

The politics of *washoku*: Japan's gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy

Felice Farina

Abstract: In this paper, we will explore the political construction of *washoku* by analyzing Japan's recent strategy of gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy. We will argue that the definition of *washoku*, as inscribed in the UNESCO's International Cultural Heritage List in 2013, is the result of a process of invention of tradition whose aim is to homogenize and preserve national identity and project this identity abroad. While emphasizing the role of food as an essential element of national identity, we will also show that the promotion of *washoku* is also motivated by the need to address several issues of broader domestic politics. Starting from the assumption that Japan's low food self-sufficiency rate could be improved only by increasing the demand for Japanese food, the government implemented a strategy of promotion of *washoku* at home (gastronationalism) and abroad (gastrodiplomacy) in order to increase both the domestic consumption of traditional food and the export of agrifood products.

Keyword: *washoku*, gastronationalism, gastrodiplomacy.

要旨: 本稿は日本の「伝統的な食文化」とされる和食に焦点をあて、その食文化の美食ナショナリズム(gastronationalism)と美食外交(gastrodiplomacy)の施策を検討することを目的とする。2013年12月4日に「和食;日本人の伝統的な食文化」がユネスコ無形文化遺産(ICH)リストに登録されて以来、日本政府は和食の魅力を軸として国内外での和食振興と日本産食品の輸出の推進に取り組んでいる。本稿では和食という概念の分析を通して、その概念が文化遺産としての国家が均質なナショナル・アイデンティティーを形成しようとしてきた伝統の創造的過程の結果であると主張する(美食ナショナリズム)。一方、海外での和食の振興政策はそのアイデンティティーを日本国外に投影し、日本産食品の輸出を増加しながら、食料自給率も増加するための政策であると強調する(美食外交)。

キーワード: 和食、美食ナショナリズム、美食外交。

1. Introduction

Food plays an important role in our daily lives, not only for its indispensable role as source of dietary energy but also for its profound implications for national identities and politics. Numerous studies have shown that food and food habits represent emblematic elements of culture and operate as markers of individual and collective identities (Appadurai 1988; Bourdieu 1979; Montanari 2013; Lupton 1996; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Belasco and Scranton 2002; Bell and Valentine 1997; Pilcher 1996). Indeed, in the same way as language or religion, food plays a fundamental part in delineating distinctive boundar-

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ies between “us” and the “others” through a process of selection, remaking and even invention of national traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). For these characteristics, states and state-backed organizations have often exploited food for their national objectives, putting a particular significance to specific foods and playing a fundamental role in the process of creation/invention of national cuisines (Ichijo and Ranta 2016).

Foods and nations are also linked through marketing and promotional campaigns. Recently, the constant expansion of the food industry and agribusiness has accelerated the process of commodification of food, and many governments have implemented strategies aimed at promoting their national cuisine abroad to increase food export or tourism. These strategies are not limited to highlighting the economic or nutritional advantages of one country’s cuisine, but they also have the aim of projecting a certain image and certain values of a nation worldwide (Zhang 2015; Ichijo and Ranta 2016, 107).

In recent years, the Japanese government has become increasingly aware of Japan’s contemporary cultural appeal and has been among the most active nations in exploiting cultural resources to boost its international influence (Otmazgin 2018). Among these resources, food has acquired an increasingly central role in the promotion of Japanese culture abroad and has become one of the most distinctive elements of its national identity. UNESCO’s recognition of *washoku* (Japan’s traditional cuisine) as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2013 represents one of the most evident results of this strategy and one of the most striking examples of how national cuisines are “projected on a global screen of cultural identities (cultural defined) and cultural politics for national recognition, as well as to promote domestic goals of cultural identity formation” (Bestor 2014, 61).

If a critical evaluation of *washoku* from Japanese scholars is lacking,¹ a situation remarked by Cwiertka and Yasuhara (2020), English-language literature has shown greater dynamism in the critical analysis of *washoku*, by putting emphasis on how the concept has been constructed by Japanese government and on the process of inscription in the ICH list (Bestor 2018; Cwiertka and Yasuhara 2020; Cang 2018, 2019; Ichijo and Ranta 2016).

In this paper, we will try to explore the political construction of *washoku* focusing not only on the implications related to identity and nationalism but also on the food security motivations behind it, an aspect often overlooked in literature. In doing this, we will concentrate on the dual nature of Japanese government’s strategy, at home and abroad. On the one hand, we will analyze the process through which Japan’s government has tried to create a homogeneous national culinary consciousness (gastronationalism), epitomized in the official definition of *washoku*. We will show that the main goal of this process is the increase

¹ Though acknowledging that *washoku* is a recent word, most of Japanese scholars tend to reaffirm the long historical roots of *washoku*’s characteristics without critical evaluation (Harada 2005, 2014, 2015; Kumakura and Ehara 2015; Ehara 2015). An exception is represented by Ōmori Isami (2017, 2019), who in her works investigates the critical role of media in the redefinition of *washoku*.

in consumption of local agricultural products in order to improve the low food self-sufficiency rate of the country. On the other hand, we will analyze the strategy of the promotion of *washoku* internationally, through which the government attempts to increase the appeal and desirability of Japanese culture, values and ideas, strengthening the association of some foods with a specific image of the country (gastrodiplomacy). We will argue that Japan's gastrodiplomacy is not a mere act of popularization of traditional food worldwide, but, just as gastro-nationalism, it is strictly related to the food security of the country, as the main objective of the government is to raise food export, in order to foster agricultural production and improve self-sufficiency.

2. Food and national identity: gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy

Food and food habits can be considered as some of the most quintessential expressions of national identity. Every human society develops its own food preferences and ways of eating, giving birth to what we usually call "national cuisines". Warren Belasco has defined national cuisine as a "shared set of 'protocols'", characterized by five main elements: a limited set of basic food; a distinctive manner of preparing food; a distinctive way of seasoning dishes; codes of etiquette; and a distinctive infrastructure or "food chain", from which food moves from farm to plate (Belasco 2008, 15–20). All these characteristics are not fixed in space and time but are in fact highly variable and, in most cases, only recently "constructed". National cuisines are in a process of constant reinvention, absorbing new influences and letting some traditions die out. Here it is possible to observe a fundamental contradiction in the food-nationalism nexus: the cuisine which we consider to be specific to a particular place is not a tradition that has been going on continuously in the same way since ancient times but is the result of an uninterrupted process made of movements, cultural contaminations, innovations and mixing. If a nation is an "imagined community", the nation's diet is a "feast of imagined commensality" (Bell and Valentine 1997, 169). As Cook and Crang (1996, 140) observe:

Food do not simply come from places, organically growing out of them, but also make places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive construction of various imaginative geographies. The differentiation of foods through their geographies is an active intervention in their cultural geographies, rather than the passive recording of absolute geographic difference.

As already mentioned above, there is a rich literature dealing with the relationship between national cuisine (more broadly, food) and nationalism. Among them, sociologist Michaela DeSoucey's work on *foie gras* and contemporary European food politics (2010) offered an original analytical approach to the study of food and nationalism and proposed the concept of "gastronationalism". She defines gastronationalism as "a form of claims-making and a project of collective identity", that "is responsive to and reflective of the political ramifications of connecting nationalist projects with food culture at local levels" (DeSoucey 2010,

433). Moreover, gastronationalism “signals the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food” (DeSoucey 2010, 433). According to her, gastronationalism is a defensive strategy aimed at re-establishing those symbolic boundaries threatened by the homogenization of diets promoted by globalization, because, as she points out, the “attacks (symbolic or otherwise) against a nation’s food practices are assaults on heritage and culture, not just on the food item itself” (DeSoucey 2010, 433). In the case of gastronationalism, the state plays a central role in the market, acting as an ideological agent and a broker for food production and distribution as cultural goods, not only to protect material interests but also to draw national boundaries between national foodstuffs and foreign foodstuffs (DeSoucey 2010, 434–5).

If, through gastronationalism, states strengthen national identity and national symbolic borders, it is through gastrodiploacy that they promote this identity abroad to enhance their international image. Gastrodiploacy can be defined as the use of food as a tool of a country’s public diplomacy.² Some authors use the term “gastrodiploacy” interchangeably with the expression “culinary diplomacy” (Wolf 2006; Chapple-Sokol 2013), however we here accept the distinction made by Paul Rockower (2014), who argues that the two terms involve two different levels of diplomacy. According to Rockower, culinary diplomacy can be defined as the use of food and cuisine as “a medium to enhance formal diplomacy in official diplomatic functions” (Paul Rockower 2014, 14). In this sense, culinary diplomacy seeks to increase bilateral ties by strengthening relationships through the use of food and dining experiences as a means to engage visiting dignitaries. In comparison, gastrodiploacy has a broader dimension and can be defined as “a public diplomacy attempt to communicate culinary culture to foreign publics in a fashion that is more diffuse” (Paul Rockower 2014, 13). Compared to culinary diplomacy, then, gastrodiploacy seeks to influence a wider public audience rather than only high-level élites.³ In this sense, it is clear that gastrodiploacy is not a mere promotion of one country’s cuisine abroad, but it is a way to increase the appeal and desirability of its culture, people, values, and ideals, strengthening the association of some foods with that country, and obtain also economic outcomes, such as food export or increasing tourism.

3. *Washoku* and Japan’s gastronationalism

On 5 December 2013, “*Washoku*, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year” was formally inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Edu-

² If traditional diplomacy involves government-to-government relations, public diplomacy involves the way in which governments talk to global publics and try to inform, influence and engage those publics in support of national objectives and foreign policies (Snow 2008, 6).

³ The same two concepts have been named by Sam Chapple-sokol, respectively, “private culinary diplomacy” and “public culinary diplomacy” (Chapple-Sokol 2013, 162).

cational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In the nomination file submitted by the Japanese government to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in March 2012, *washoku* is defined as 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” (UNESCO 2013, 3). The file goes on affirming that *washoku* “is practiced all over the territory of the State” and “has developed as part of daily life” in which it “has important social functions for the Japanese to reaffirm identity, to foster familial and community cohesion, and to contribute to healthy life, through sharing traditional and well-balanced meals” (UNESCO 2013, 4). It also states that the basic knowledge and skills of *washoku* are transmitted from parents or grandparents to their descendants at home in order to preserve the *ofukuro-no-aji*, the “taste of mother’s cooking” (UNESCO 2013, 4). According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan (MAFF), a *washoku* meal is built around rice at its heart, with the addition of one soup and three side dishes (one main dish and two secondary dishes), according to the principle of *ichi-jū sansai* (“one soup, three side dishes”) (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan, MAFF 2013, 17). It is characterized by four main elements that are based on the common principle of the respect of the nature (*shizen no sonchō*): 1) the use of various fresh ingredients, whose natural tastes are wisely preserved; 2) a well-balanced and healthy diet; 3) an emphasis on the beauty of nature in the aesthetic of a plate; and 4) a connection with annual festivals and events (MAFF. n.d. a).

We can clearly see that what has been recognized as *washoku* is not a particular food item or a specific cuisine itself. Contrary to what might seem, the lack of reference to specific gastronomic practices or recipes is not an act of negligence but, as Cwiertka and Yasuhara (2020) argue, it was a deliberate strategy guided by “ignorance and error, omissions, inventions, and exaggerations” (Cwiertka and Yasuhara 2020, 119), whose aim was to easily meet the UNESCO’s criteria that are closely related to the social and cultural aspects of food as a lived experience in a specific socio-cultural context. What the Japanese government indicates as the main elements of *washoku* are nothing more than a forced interpretation (if not a real manipulation) of a stereotypical idea of the culinary tradition of Japan. This manipulation is immediately clear from the very definition of *washoku* itself. In the Japanese language, *washoku* literally means “Japanese food” (*wa* is a word often used to refer to Japan and *shoku* means food or eating). It is a relatively new word, first appearing in the Meiji period (1868–1912) in opposition to the new foods and culinary trends introduced by Western countries, which were generally referred to with the expression *yōshoku* (lit. “western food”). Since then, the word *washoku* has been used as a common noun who simply meant “a Japanese meal/Japanese meals”, without any particular connotation. It has also been proved that it came into use primarily in the context of department store restaurants, in contrast to the idea of *washoku* as a traditional home-cook-

ing practice, as it has been defined in the UNESCO nomination, which can be thus considered “an imaginative interpretation of an ordinary noun” (Cwiertka and Yasuhara 2020, 45).

The role of rice in the Japanese diet is another problematic aspect. The idea of rice as a central staple of the Japanese has long been debated by scholars, who are divided between those who claim that rice had been the staple food for all Japanese throughout history and those who argue that rice was limited to a small segment of the population, mainly the *élite*, whereas most of the population consumed millet and other miscellaneous grains as basic food (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 30–43). More recent studies have demonstrated that rice became prominent only at the beginning of the 20th century and replaced all the other grains only in the 1960s (Cwiertka and Yasuhara 2020; Francks 2007). Also, the claim that *ichijū sansai* is a traditional feature of the Japanese daily diet is a mystification. The *ichijū issai* pattern (one soup and one side dish) was the most common among Japanese whereas the *ichijū sansai* structure (originated from the ceremonial banquets in the medieval period) was not institutionalized as an everyday food practice until the 1950s and the 1960s (Cwiertka and Yasuhara 2020, 27). Moreover, the *ichijū sansai* style might not necessarily promote good health (Minari *et al.* 2015). It must be also pointed out that while the respect for nature is considered the basic principle of *washoku*, many of the ingredients used in traditional cuisine, such as fish or soybeans, are now imported or produced in ways that cannot be considered nature-friendly (Kodama 2017).

But why did the Japanese government put so much effort into this reinvention of national cuisine? The operation of reinvention of *washoku* and its inscription in the ICH list is not a mere act of nation-building through food but it must be evaluated in the general context of Japan’s national food security strategy. Food security is a crucial issue in Japanese politics, because since 1945 the food self-sufficiency rate⁴ of the country has constantly declined reaching 38% in 2020, one of the lowest percentages among industrialized countries (MAFF. n.d. b). A low food self-sufficiency rate is considered a risk factor because it makes Japan extremely dependent on importations and, consequently, more exposed to the fluctuations of the international food market. The profound change in lifestyle of Japanese consumers from a traditional diet to a westernized one, with an increase in the consumption of meat, wheat, oils, dairy products, and a consequential decrease in the consumption of “traditional” food, such as rice, is considered one of the main causes behind the decline of the food self-sufficiency rate (MAFF 2006a, 16). For this reason, in 2005, the government introduced the Basic Law of Food Education (*shokuiku kihonhō*), whose objective is

⁴ The food self-sufficiency rate usually used by the MAFF is based on caloric intake and refers to the ratio of calorie supply from domestically produced food to the total calorie consumed by each person daily. This means that over 60% of the calories that each Japanese consumes every day come from imported food. For an analysis of the reasons behind Japan’s food self-sufficiency decline see: George Mulgan (2004), Suzuki (2013), Kako (2009), Farina (2017).

the increase in consumption of local agricultural products, by promoting a nationalistic idealization of Japanese food, with rice as main staple food, and by associating local products with healthiness and imported foods with unsafeness (Assman 2015; Kimura 2011). Following the enactment of this law, a nationwide food education campaign was launched to promote *washoku* into school lunch programs and encouraged local exchanges between local producers and local schools. One of the objectives of the campaign is to raise the awareness of the food self-sufficiency issue, by encouraging school children to calculate the food self-sufficiency rate of the food they were offered at home, in an attempt to contain the globalization of food consumption among young Japanese (Assman, 2017, 128–30). However, the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011 raised serious concerns about the safety of Japanese food and many consumers started to avoid agricultural products from Tōhoku, a major producer of fresh vegetables and fruits.

The incident sparked a new sense of urgency about the need to promote and consume Japanese food. A successful inscription of traditional Japanese cuisine in the UNESCO ICH list was believed to be able to deal with the confusion and loss of confidence generated by the incident (Akagawa 2018, 209–10). The incident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in March 2011 also prompted the authorities to review the *shokuiku*. As Reiher (2012) has suggested, the risk of nuclear contamination made clear that the focus on public health and the consumption of local products, present within *shokuiku*, was no longer helpful for the promotion of a traditional diet. For this reason, the Shokuiku council decided to shift the focus from the consumption of local food produced in the same prefecture to the food produced all over Japan (Takeda *et al.* 2016, 281). The new Basic Plan for *Shokuiku*, settled in March 2011, also stressed the importance of family meals and home-cooked meals, presenting them as an established tradition that has been lost in contemporary Japanese society, despite the fact that family or home meals are indeed relatively new to Japan (Takeda *et al.* 2016, 280). The new approach, which accentuated the national character and the home cooking nature of *washoku*, together with the urgency to rehabilitate the image of Japanese food as safe for health, paved the way for the definition of *washoku* proposed to UNESCO and eventually inscribed in the ICH list.

4. *Washoku* in the world: Japan's gastrodiploamacy strategy

When in 2002, Douglas McGray coined the expression “Japan's gross national cool” to indicate Japan's cultural influence, he could not imagine that it would gain so much popularity in the media and among academics that even the government of Japan decided to use it to define the strategy of promotion of Japan's cultural and creative industries. In his article, McGray argued that, despite the severe economic recession that the country had been facing since the bursting of the speculative bubble in the 1990s (the so-called “lost decade”), Japan still was a cultural superpower thanks to the success of its content industry worldwide. Stimulated by the “Cool Japan” thesis, the government started

a new industrial policy to stimulate the economy by supporting the content industry. One of the first acts was the establishment in 2003 of the Task Force on Contents (*kontentsu senmon chōsa kai*), one of the three task forces of the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters (*chiteki zaisan ryaku honbu*, IPSH), a governmental agency set up within the Cabinet Office that acts as an intermediary between the various government ministries. The members of the Task Force on Contents were mainly intellectual property policy experts from the private sector, whose main task focused on the management of media contents, such as music, movies, game software and animation.⁵

In 2004, the Japan Brand Working Group (*Nihon brando wāking gurupu*, JB-WG) was organized within the Task Force to conduct more in-depth discussions about national branding. During its third meeting on January 21, 2005, the group discussed about the role of food in Japan's branding strategy, and they recognized that, despite the popularity of Japanese restaurants around the world, most of them did not provide the "correct (*tadashii*)" Japanese food culture to their customers and so efforts were needed to promote the "correct knowledge and techniques (*tadashii chishiki to gijutsu*)" of Japanese food by putting emphasis on the healthiness of the Japanese diet.⁶ But to do this, it was first necessary that the Japanese themselves had a balanced and healthy diet.⁷ One month later, the JBWG compiled its first report entitled *Promotion of Japan Brand Strategy – Conveying to the world Japan's attractiveness* (*Nihon brando senryaku no suishin – Miryoku aru Nihon wo sekai ni hasshin*). In the report, culinary culture was identified as one of the three most important contents of cultural diplomacy along with fashion and local brands, that would help Japan to become a "loved and respected" country (*aisare, sonkei sareru Nihon*) (JBWG 2005a). The report also underlined the need of establishing a strategy for improving food education at home and promoting Japanese food abroad (JBWG 2005a). The *shokuiku* campaign would be implemented the same year. For JBWG, Japan needed to implement a twofold strategy—creation and promotion of a traditional diet at home and branding Japanese food abroad—in order to increase food exports. It is interesting to note that the report speaks of "Japanese food culture (*Nihon no shoku bunka*)" and "Japanese food (*Nihonshoku*)" and never uses the word *washoku*.

Following the publication of the JBWG report, the secretariat of the IPSH set up the Committee for the Promotion of Research on Food Culture (*Shoku bunka kenkyū suishin kondankai*), who brought together representatives from the private and public sector and whose president was Mogi Yūzaburō, chairman of Kikkoman. The Committee's main task was to conduct research on Japanese food culture and suggest concrete actions to promote Japanese cuisine at home and abroad. The Committee reiterated the strategic role of food as tool

⁵ Chiteki zaisan ryaku honbu, Kontentsu senmon chōsa kai [Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, Taskforce on Contents] 2003.

⁶ Nihon burando wākingu gurupu [Japan Brand Working Group] 2005b.

⁷ Nihon burando wākingu gurupu [Japan Brand Working Group] 2005b.

to promote a positive image of Japan abroad and outlined the situation of Japanese restaurants abroad in terms of number, preparation techniques and customers (Committee for the Promotion of Research on Food Culture 2005). It also recommended some practical actions to be undertaken by the government, including the creation of relevant texts about the standards of Japanese cuisine, the establishment of culinary training courses for foreigners, the strengthening of the collaboration between the farmers and the restaurants, and the introduction of traditional Japanese cuisine to foreign tourists in Japan (Committee for the Promotion of Research on Food Culture 2005).

In 2006, the first big international campaign for the presentation of Japanese food and food culture abroad—named “Washoku-Try Japan’s Good Food”—was launched. The campaign was established as a joint project between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and aimed to spread Japanese food culture and increase the export of Japanese agricultural, forestry and fishery products through the presentation of Japanese dishes at special events held by Japanese diplomatic mission abroad.⁸ On 27 November 2006, MAFF officials proposed the institution of a certification system for Japanese restaurants outside Japan to ensure the authenticity of Japanese food served abroad (MAFF 2006b and MAFF 2006c). The monitoring of the “authenticity” of Japanese cuisine abroad was strongly criticized and labeled as “sushi police”, an expression that inspired a series of computer-graphic animated short films where the three protagonists, members of a government special police unit, travelled all over the world to crack down on restaurants serving “unauthentic” sushi (Cang 2019, 2–3). In 2007, in reaction to this criticism, the MAFF later changed the name to “recommendation (*suisen*)” instead of “certification (*ninshō*)” and transferred the project to a non-profit organization called the Organization to Promote Japanese Restaurants Abroad (JRO) (MAFF 2007).

The MAFF is not the only ministry involved in this strategy. Also, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) have been playing an active role in promoting Japanese cuisine abroad. In a 2010 report, titled “Towards Nation Building through Cultural Industries”, the METI emphasized the importance of cultural industry as nation’s “soft power” resource. Among other things, the report highlighted the importance of exporting agricultural crops, processed foods, and tableware together in the marketing of Japanese cuisine, in order to carry with it the elements of Japanese “authentic” culture (Farrer 2015, 11). On the other side, the MOFA created the Public Diplomacy Department in August 2004, composed by two divisions, the Public Diplomacy Planning and the Cultural Affairs Division. This department aims at combining “public relations and cultural exchange in a more systematic way” (Diplomatic Bluebook 2005, 207) and indicates “Japan brand” as one of the main pillars of Japan’s economic diplomacy in 2011 (Ber-

⁸ For a list of these events see: MAFF 2011.

geijk *et al.* 2011, 61) and *washoku* as a vehicle to promote understanding of and trust in Japan (MOFA 2014, 38).

The inscription of *washoku* in the UNESCO ICH list in 2013 was therefore the result of the gastronationalism and gastrodiplo-macy strategy implemented by the Japanese government since the early 2000s. With the international recognition of *washoku*, the Japanese government's strategy shifted to focus more on increasing food exports. In August 2013, the MAFF outlined a new strategy to increment the export of food products up to one trillion yen by 2020 (it was over five hundred billion in 2013). This strategy has been nicknamed the "FBI strategy" since it aims at undertaking three main activities, namely, the promotion of the use of Japanese ingredients in the various cuisines of the world ("made from Japan"), the development of food industries and the promotion of Japan's food culture ("made by Japan"), and the expansion of Japan's food export ("made in Japan") (MAFF n.d. c).

The importance of foreign markets has been confirmed in the 2015 Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas, where, though re-emphasizing the importance of increasing consumption of traditional food to raise the food self-sufficiency rate, for the first time the MAFF referred to both "domestic and foreign demand (*kokunaigai no juyō*)" of Japanese food, highlighting the strategic role of food export in improving national food security (MAFF 2015, 15). In order to better understand the productive capacity of Japan, the Plan established a new indicator—the "food self-sufficiency potential (*shokuryō jikyū ryoku*)"—that, compared to the food self-sufficiency rate, shows the possible per capita caloric supply per domestic food produced using all farmland in Japan, including abandoned, but recoverable farmland (MAFF 2015, 24). The new indicator changes the perspective about the relation between self-sufficiency and food security. Through the food self-sufficiency potential, it is easier to understand Japan's capacity to cope with any crisis of food import that might arise, but it is also possible to highlight to which extent Japan is able to respond to a major increase in external demand of agricultural products (MAFF 2015, 24). For this reason, in the 2016 White Paper, the MAFF declared that "the government will continue to improve food self-sufficiency potential and the food self-sufficiency ratio through efforts such as the increase in the demands of domestic agricultural products at home and abroad including exports" (MAFF 2016, 10). This requires, according to the report, to enhance competitiveness of Japan's agriculture through some important reforms—such as reducing costs of farming inputs, development of manpower, structural reform of distribution and processing, etc.—but also through the development of strategic export system (MAFF 2016, 4).

In order to develop this export system, the MAFF established the Executive Committee for the Export Strategy (*yushutsu senryaku iinkai*) and formulated the Export Expansion Policy (*yushutsu kakudai hōshin*), where seven categories of food and agricultural products to promote abroad were identified—seafood products, rice and rice-made processed foods, forest products, flowering trees (bonsai), vegetables, beef meat and tea (MAFF 2015b). In the same year, the ministry implemented a new more detailed strategy. The new strategy is based

on seven main actions—the collection of data concerning the export markets; the promotion of Japanese food culture by highlighting the “good quality” of Japanese food and agricultural products; holding regular events where to promote Japanese foods and improve logistic networks; supporting the creation of overseas sales bases; reviewing the current regulation and help foreign buyers to buy directly from Japanese wholesalers; relax export regulations; and renovate the procedures for food export (MAFF 2016b).

The Economic Partnership Agreement signed between Japan and the European Union in 2017 can be seen as an important result of this strategy and perfectly represents the change of attitude of the Japanese government towards the liberalization of the agri-food market. In fact, if in the past the aspects relating to greater concessions in the agri-food sector caused tensions in the negotiations of economic partnership agreements because of the fear of any damage to Japanese agriculture, the Japan-EU EPA is now presented as an important opportunity for Japan to increase agri-food export towards EU's countries and thus improve national production (MAFF 2019).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to demonstrate how food occupies a prominent place in one country's discourses on nationalism and foreign policy. We have shown how national cuisines constitute an effective tool in the hands of governments to spread and preserve a specific and homogeneous idea of national identity but also to project this identity abroad in order to enhance one's country image among foreign audience and get some important economic results in the field of food security, such as the increase of food exports. The analysis of Japan's gastronationalism and gastrodiplo-macy that we have proposed here has tried to highlight these aspects. The *shokuiku* campaign and the inscription of *washoku* in the UNESCO ICH list are an example of a political process which, through the use of stereotyped—if not invented—concepts relating to the Japanese culinary tradition (such as the centrality of rice, the *ichijū sansai* structure, the health benefits, the respect of nature) tries to foster national identity and reorient the Japanese towards a major consumption of domestic food. Also, the strategy of promoting Japanese cuisine abroad demonstrates how cuisine has become a strategic instrument of Japan's nation branding and public diplomacy. This strategy has already brought some noticeable results. From 2005 to 2012, Japanese agri-food exports remained steadily at a level of around 400–450 billion yen per year, however, after the approval of the strategy to increase food export and the inclusion of *washoku* on the ICH list, Japan's exports saw a considerable increase, almost reaching the government target of one trillion yen in 2020 (921 billion).⁹

⁹ These data were calculated based on White Books of MAFF, from 2004 to 2021.

Despite these relative successes, the Japanese government's strategy does not seem to have the desired effects on the country's dependence on food imports. The food self-sufficiency rate continues to decline, casting some doubt on the actual capability of a strategy based primarily on directing food consumption towards (what is perceived or presented as) a traditional diet and leaving room for future research about the relation among food security, food self-sufficiency and traditional diet.

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