

Book Review: Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Yasuhara Miho (2020) *Branding Japanese food: From meibutsu to washoku* University of Hawai'i Press (Honolulu)

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Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Yasuhara Miho's *Branding Japanese Food: From Meibutsu to Washoku* provides a historical analysis of the role of food as a tool of place-branding in Japan. The two authors are recognized specialists of Japan's food culture. Cwiertka is chair of Modern Japan studies at Leiden University, the Netherlands, and Yasuhara is an independent scholar who has published on a variety of topics within Japanese culinary history. The idea for this book was born in 2014, a year after the inscription of "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year" on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity. Driven by a feeling of irritation towards this inscription and frustration towards the lack of any critical voice among Japanese scholars, the two authors decided to exhibit the inaccuracy of *washoku* (Japanese food) as it was defined in the UNESCO nomination in a Japanese-language book titled *Himerareta washokushi* (The hidden history of *washoku*) in 2016. As they admit, the book "generated little publicity and never became a best-seller" (p. xii). The idea for an English version came up soon later. However, the present English version is not a simple translation of their previous work. In *Branding Japanese Food*, Cwiertka and Yasuhara have expanded their focus from *washoku* to a historical analysis of the branding of Japanese food, offering to the reader a full immersion in the history of tourism in early modern Japan. The authors acutely argue that the concept of *washoku* is a modern construct and its creation is a contemporary continuation of long-standing business practices that have their roots in the premodern period, and whose aim was to fabricate specific associations between food products and locations. In particular, they draw historical parallels between the manipulation of historical facts in the case of *washoku* and the practices of place branding that occurred in Edo-period Japan (1603-1867), such as the utilization of gastronomic *meibutsu* (famous products) as the iconic markers of touristic attractions and the similar strategies of the branding of edible *omiyage* (souvenir from a trip).

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The book consists of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. In the introduction, they set out the scope and the objective of their investigation and present an examination of the concept of “branding” as a theoretical tool of analysis. Building on the studies of David Wengrow (2008), who showed how commodity branding is not a distinctive feature of the modern global economy but “has been a long-term feature of human cultural development” (p. 3), Cwiertka and Yasuhara situate the process of *washoku* in a historical context by juxtaposing modern and contemporary branding practices in Japan with their early modern counterparts. Three aspects of branding are particularly relevant to their analysis: the symbolic importance of brands, the growing aestheticization of material objects (e.g., packaging), and the role of myths in branding strategies. They argue that food has assumed a prominent role in the strategy of nation-branding, which is the deployment of marketing communication techniques to create and promote a nation’s image (p. 6). The promotion of a country’s image abroad through food and national culinary culture is defined as “gastrodiplomacy” (p. 7). According to them, the inscription of *washoku* in the UNESCO ICH list is an example of the exploitation of the UNESCO status for commercial and gastrodiplomatic purposes.

In Chapter 1, the authors start by debunking some common myths and misperceptions about *washoku*, namely the idea of rice as the main staple food in Japanese diet and the *ichijū sansai* (“one soup-three side dishes”) structure of a common Japanese meal. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, in her seminal book *Rice as self: Japanese identities through time*, has shown that, since World War II, there have been basically two positions among the scholars regarding the issue of rice as the main staple food in Japanese diet. One is defined as the *inasaku bunka* (rice culture school), that sustains that rice has been the main staple food for all Japanese since ancient times, and the other one is the *zakkoku bunka* (miscellaneous grains school), that claims that rice as a staple food was confined to a small segment of the population, primarily the élite, whereas most of the population was eating miscellaneous grains (Ohnuki, 1993, pp. 30-36). Cwiertka and Yasuhara can be considered representatives of the latter current and they provide a map of white rice consumption in the 1920s, which indicates that there were only few places where rice was a daily staple (p. 17). They also reject the claim that *ichijū sansai* is a traditional feature of the Japanese daily diet. Through a meticulous analysis of diaries, notebooks, nutritional surveys, menus from banquets and restaurants, and other sources, they provide details of Japanese food consumption and suggest that *ichijū issai* (one soup and one side dish) was actually the most common pattern whereas the *ichijū sansai* structure (which originated from the ceremonial banquets in the medieval period) was not institutionalized as an everyday food practice until the 1950s and 1960s (p. 27).

In Chapter 2, the two authors historically analyze the meaning of the word *washoku* and question its use in the UNESCO nomination. In the nomination file submitted by the Japanese government to UNESCO in March 2012, *washoku* is defined a “social practice based on a comprehensive 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 closely related to the sustainable use of natural resources” (p. 28). According to Cwiertka and Yasuhara, this definition does not correspond to the actual use of the word *washoku* prior to its inscription in the UNESCO ICH list. Through the use of historical

databases, newspapers, cookbooks, etiquette manuals and other food related sources, they demonstrate how the term *washoku* has been traditionally used as a common noun that simply meant “a Japanese meal/Japanese meals”, without any particular connotation. Besides, they also prove that the word *washoku* came into use primarily in the context of department store restaurants, in contrast with the idea of *washoku* as a traditional home-cooking practice, and its use in newspapers only exploded after the 1980s. Their conclusion is that the definition of *washoku* in the UNESCO nomination is nothing but ‘an imaginative interpretation of an ordinary noun’ (p. 45).

In Chapters 3 and 4, Cwiertka and Yasuhara argue that the manipulation of reality for the purpose of branding is not new in Japan, but it has been rather a common practice since at least the eighteenth century. More specifically, they analyze two essential elements of travel experience in Japan, *meibutsu* (Chapter 3) and *omiyage* (Chapter 4). The two words are often used interchangeably in Japanese as they both refer to iconic products (usually food, but not only) that are representatives of a particular place. But, if *meibutsu* is something that is usually enjoyed on the spot, *omiyage* refers to the souvenir that a traveler brings back from a journey. Over these two fascinating chapters, Cwiertka and Yasuhara not only guide the reader through a history of travel and tourism in modern Japan, but thoroughly describe the ante-litteram branding process of fabrication of imaginary connections between *meibutsu/omiyage* and the areas they are supposed to represent. In this process, a critical role in defining this sort of fictionalized imaginary connections is played by the exploitation of local historical or legendary personages or historical events that have taken place in the vicinity.

In the fifth and final chapter, the authors go back to the topic of *washoku*. Here the authors review the procedures for registering an element in the UNESCO ICH list and they argue that the definition of *washoku* as a home-cooking practice was nothing more than a “deliberate strategy” guided by “ignorance and error, omissions, inventions, and exaggerations” (p. 119), whose aim was to easily pass the UNESCO screening. But, immediately after the inscription of *washoku* in the ICH list, the true nature of Japanese government’s intentions came to light. They argue that “the core of *washoku* branding relies on misleading the public into confusing it with *kaiseki*”, a term that can refer both to a Japanese haute cuisine or to a formal meal served before the tea ceremony (p. 100). According to them, while the name of the nominated element remained *washoku*, in reality, *kaiseki* was the central element of the promotional activities for the inscription, and this confusion has also been constantly perpetuated in the national and international media.

In the Conclusion, the authors succinctly summarize the main arguments of the book and end on a critical note towards the Japanese scholars who have remained silent in the face of the Japanese government’s manipulation of *washoku*.

“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you where you are from”. *Branding Japanese Food* is a thoughtful and insightful book, that reveals the main mechanisms of food place-branding, a perspective that is still little explored in the field of research on food, heritage and tradition. It is

well-structured, thoroughly researched and based on strong historical evidence. It reveals a series of inconsistencies in the official narrative of *washoku*, which are contradicted by historical evidence. Moreover, it helps to shed light on the historical continuum of place-branding strategies in Japan. However, the fascinating parallelism with the place-branding practices that took place in the Edo period leaves room for one question: if the practice of creating myths and imaginary links between food and places has its origins centuries ago, what is particularly problematic in the current strategy of the Japanese government that even “irritated” the two authors? Reading the book, it would seem that one of the main differences lies in the fact that the place-branding practices of *omiyage* and *meibutsu* arose spontaneously from below, among producers and merchants, who had a more genuine goal of customization of travelers’ experiences. Whereas, on the other hand, the current strategy of the Japanese government is undoubtedly a top-down strategy, based on the mystification and manipulation of reality. This is only my interpretation. Basically, I would have appreciated a major emphasis not only on the undeniable analogies but also on the differences between past and present place-branding practices, which would have made their argument even stronger.

Aside from such a picky point, *Branding Japanese Food* is a gripping and innovative book that gives a new perspective on the heritagization of *washoku*. It offers a number of insights not only for students of Japanese studies or food studies, but also of tourism studies, cultural studies, heritage studies, and modern Asian history.

References

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