Washoku Far and Near:

Culinary Heritage and Global Food Culture

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In this paper I want to consider how a locally significant aspect of culinary heritage – in this case, Japanese washoku – becomes globalized. How does food culture translate across the boundaries of nations, societies and cultures? How does growing global popularity also create new challenges and responses within the home culinary community?

In short, how is washoku promoted, conceived, and imagined at the interfaces of the local and the global. Not as a product simply of the original cultural context, but partly as a response both to the incursion of foreign food cultures into Japanese life but also to the increasing interest in Japanese cuisine expressed by foreign visitors, chefs, and others.

This paper will discuss the movement to gain recognition for washoku by UNESCO, as well as some of the programs of government agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote washoku both within Japan and overseas.

I will discuss some of the issues of naming washoku – what’s the wa? – as well as other socio-linguistic aspects of washoku in a Japanese context. I will also draw on examples of the role of washoku in popular media, and in the promotion of tourism.

Finally, I will discuss some of the ideas of Aoki Tamotsu about “cultural branding,” as they apply to imagining washoku as an intrinsic element of Japanese identity.