

# **The Global Struggle over Japanese Cuisine**

The Emotional Politics of Owning  
*Washoku*

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Japanese cuisine has been steadily spreading across all corners of the world. What was once considered to be exotic is now found in local supermarkets globally. The significance of Japanese cuisine, or *washoku*, is evident through its recognition as an intangible cultural heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This inscription signifies not only the cultural value but also the economic and political importance of Japanese cuisine for the Japanese. However, the Japanese cuisine that is served abroad may have little to no resemblance that the Japanese have an emotional reaction towards this. This paper looks at the development of emotional responses by the Japanese towards the Japanese cuisine that is served abroad, especially in the West. It seeks to highlight the factors between the 1960s and 2010s that led to a build-up in various sorts of emotions. Analysis of newspaper articles reveals that strong opinions towards *washoku* abroad appear when dishes become localized, and the foreign influence increases. Emotions further intensify when non-Japanese Asians begin to have a dominant role in the development of *washoku* abroad. This attitude is an extension of the “us vs. them” mentality creating an “other,” which is to be differentiated from “us, the Japanese.” The globalization of *washoku* diminishes the importance placed on authenticity leading the Japanese to lose ownership of *washoku*. The culmination of these emotional responses is evident in the 2013 inscription of *washoku* as an intangible cultural heritage. This loss causes the Japanese government, which wants to capitalize on the *washoku* boom, to create its own narrative. The struggle exists between this attitude by the Japanese government and the public who no longer echoes such controlling views. The attachment to a particular type of *washoku* by certain people hinders the further spread of Japanese cuisine. Therefore, the struggle for further appreciation of Japanese cuisine worldwide can only be fulfilled with less attachment towards controlling *washoku* and letting go of the strong “us vs. them” mentality.