, Japan's nomination document included the following measures: 1) the provision of local dishes in school lunches and at local community events, 2) the implementation of diverse dietary education activities by means such as parent-child classes, and 3) the establishment of symposiums on Japan's dietary culture. Through these activities, we hope to spread and pass on the splendors of washoku once again. These actions are not merely about the preservation of washoku culture, but are integral to the protection of the environment in Japan and the rediscovery of the identity of the Japanese people.