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There's Something Fishy About That Sushi: how Japan interprets the global sushi boom

Abstract

Since the 1990s sushi has become a global product with a transnational market. Hybridised and localised sushi like California Rolls and Spider Rolls are now even being reverse-imported to Japan as 'genuine American sushi'. This article examines some attempts to renationalise global sushi, both from the Japanese state and from the vernacular media. We argue that while popular reporting on the 'overseas sushi boom' generates a sense of national pride over 'them' eating 'our' food, the state's position is a more strategic one. It operates with a clear motive of increasing sales of Japanese food products overseas, mobilising the *image* of authenticity for this specific purpose. Both state and popular expressions of culinary nationalism claim Japanese ownership of culture not only in its 'authentic' forms but in its multiple, creative, hybrid and fusion forms. By examining Japanese responses to foreigners consuming sushi, we hope to provide some insights into the relationship between food, national culture, authenticity and globalisation. A further objective is to understand Japan's culinary nationalism within the larger context of the 'soft power' and 'cultural diplomacy' discourse.

Keywords: sushi, globalisation, culinary nationalism, soft power, cultural diplomacy

Introduction

In this article we analyse some of the Japanese state's recent discourse about the global sushi boom, and compare this with Japanese media and popular non-fiction interpretations of the same phenomenon. Why is this of any interest? At the most elementary economic level, sushi has become a global commodity, and generates hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue annually around the world. Understanding how sushi has been discursively constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed therefore, certainly has implications for trade. But arguably as important are the links between these forms of discourse and the production of the rhetoric of the nation. We focus, therefore, on the relationship between these discourses as an example of how the concept of culinary nationalism emerged and has been codified in the context of globalisation.

The so-called global sushi boom started in the US in the 1960s and 1970s and quickly spread to many parts of the world (Bestor 2000: 56; Cwiertka 2001: 15). Today there are sushi restaurants in many cities in Europe, Asia, Russia, India, Latin America, as well as Oceania, often serving localised versions of sushi. The rapid increase in the number of Japanese restaurants overseas in the last decade¹ initially led to high profile media coverage of this phenomenon in Japan, and subsequently to the state's 2006 attempt to certify 'genuine' Japanese cuisine abroad. This action by the Japanese state led to accusations by some western media that they were trying to create the 'sushi police' to police the authenticity of sushi produced outside of Japan (See, for example, Failoa 2006; Sanchanta 2007). Both the state's intervention and the reports in food magazines and general-interest books demonstrate a high level of interest in the overseas consumption of Japanese food. The desire for claiming the ownership and authenticity of Japanese cuisine overseas – in other words, nationalising Japanese

food outside Japan – is evident in both popular and state discourse. While popular writings tend to generate a sense of national pride over ‘them’ eating ‘our’ food, the state’s position is a more strategic one. It operates with a clear motive of increasing sales of Japanese food products overseas, promoting the *image* of authenticity for this specific purpose.

In the following, we will first examine the overseas sushi boom, paying particular attention to sushi’s evolution as a hybrid globalised food. We will then analyse how this phenomenon is represented in respect to both popular writings and state discourse. By examining Japanese representations of how foreigners consume sushi, we hope to provide some insights into the relationship between food, national culture, authenticity and globalisation. A further objective of the study is to understand Japan’s culinary nationalism within the larger context of the ‘soft power’ discourse, which employs the ‘power’ of pop culture such as anime and manga to further state interests, a topic that has attracted considerable popular and scholarly attention in recent years (See, for example, McGray 2002; Aoki *et al.* 2005; Goot 2006; Lam 2007; Otmazgin 2007). In these studies, however, food has been largely neglected. Also, both the advocates and critics of such attempts assume a non-problematic link between nation and culture. While it is debatable whether Japanese pop culture overseas does or does not further Japanese national interests as the government hopes, the assumption that anime, manga, or otaku aesthetics are essentially and originally Japanese often goes unquestioned. Similar assumptions about the link between culture and national/ethnic identity also exist in the field of food in transnational contexts, which often examine ethnic food as a site for the construction of diasporic identity (Turgeon and Pastinelli 2002; Roy 2002; Thomas 2004; Oum 2005). Our study of

sushi offers a different perspective, as it questions the essentialised notion of a national culture, implicitly challenging the idea that the expansion of food cultures is linked always to diasporas. Indeed, we emphasise the interactive global processes that have led to sushi's popularity outside Japan, and how the discourse surrounding the sushi boom has led to a reassessment of the role of the state in the production of nationalist narratives of ownership and control.

Sushi goes global

As many theorists of globalisation point out, today's world is characterised by accelerating flows of people, material goods, information, images and so on from multiple points of origin to multiple destinations. New communications and transport technologies connect geographically distant areas, often creating new cultures that are translated, hybridised, transformed, or indigenised (Thomlinson 1999; Pieterse 2004). Sushi's globalisation can be seen in this context. The first sushi restaurants outside Japan developed along diasporic lines, as Japanese immigrants in the early twentieth century settled in places such as Los Angeles, Hawaii and Sao Paulo. The earliest overseas Japanese restaurants were generally run by Japanese and catered for Japanese customers. In the 1970s, however, non-Japanese Americans began eating sushi first in the West Coast and then in other parts of the country. Factors that contributed to this trend included the new emphasis on healthy eating based on vegetables and fish rather than meat, alternative lifestyle movements such as ecology and hippie movements, as well as Japan's high media profile in the US following years of rapid economic growth and increasing travel between the two countries (Cwiertka 1999: 56; Bestor 2000: 56; Matsumoto 2002: 10).

The global boom truly started in the 1990s when the UK, Europe and the rest of the world began to catch up with the trend set in the US. In London, for example, a number of successful sushi restaurants opened in the mid-1990s: Harrods Sushi Bar (1995), Moshi Moshi (1994), Itsu (1997) and Yo! Sushi (1997), to name just a few. This period marked the beginning of sushi's evolution from being mostly an upmarket food for sophisticated cosmopolitan customers to becoming also an affordable, 'fast food' made by sushi robots and sold on conveyor belts or picked up at supermarkets.² Today sushi is globally ubiquitous, as we have stated above. Statistically, according to one estimate, there are now between 14,000 and 18,000 sushi-serving restaurants outside Japan (Matsumoto 2007: 2). In many countries sushi is now made by local chefs and (non-Japanese) Asian immigrants such as Koreans and Chinese, and adapted to local palates and ingredients.

In the process of crossing national borders, sushi has transformed itself considerably. Unlike in Japan, where *nigirizushi* with raw tuna, salmon, shrimp and squid is the most popular (De Silva and Yamao 2006: 71), the global sushi boom has largely been about roll sushi, especially those made without raw fish. New combinations of fillings with vegetables and cooked fish or meat have been created for customers who find raw fish too challenging. Also, for those who find the texture of seaweed unappealing, *uramaki* rolls, with seaweed inside and rice outside, have been invented in the US.³ Popular US inventions like California Rolls (imitation crab, avocado and mayonnaise), Spider Rolls (fried soft-shell crab; so called because the crab legs sticking out of the roll look like spider legs), Philadelphia Rolls (cream cheese, smoked salmon and cucumber) and Caterpillar Rolls (avocado, eels and cucumber) are all made as

uramaki sushi, without raw fish. While sushi with brown rice was unheard of in Japan until recently, it is becoming more popular in the US among health-conscious customers. Outside the US other esoteric forms of sushi exist: in China the Peking roll is made with Peking duck (Matsumoto 2007: 6); in the Netherlands herring sushi is made with salted raw herring (Cwierka 1999: 57); in Singapore there is curry sushi (Ng 2001: 16) and in Mexico the Tampico roll made with imitation crab, mayonnaise and serrano peppers (Mizrahi 1999: 60), for example. In Australia and New Zealand, teriyaki chicken and avocado are the most popular sushi types.⁴ Sushi as a global food is thus often quite different from sushi as ‘traditional’ Japanese food as it has gone through a process of hybridisation and localisation; and yet, as we will see in the following section, the current ‘sushi boom’ overseas is often represented in terms of ‘them’ eating ‘our’ food, or even Japanese sushi ‘conquering the world’ (Tamamura 2000: 57), suggesting the existence of culinary nationalism.

Popular discourse: ‘They’ are eating ‘our’ food

In this section we will analyse how Japanese popular vernacular media reported the overseas sushi boom and identify some recurring patterns of how they report the ‘us/them’ configurations. We focus on four books that appeared in the early 2000s on the subject of overseas sushi: Kato Hiroko, *Sushi, purīzu: amerikajin sushi o kū* (Sushi please: Americans eat sushi, 2002); Matsumoto Hirotaka, *Osushi, chikyū o mawaru* (Sushi around the world, 2002); Tamamura Toyoo, *Kaitensushi sekai isshū* (Around the world with conveyor-belt sushi, 2004); and Ikezawa Yasushi, *Amerika nihonshoku wōzu: ima Amerika de wa nihonshoku ga dai būmu* (Japanese food wars in the US: huge Japanese food boom in the contemporary US, 2005). All four books

target general readers, with the first three in the cheap and widely available paperback *bunko/shinsho* format.⁵ *Sushi purīzu* and *Amerika nihonshoku wōzu* focus on the US, whereas *Kaitensushi sekai isshū* looks at the US, UK and Europe. *Osushi, chikyū o mawaru* covers Oceania, China and Mexico, as well as the US, UK and Europe. All include examples of overseas sushi, authors' experiences of overseas sushi restaurants, interviews with owners and chefs, as well as some photographs of overseas sushi. We have chosen these books because they are substantial and offer not only 'factual' information but also some interpretations as to what 'their' consumption of 'our' food means for Japan and Japanese (some more explicitly than others). The basic patterns of representation found in these books reflect the general discourse on the 'overseas sushi boom' that is currently circulating in Japan. However, it is worth noting that there is some internal ambivalence in the representations: stylish and fashionable but also strange; simultaneously modern and traditional. These contradictory and competing frameworks are merged into the discourse of Japan as the great mixer of east/west, traditional/modern culture.

In this literature there are generally two distinctive images produced – one positive and the other negative – that are associated with sushi overseas. Positively, sushi and sushi restaurants outside Japan are described as being fashionable, trendy and stylish. Words like 'chic', 'cutting edge', 'novel', 'original' and 'innovative' are frequently used. 'Clean' and 'hygienic' are also recurrent terms. In this vein, for instance, it is reported that 'sushi fever' started in young trendsetters in 'progressive' Californian beach cities (Ikezawa 2005: 28) or that students at UCLA eat California rolls because they think 'sushi is cool' (Ikezawa 2005: 43). Readers learn that in Manhattan 'fashionable young women and New Yorkers in striking suits are picking up take-

away sushi for lunch' (Kato 2002: 28)⁶ and that the first conveyor-belt sushi restaurant in Milan 'is full of Milanese dressed in chic clothes' (Matsumoto 2002: 147). Hollywood celebrities are always mentioned, and wealthy, educated people are identified as the major sushi consumers outside Japan. In short, the message is that the current global 'sushi boom' is about trendy people eating trendy Japanese food. The descriptions of stylish sushi bars with excellent selections of wine, and bright, open spaces with lots of glass and futuristic décors clearly differentiate foreign sushi restaurants from more traditional establishments within Japan, or 'Japanese restaurants that Japanese customers would visit' outside Japan (Tamamura 2004:15).

At times, however, the difference between foreign and Japanese sushi is articulated in negative terms such as 'strange', 'odd', 'outrageous (*tondemonai*)' or 'wicked (*jadō*)'. Such words construct foreign sushi as an uncomfortable or perhaps amusing, if not completely undesirable, deviation from the Japanese original. While the value of 'trendy' we have looked at earlier is used largely to connote a perspective of foreigners (i.e. 'they' think sushi is trendy), commentaries about 'strange' or 'outrageous' overseas sushi are always made from an (authoritative) Japanese perspective: 'they' do not think it odd to put mayonnaise in sushi, but 'we' do; and we know what we are talking about because sushi is Japanese.⁷ From such a perspective, these writers observe, report, marvel at and sometimes poke fun at the shocking combination of ingredients, over-sized *nigirizushi*, or the extraordinary amount of *wasabi* foreigners use, for example. The writers describe sushi that 'Japanese would be astonished with' (e.g. parma ham and melon roll, BLT roll, peanut butter and jelly sushi ...) (Kato 2002: 27) and sushi so unpalatable that it 'defies the imagination' (Ikezawa 2005: 59). Using the trope of original vs. copy, authenticity vs. fake, the

us/them boundary is constantly reinforced in contrasting ‘overdecorated’ foreign sushi vs. ‘simple’ Japanese sushi; foreigners’ preference for strong tastes vs. Japanese appreciation of delicate flavours; Japanese knowledge of fish vs. foreigners’ relative ignorance of it. Strongly implied in statements such as ‘those people who drink coke with sushi will not understand Japanese aesthetics of *wabi* and *sabi*’ (Kato 2002: 69-70), is the positionality of the writers as from the ‘original culture’ which produced sushi, and linked with this is the idea that only Japanese ‘truly’ understand ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ sushi. The cultural superiority of such perceptions is unmistakable.

Still, the overall tone of these books is more that of appreciation of the creativity and vitality of sushi outside Japan than that of blatant nationalism. For instance, even as Tamamura claims he cried (in distress) over his sweet *hijiki* seaweed salad in Paris (‘a powerful sweetness as if the whole thing is dipped in sugar and honey’), he responds with restraint, only muttering that it was ‘an odd place’ rather than criticising the wisdom of the French chef who created sugared seaweed (Tamamura 2004: 39). Similarly, when describing a noticeably Orientalist sushi bar in London’s Soho (a masseur in judo uniform offering customers massage (!); morning TV radio-exercises projected on screen; nonsensical Japanese phrases printed on the glass façade ...), he is not in the least critical of what seems to be misinterpreted ‘Japaneseness’ (Tamamura 2004: 95-103). Indeed, in an interview Tamamura gave elsewhere, he says of the bar in question: ‘I’m sure the idea was to do things the Japanese way, but somewhere along the line the place took a peculiar turn. I will say, though, that the massage is actually very pleasant. ... If restaurants in this country [i.e. Japan] tried this “meal and massage” angle, I think it might actually catch on’ (Tamamura 2000: 57). Clearly, he is not interested in correcting the misguided attempts at

‘Japaneseness’ or promoting the ‘authentic Japanese way’; if anything, he is willing to participate in the inter-cultural imaginary of the new Orient, or to adopt part of the western imaginary of Japan as his own. Indeed none of these four books insists on ‘authentic’ sushi in traditional Japanese style; rather, they recognise and commend the creativity of overseas sushi restaurants that are not tradition-bound.

Of course, the line between the creative and the strange, between the acceptable and not-so-acceptable is a fine one. Just how much innovation is too much? At what point does sushi cease to be sushi? While these questions are indeed asked by some of the writers themselves, none of them seems to have a clear answer beyond a simple assumption of Japanese cultural and historical authority over the culinary art of sushi-making. When it comes to drawing the line, the long history of Japanese sushi, stringent training, craftsmanship and masterly performance of Japanese sushi chefs are evoked and contrasted with non-Japanese versions. For example, Ikezawa narrates an episode where a trained Japanese sushi chef tries American supermarket sushi and asks, in disbelief, ‘do Americans eat such a thing?’ (2005: 59). Unsurprisingly, readers are expected to accept his judgement as truth. The distinction between ‘creative’ sushi and ‘strange’ sushi is thus discursively managed by the implicitly hierarchical us/them structure, maintaining Japan’s position of authority.

In addition to the ambivalence over whether sushi is ‘stylish’ or ‘strange’ – or indeed both – there is also ambivalence about where, chronologically and culturally, it should be located; that is, it lies somewhere between the traditional and the modern, and the old and the new, but its articulation is dependent on individual cases located at specific cultural and chronological locations. This theme of ambivalence is most

evident in Tamamura's *Kaitensushi*, so let us focus on this text from now on.

Although sushi in Japan is considered traditional food with a long history, Tamamura associates overseas sushi with newness and even the future. He asserts that the image of Japan seen by the world has recently changed: 'Japan of Fujiyama and geisha, via transistor radio and motorbike, transformed into Japan of sushi, anime and karaoke' (2004: 3). This kind of statement does not simply describe objective facts but rather constructs a teleological view of techno-Japan and the world. In this case he separates sushi from tradition and the past, and instead places it on the side of the modern beside other forms of contemporary Japanese popular culture which have transnational popularity. The idea here is that foreigners think that sushi is cool not because it represents history and tradition but because it is associated with values like progressiveness, fashion, trend and newness. Repeated use of words like 'new', 'future', '21st century' and 'high-tech' reinforces this perspective. British supermarkets without sushi are deemed 'old-fashioned', and a prediction is made that 'in the 21st century sushi may become the world's fast food, replacing hamburgers (Tamamura 2004: 82, 110).

The representations of sushi as a 'new', 'cool' and contemporary global food, however, does not preclude its association with 'tradition'. Sushi is caught in a retro-future ambiguity, representing both past and future, tradition and innovation. For example, when a French sushi chef is quoted saying that sushi's success in France is closely linked to it being part of 'old culinary culture' with a 'sophisticated tradition' (Tamamura 2004: 45), sushi's age and tradition are invoked to explain this new trend. While sushi is said to be 'modern' and forward-looking, not 'traditional' and stuck in the past, tradition and history are constantly brought up in discussions about it. On a

number of occasions, these books point out that seemingly ‘new’ overseas takes on sushi (e.g. rice without vinegar; larger size *nigiri*; roll sushi with several colourful fillings; roll sushi without nori) have in fact existed somewhere within the long and rich history of sushi in Japan. This kind of discourse, by drawing equivalence between contemporary foreign sushi and older and forgotten forms of Japanese sushi in history, functions to reduce possibly threatening new differences of the Other by reassigning it into the realm of the old and familiar Self. The explanation of sushi’s global success in terms of its innate ‘capacity to allow ‘freedom’’ that is found in history (Kato 2002: 84) also serves to reinforce Japan as the origin and as the originator, inferring others are copiers or imitators.

The new/old ambivalence is further complicated because the newness and oldness are not neatly assigned to ‘us’ and ‘them’ respectively. There is no clean-cut representation where ‘Japan’ equals tradition and Euro-American Other equals ‘newness’, or vice versa. Instead there is a skewed sense of history and a sentiment akin to ‘overcoming modernity’ in the implicit but prevalent message that the overseas sushi boom means that ‘they’ are finally appreciating ‘our’ culture, that ‘they’ are learning from ‘us’ or that ‘they’ are yet to catch up with ‘us’. The paragraph below from the ‘commentary’ that appears at the end of Tamamura’s *Kaiten sushi*, frankly expresses this perspective. Interestingly, ‘their’ (in this case French) eating ‘our’ sushi is understood as a victory of sorts in the long historical battle over cultural superiority.

France, a country of women’s dreams, of brands and modes; entrancing
French modern classical music such as Debussy’s; France, a country of

literature that produced Baudelaire and Rimbaud. France, a country of philosophy from Sartre to structuralism; France, the centre of European culinary civilisation. When it comes to venturing into such a country, Japanese habit has long been to employ a regular tactic for attack and think, in the Rokumeikan style, that first we need to learn till we achieve the same level. Who amongst us Japanese predicted that sushi was to become the eye of the typhoon of Japan's cultural attack on Euro-America? (Saeki 2004: 267).

The writer then concludes that after reading Tamamura's book 'with tears and respect', he realised that 'the high pride of France and Europe, which the Japanese used to think was as high as the wall of Berlin, is now quickly smashed up by the sharp drill of *kaitensushi*' (Saeki 2004: 267). Such simplistic cultural nationalism professes the culinary superiority of Japan, arguably reversing the inferiority complex towards the 'west' ingrained in Japan's modern history. The reference to Rokumeikan clearly indicates this kind of mentality, as does the use of the metaphor of 'Black Ship of sushi' that has been evoked in relation to overseas sushi (see, for example, Kato 2002: 147). In this context it can be seen that this kind of discourse on overseas sushi is produced with reference to the civilised (west)-uncivilised (east) axis that influenced Japan's relations with the west in the nineteenth century. Japan has long had a love-hate relationship with the (imaginary) 'west'. The west was an object of both admiration and abjection, in relation to which Japan constructed its own self image, and whose approval Japan desperately sought. In the above quote sushi is given the hefty task of clearing up this historically overdetermined problematic. It is saying: 'Japan's long-term object of desire and source of national inferiority complex is now bowing in front of sushi power! We no longer need to play and excel in their

game to be acknowledged and accepted. With sushi, we are making them play our game'. Of course this is somewhat anachronistic in today's world, where the cultural superiority of the imagined 'west' has long been challenged and superseded. Still, it is interesting to observe that memories and traces of imperialist and colonial power relations of the nineteenth century play a role in the production of contemporary discourse on overseas sushi.

If Saeki reads sushi as Japan's 'cultural attack on Euro-America' (2004: 267), Tamamura himself has somewhat subtler views. He suggests that sushi is about to become a form of 'world "civilisation"', and that for sushi to be accepted globally it needs to leave its Japanese roots (Tamamura 2004: 240, 256). He says this should be done in a way that does not impose Japaneseness on sushi production, but rather develops a universal standard without cultural barriers: 'Japanese tend to protect themselves by raising barriers, and rejecting the participation of outsiders saying that it is too difficult, or that outsiders do not understand' (Tamamura 2004: 70), but he recommends that Japanese people should be more easy-going. If sushi remained 'mysterious and hard to get to know', no one would have been interested. Conveyor-belt sushi's international success, he says, is because of its 'universal standard' and 'barrier-free' nature. It 'presents profound culture in a visible and easy-to-understand form' (Tamamura 2004: 48). Foreigners are both 'naïve' and 'brave' in wanting to learn how to make sushi, he says, and that's OK with him.

He also sees Japan as the perfect agent for merging the west and east: 'In the 21st century, we, the Japanese, who have learned all aspects of eastern and western cultures, need to spread a new lifestyle to the world. [Sushi is] a perfect case study'

(Tamamura 2004: 18). In the context of Japan as not simply the great ‘adaptor’ of overseas foods, but as a centre of innovative culinary fusion, sushi can be seen as a new model, style and place for cross cultural encounters. The stereotype of Japan as a peaceful nation, rather than Japan as an economically powerful nation, drives the process through its international influence on cooperation and accommodation. He suggests that a strong economy is detrimental to cultural transmission (e.g. the US cultural transmission tends to be regarded as cultural imperialism or a ‘forcing of global standard’) and that Japan’s currently weak economic position offers a better opportunity for its culture to be accepted by non-Japanese consumers (Tamamura 2004: 254-255). Japan’s role would be not to ‘force “Japanese tradition”’ but to ‘volunteer to be a *gyōji* (sumo referee) to ensure that culture is communicated correctly’ (Tamamura 2004: 254). The book ends with a statement that sushi and Japan lie ‘at the centre of a joyful circle where we are liberated from the yoke that divided us along the lines of national borders, ethnicity and religion’ (Tamamura 2004: 261). Such expressions of nation and self in this context reflect an entirely different kind of nationalism to that which is commonly iterated in popular culture, but while expressed in accommodating tones, it still emphasises the ambivalence about self/other, and most importantly foregrounds Japan ‘at the centre’ of the new global community.⁸

‘Tradition’ thus emerges as a side-effect of the representation of the hybrid, new, east/west sushi, and is encoded with superiority and prestige. Even if these books are about new overseas sushi, the image of ‘traditional sushi’ follows them around like a shadow. Tradition appears strong via the discourse on the hybrid, but such a position cannot engage the fact that sushi is not consumed as ‘foreign food’ by many overseas

consumers – the current generation of Los Angeles, Sydney, Auckland, London, Seoul children, for example, are growing up on local variations of sushi (this is akin to Japanese children growing up eating Japanese spaghetti, which they do not regard as ‘Italian’). Besides, the contemporary readers of these books themselves are as alienated from the traditional sushi as foreigners are, judging from the numerous guidebooks, manuals and internet sites advising Japanese readers on how to order, eat and pay correctly at traditional sushi bars, which often seem incomprehensible from outside.

In contrast to these nuanced, ambivalent, populist interpretations of the global sushi boom, the Japanese state has adopted what at first appeared a patriarchal and rather parochial stance concerning the production and consumption of sushi overseas. In the next section, we will turn our attention to the state’s interest in promoting ‘genuine’ Japanese food overseas, with the intention of understanding such an effort in the context of Japan’s *bunka gaikō*, or cultural diplomacy (and related concepts of soft power and national branding).

Soft Power, National Branding and the ‘Sushi Police’

In November, 2006, *The Washington Post* ran a leader that described how following the Japanese Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (hereafter, MAFF)’s culturally confusing experience in Colorado at a restaurant serving *both* Korean Bar-B-Q *and* sushi, the Japanese government had decided to intervene to ensure that *pure* Japanese food could be distinguished from other pseudo-Japanese food outside Japan:

With restaurants around the globe describing themselves as Japanese while actually serving food that is Asian fusion, or just plain bad, the government here announced a plan this month to offer official seals of approval to overseas eateries deemed to be ‘pure Japanese’ (Faiola 2006).

The article suggested that the development of this system may mean ‘yet another expression of resurgent Japanese nationalism’, and went on to warn America, ‘home of the California roll’, that ‘the Sushi Police are on their way’ (Faiola 2006). In the following we discuss the Japanese government’s authentication plan and situate this scheme within the context of the wider effort at increasing Japan’s ‘soft power’ via so-called cultural diplomacy and national branding. The Japanese case stands out not simply as an attempt to nationalise ‘Japanese food’ but also as a conscious effort to manage the national image in order to cash in on the positive branding associated with foreigners consuming quality Japanese food.

Initially, at a rhetorical level, the scheme *was* about authenticity. For example, the Agriculture Minister Matsuoka Toshikazu, when asked about why the state felt impelled to exert quality control over Japanese restaurants abroad, answered:

What people need to understand is that real Japanese food is a highly developed art. It involves all the senses; it should be beautifully presented, use genuine ingredients and be made by a trained chef... What we are seeing now are restaurants that *pretend to offer* Japanese cooking but are really Korean, Chinese or Filipino. We must protect our food culture (cited in Faiola 2006: A01) (authors’ italics).

The MAFF document similarly pointed out the existence of the ‘increasing numbers of Japanese restaurants outside Japan providing Japanese cuisine that was different to ‘traditional’ Japanese cooking ... however *continue to operate under the guise* of a Japanese restaurant’ as the rationale behind the scheme (MAFF 2006a: 1) (authors’ italics). The discourse of intervention is thus ostensibly about protecting ‘our [i.e. Japanese] food culture’, defined as ‘genuine’ and ‘traditional’ food. It mobilises an essentialist and nationalist rhetoric that rejects the value of non-Japanese restaurants (often owned and run by Asian ‘others’) that ‘pretend’ to be ‘real’ Japanese. It assumes a non-problematic notion of ownership and authenticity regarding what is considered to be Japanese national cuisine, and attempts to exert control over it. In this sense, the above quotes demonstrate a clear case of culinary nationalism. Such nationalistic discourse emerged not just because of the increasing global popularity of Japanese food and the state’s concern over the ‘purity’ of food. It also emerged in the larger context of promoting Japan’s soft power and cultural diplomacy.

Since around 2000, ‘soft power’, a term coined by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye (1990; 2004) has become a buzz word in Japan. Nye’s argument that attractive culture and ideas – rather than the more conventional ‘hard’ military or economic power – is a new ‘means to success in world politics’ seemed to have fitted well with Japan’s desire to regain some confidence internationally at a time of economic decline. In addition to the recession, post-1990s Japan was also struggling to reformulate its national identity away from its association with wartime aggression. At a time when there was considerable international media attention focused on such issues as the ‘comfort women’ and the Nanjing Massacre, the focus on culture as something ‘soft’

and non-threatening must have been quite attractive to the Japanese state and to many Japanese.⁹ Following the publication of US journalist Brian McGray's *Foreign Policy* article 'Japan's Gross National Cool' (2002), which depicted Japan as an increasingly influential superpower producer of popular culture such as manga and anime, Nye's suggestion that culture is an indicator of a nation's status and influence on the global stage was quickly taken up by Japanese policy makers, academics and media alike.¹⁰

In particular, the Japanese government's new enthusiasm for popular and consumer culture as a matter of national interest has crystallised around the catchphrase of *bunka gaikō*, or 'cultural diplomacy'. The Koizumi cabinet in 2004 created an advisory group¹¹ to discuss the promotion of cultural diplomacy, which produced a summary report (*Bunka gaikō no suishin ni kansuru kondankai 2005*). This key document emphasised the importance of culture as a means to increase international understanding of Japan, and subsequently to improve its national image overseas, which ultimately aids Japan's diplomacy and helps to 'realise the national interest' (*Bunka gaikō no suishin ni kansuru kondankai 2005: 2*). As the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs (and later Prime Minister) Aso Taro clearly stated, 'foreign policy is a competition over brand image' (Aso 2006), and the Japanese government saw that its task was to utilise culture to create a 'Japan Brand'. The media, too, embraced 'Japan Cool' as a new Japanese aesthetics discovered and endorsed by Euro-American consumers.¹² Although there are some sceptical voices (see, for example, Otsuka 2005), the discourse of cultural diplomacy and the idea that Japanese popular culture, fashion and food are popular overseas, and that this signifies the growth of Japan's soft power, has been largely accepted.

The 'sushi police' scheme emerged as a part of this general trend. Since 2005, the dissemination of Japanese food and food culture abroad became part of the government's Intellectual Property Strategic Programme (hereafter IPSP), which is reviewed annually by a group headed by the Prime Minister and consisting of all cabinet ministers including the MAFF Minister. The programmes created in this forum aim to increase Japan's share in foreign markets by fostering soft power industry and pursuing a 'Japan Brand Strategy'. In 2005 the 'Japan Brand Working Group' was established by the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, and this led to the formation of 'Shoku-bunka kenkyū suishin kondankai' (An informal gathering to discuss the promotion of food culture research), which specifically looked at how to promote Japanese food as 'Japan Brand' and requested that the government 'promote food culture as a state strategy' (Shoku-bunka kenkyū suishin kondankai, 2005: 12). Following this, the 2006 IPSP listed food culture as one of the 'cultural assets' that represent the 'gross national cultural power' of Japan' (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2006: 130). In this document MAFF was given a number of tasks such as 'spreading Japanese food culture around the globe' and 'promoting global use of quality foodstuffs produced in Japan' (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2006: 153). In the same year, MAFF was also required to promote Japanese food overseas as one of the 'follow up' actions to promote cultural diplomacy (Bunka gaikō no suishin ni kansuru kondankai 2006: 1). In response MAFF established its own internal advisory council in late 2006.¹³ The advisory council duly compiled some statistics, confirmed the 'rapid increase' of Japanese restaurants in the US, UK, France, China and Thailand over the last decade, and identified sushi as being 'particularly popular around the world' (Bunka gaikō no suishin ni kansuru kondankai 2006: 8).¹⁴ It also noted the prevalence of 'fusion food'

and ‘non-Japanese ownership’ in such restaurants and discussed possible means of certifying ‘authentic’ Japanese restaurants; that is, restaurants that would meet their (as yet to be decided) criteria to qualify as ‘genuine’ Japanese government-approved restaurants. By way of comparison, it looked at similar certification schemes for national cuisines in Italy and Thailand.¹⁵

As we have seen at the beginning of this section, however, the US and other English-language media wondered whether MAFF’s certification plan was not a rather clumsy attempt to ‘authenticate’ a product that really was not the government’s to authenticate in the first instance. Writing from the position that Japanese bureaucrats were trying to recapture the concept of Japanese cuisine for Japan and control what actually constituted Japanese food,¹⁶ criticism mounted and discussion ensued from both within and outside Japan involving media, academics, restaurant owners and bloggers. Despite MAFF’s insistence that the certification system had nothing to do with xenophobia or racism (Sanchanta 2007), some Japanese media reported that ‘fake Japanese food’ was made by Chinese, Koreans, or Vietnamese (J-Cast News 2006), and some feared that non-Japanese owned restaurants would be excluded from the scheme. The MAFF Minister on his visit to the US in March 2007 had to refute such rumours (*Yomiuri Online* 2007).

In Japan media discussions revolved around the notion of ‘authenticity’ and the government’s ‘nationalistic’ attitude in attempting to determine exactly what makes up ‘genuine Japanese food’. There were repeated use of words such as ‘pretend’, ‘guise’, ‘counterfeit’, ‘pseudo’, ‘imitation’ and ‘bastardization’ on the one hand, contrasted with the use of words such as ‘pure’, ‘authentic’, ‘proper’ and ‘genuine’

on the other. References were made to Japanese curry and *rāmen* noodles, which of course bear at best a family resemblance to the ‘original’ Indian curries or Chinese soup noodles, yet have achieved the status of national ‘Japanese’ dishes at least in the minds of many Japanese. Questions were asked as to what ‘Japanese food’ meant, anyway. As a *Financial Times* writer has put it, ‘certifying authentic food ... is outmoded in a globalised world where McDonald’s in Tokyo serves teriyaki hamburgers and Pret a Manger in London sells sushi’ (Sanchata 2007). Many commentators underscored the importance of flexibility in defining ‘Japanese food’ and tolerance towards local adaptations of Japanese cuisine outside Japan.

Unsurprisingly, the certification plan was revised, and eventually it was transformed into a ‘recommendation programme’. Partly in response to foreign media’s ‘sushi police’ accusations and the subsequent discussion outlined above, the final proposal (Kaigai nihonshoku resutoran suishō yūshikisha kaigi 2007) for the recommendation programme (which replaced the original ‘certification’ plan) played down the ‘authenticity’ argument, instead focusing on the use of ‘Japanese ingredients’ and ‘Japanese cooking skills’ (Kaigai nihonshoku resutoran suishō yūshikisha kaigi 2007: 6).¹⁷

From the perspective of cultural diplomacy and national image-management, it was important for the state to quickly refute the ‘sushi police’ and the more extreme ultranationalist accusations. Words like ‘authenticity’, ‘genuine’ and ‘proper’ are nowhere found in the 2007 proposal, and it acknowledged the influence of foreign cuisine and culture on Japanese cuisine.¹⁸ It urged that the plan’s aim should be assisting ‘those who make good Japanese food, irrespective of the nationality ... and

[the recommendation] should not be exclusive or discriminatory’ (Kaigai nihonshoku resutoran suishō yūshikisha kaigi 2007: 4). The positive recommendations were to be made on the basis of the use of ingredients imported from Japan (e.g. rice, sauces and spices) as well as Japanese culinary skills, atmosphere, Japanese language, service, presentation and so forth. Restaurants were also expected to convey information about Japanese food culture to customers. Based on this proposal, the government created a non-profit organisation called Japanese Restaurants Overseas (JRO) and provided funding, but otherwise removed itself from the running of the scheme. The JRO offices subsequently opened in Bangkok, Shanghai, Taipei, Amsterdam, London, Los Angeles and Paris in 2008 with the aim of recommending ‘traditional’ Japanese restaurants overseas, and with an annual budget of ¥270,000,000.¹⁹ A logo with chopsticks, a cherry blossom and the Japanese national flag was created, and a recommendation sticker was designed based on this logo to be awarded to appropriate restaurants.

The story so far demonstrates that the Japanese state has backed down from its original position to provide quasi-official quality control over Japanese food overseas, largely in response to international media critique and negative public reactions. Moreover, given that it is not in the state’s interest to generate negative publicity over its attempt to ‘renationalise’ sushi, and given that soft power is about producing positive images of Japan overseas, it is not surprising that the state modified its views on the ownership of sushi abroad. So, while the government may have given up the idea of certifying ‘genuine’ food, has it given up the idea of using food as Japan’s ‘cultural asset’ and a source of soft power? Not quite. In the following we will look at the JRO and suggest that state culinary nationalism entails more than authenticity and

purity of Japanese food. Even without a commitment to authenticity, food and cuisine are clearly part of Japan's nationalist agenda and soft power discourse.

More Than Just Authenticity

Far from being the 'sushi police', the current JRO seems to have little interest in authenticating or certifying foreign sushi restaurants. Its goals are: establishing branches abroad; publishing a journal and preparing educational materials on culinary skills; developing human resources with regard to Japanese cooking; identifying overseas owners of Japanese restaurants' needs and conducting local PR activities; information exchange; and research on the promotion of exports of Japanese foodstuffs (JRO 2008: 3). In an interview with JRO's Mr Shimoguchi in early 2009, we asked whether the current JRO activities would evolve to resemble the early planning in 2006-7. He said that if local demand was significant enough JRO would consider introducing the recommendation sticker scheme, but that there was no current plan to do so. It was not likely to eventuate, he believed. He emphasised JRO's role in 'supporting' and 'assisting' overseas restaurants, and told us that currently many of JRO's activities are based on responses to needs of foreign owners of Japanese restaurants for access to Japanese ingredients, chefs, food handling skills and so forth:

JRO responds to local restaurants' requests concerning, for example, hygiene control, shortage of trained chefs, or difficulty in getting ingredients. Once we've gathered opinions from restaurants, JRO may, for example, communicate to the relevant authority that there are some demands to reduce tariffs on some

ingredients. Our job is to communicate the existence of needs to relevant organisations.²⁰

In short, JRO sees itself increasingly as an agency that facilitates commercial activities between overseas Japanese restaurants, exporters and government agencies, rather than as an agency that ensures the authenticity of Japanese food overseas. To this end, it has arranged study group meetings with exporters and importers both from Japan and overseas, which has proved useful in stimulating export growth. It also provides forums for interested importers and resellers of Japanese food abroad, and attempts to facilitate government-business interactions that can lead to increased sales of Japanese agricultural and marine products abroad. However, it is important to note at this juncture that while the formal discourse has changed from ‘authenticity’ to ‘support’ for overseas owners of Japanese restaurants, a more subtle form of discursive parochialism still exists.

In terms of the question of authenticity and the ‘sushi police’ accusation, JRO seems clearly aware that the issue of what actually defines Japanese food is problematic. Mr. Shimoguchi related its current perspective as follows:

JRO is not concerned with whether food is *oishii* or *oishikunai* (tasty or not). It does not concern itself with the definition of Japanese food, which is very difficult anyway. Think about pasta and ramen noodles in Japan. When it comes to food culture, if the local people think some food is *oishii* (tasty), then that is fine. However, JRO will say things like ‘if you use this type of ingredient, make it this way, then it will be even more delicious (*motto oishiku narimasu yo*)! It

will say things like ‘it’s dangerous not to be careful about hygiene’. But JRO does not say whether something is *oishii* (delicious) or *oishikunai* (not delicious).²¹

The JRO would *never* judge whether a particular dish is ‘delicious’ or not, particularly if it was made in an overseas location, and it would limit its role to advising the restaurants on how to make the dish ‘more delicious’. While this statement on one level denies JRO’s position as the judge of authenticity, it also confirms, on another level, Japan’s superior position as the origin and authority. For what makes Japanese food overseas ‘more delicious’ is presumed to be the use of ‘real’ ingredients from Japan and ‘real’ trained chefs, as well as ‘real’ Japanese knowledge and skills in food preparation. After all, one of the most important of JRO’s goals is to expand overseas markets for Japanese food (JRO 2008: 2). The inference about what constitutes ‘deliciousness’ is moot; *of course* Japanese know what is delicious, hence how to make something ‘more delicious’. But there is also a negative inference here: that these conditions for making ‘tastier’ Japanese food overseas are *not* being met. Hence there is a need for the existence of their organisation – to help others meet a higher ‘standard’ which is yet to be articulated.

We would like to suggest that the Japanese government (and JRO as its agent) is not promoting ‘authentic’ Japanese food for the sake of authenticity. Compared to the popular culinary nationalism we saw earlier in the representations of the overseas sushi boom, the government’s position is a more strategic one. As a part of cultural diplomacy, the emphasis of the certification/recommendation plan has always been firmly on the ‘national branding’ and resultant economic gain; that is, increasing

Japanese exports. This is clear, for example, in how food is incorporated in the government's IPSP. Stating that in order to make Japan 'trusted, respected and loved by the world', it is necessary to 'establish and reinforce an attractive Japan Brand ... and actively convey the attractiveness of Japan to overseas countries' (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2006: 108), it lists a number of food-related 'Japan brand strategies'. These include 'popularising safe Japanese food throughout the world, aiming at doubling the number of consumers of Japanese food', 'spreading Japanese food culture overseas' and 'doubling exports of agricultural and food products between 2004 and 2009' (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2006: 106-107). To realise these goals, the document also proposed some concrete actions such as training non-Japanese chefs, organising food-related workshops overseas and promoting Japanese food through overseas agencies of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and JETRO (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2006: 107).

MAFF estimated that in 2006 there were 9,000 Japanese restaurants in the US alone, with their number increasing at a rate of 8.5 % per year. This suggests a significant overseas market for Japanese foodstuffs. It also recognised the soft power potential of Japanese food outside Japan, as it was 'highly regarded as being healthy, beautifully presented, safe and of high quality' (MAFF 2006b: 8). The recommendation plan took shape in response to the perception that some overseas restaurants were taking advantage of the 'up-market image that is associated with Japanese food' and that this had the 'potential to damage the *image*[emphasis added] of Japanese food' (Council of Advisors for the Recommendation of Japanese Restaurants Outside Japan 2007: 2-3).²² In other words, it was all about images, perceptions and the opportunity to 'penetrate the market abroad with food from Japan' (Council of Advisors for the

Recommendation of Japanese Restaurants Outside Japan 2007: 1). Ultimately, the government's interest was not so much in authenticity but the practical uses of the positive images associated with Japanese food. To overemphasise the authenticity aspect (as the English-language media did) would be to misunderstand the endeavour of 'cultural diplomacy' and strategic 'national branding', as well as the specific form of culinary nationalism with which the Japanese government is engaged.

Indeed, if we look at the recommendation programme closely it is apparent that this has never been just about crude cultural essentialism that regards Japanese food as an embodiment of a pure, authentic and unchanging national culture. Even the MAFF document that was produced prior to the 'sushi police' media coverage openly admitted the difficulty of determining the authenticity of Japanese food, stating that 'Japanese food ... does not possess a strict definition today' (MAFF 2006b: 7) The recognition of culinary hybridity is even more evident in the final proposal, which acknowledges the 'diverse and flexible transformation' of Japanese cuisine 'owing to local tastes and the creative talents of overseas chefs' (Council of Advisors for the Recommendation of Japanese Restaurants Outside Japan 2007: 2). It even considers the possibility of creating a 'fusion' category as part of the recommendation programme. If maintaining the authenticity is the government's sole aim, recommending fusion food – which can not be seen as 'authentic' or 'pure' Japanese food – does not make much sense. But from the perspective of soft power, fusion does make sense. Hybridised and localised fusion food, as long as it retains a positive association with the signifier 'Japan', contributes to the 'national branding', increases consumers' exposure to ingredients such as rice and seaweed, and possibly leads to sales of these products overseas. Of course, for these potentials to be realised, it is

crucial that such foods become part of the ‘Japan brand’ and not some non-Japanese, ‘odourless’ (Iwabuchi 2002) cosmopolitan and global culinary culture. For example, as long as sushi is produced and consumed with the clear understanding that it is ‘Japanese’ in origin, regardless of its idiosyncratic manifestation in different cultural settings, it can still be associated with the ‘Japan Brand’, allowing ‘seaweed from Japan’ or ‘genuine Japanese rice’ to have an added value even when used in ‘inauthentic’ fusion cuisine. This also explains the emphasis on the ‘traditional ingredients’ rather than ‘traditional cuisine’ in the proposal document discussed earlier rather than certifying ‘genuine’ Japanese cuisine.

Even embracing fusion food, Japan’s position as the origin and authority is subtly retained. For instance, in an interview available on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ website, Mr. Yamamoto of the PR department of the Ministry described the California Roll as ‘a Japanese food which makes one gasp in surprise: ‘Is THIS Japanese food!’’ but went on to say that such a fusion is a ‘good thing’ because ‘imitation is the sincerest flattery’ (2007). This statement, calling the California Roll an ‘imitation’, discursively reconstructs Japan’s authority as the ‘original’. Similarly, the chairman of JRO stated that concessions were needed for sushi’s acceptance overseas and that ‘it’s fine to consider California Roll as part of Japanese food culture ... we should be generous’ (Mogi, cited in AFP News 2008). But being ‘generous’, of course, is something one does from a position of power and superiority. Implicit in this statement is the assumption that the existence and popularity of California Roll confirms, rather than challenges, the position of Japan as the authority. Japan judges what is and is not genuine, as well as how much transformation might be acceptable. California Roll is thus re-domesticated as it is redefined as ‘part of Japanese food

culture'. From such a perspective, fusion and hybridisation would indeed be warmly welcomed. Akin to the *motto oishii* rhetoric we have seen earlier, despite the apparent rejection of the essentialism of authenticity, the superiority of Japan as the cultural origin is maintained.

To summarise, the certification/recommendation plan emerged in the context of Japan's pursuit of soft power and national branding, rather than an outright nationalist agenda to promote the purity and superiority of Japanese national culture. On one level, the government's initial attempts to certify genuine Japanese food outside Japan indicate its failure to acknowledge the shifting identity of a 'national' product within the framework of globalisation. On another level, however, seen in the specific soft culture context, national interest, not authentic food, is really the driving force behind the plan. In its attempt to 'further accelerate the Japanese cuisine boom currently sweeping across the world' and to 'double consumers of Japanese food overseas', the government, though it had nothing to do with the emerging international image of Japanese food, is trying to cash in on such images. In this sense, its endeavour is not too dissimilar to what those numerous 'non-Japanese' owners of Japanese restaurants overseas are purportedly doing.

Conclusions

It is probably fair to say there is no such thing as pure and authentic national cuisine. As Mintz suggests, 'national cuisine' is perhaps a 'contradiction in terms' (Mintz 1996: 104). Japanese food, too, has always been heterogeneous, even before today's accelerated globalisation. And yet, discursive attempts to ascertain the 'national'

ownership of globalised sushi and other Japanese food have been apparent in our analysis of the popular and state discourses on the global popularity of Japanese food. Culinary nationalism expressed in these discourses is part of the wider attempt of constructing and reconstructing Japanese national identity and promoting national interest within the context of globalisation. As the deterritorialisation of culture progresses with globalisation, dislocating cultural artefacts from their place of 'origin' and reinserting them into a new location and context, the nation-state and national subject are attempting to re-establish their claims of ownership of culture. While it is probably unrealistic to expect to fully subject food to nationalising, the culinary nationalism we have seen is subtle and complex. In particular, the Japanese gaze over the overseas 'sushi boom' incorporates attempts to establish Japanese ownership of culture, not only in its 'authentic' forms but also in its multiple, adapted, creative, hybrid, fusion forms.

Sushi has become a global product with a transnational market, but regardless of its diverse, international and eclectic forms both overseas and within Japan, there have still been attempts to renationalise it, both from the Japanese state, and from the vernacular media. However sushi is not reducible to national culture. And while popular media in Japan continue to produce accounts of 'them' eating 'our' food, and attempt to incorporate the 'new' sushi within the framework of Japan's culinary traditions, the ambivalence inherent in this discourse is undeniable, as we have seen. Soft power, though, still has relevance for both state and populist readings of the sushi boom; it is the driving force behind the state's desire to increase its exports of foodstuffs, and simultaneously it lies behind the vernacular media's attempts to promote national pride in a Japanese artefact that has been adopted and adapted by

westerners, effectively reversing the more widely recognised trend of Japan doing the adopting. The resurrection of Japan as the point of origin, and the cultural pride associated with the new forms of sushi that have appeared overseas (*they* have modified *our* product in interesting ways), reinforce Japan's cultural nationalism. Although it seems almost banal to investigate something as elementary as food as a source of national pride, both types of discourse we have examined do precisely this. It will be interesting to see how sushi continues to evolve as local and global demands and experience drive the development of new, imaginative and challenging styles of sushi; and while Japan itself may have nothing to do with this expansion of interest in sushi, the Japan branding associated with sushi will remain, giving both discursive and economic advantage to the state.

Acknowledgements

¹ It is estimated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan (MAFF) that there are between 20,000 and 25,000 overseas Japanese restaurants (Kaigai nihonshoku yūshikisha kaigi 2007: 3).

² Sushi has even begun penetrating into home kitchens, with a number of sushi making courses and sushi making kits for home chefs available on the market. Celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Nigel Slater, and Ainsley Harriott all had a foray with sushi, and even Nigella Lawson has suggested serving sushi rice with her Christmas salmon.

³ *Nori* was viewed with such dislike by US consumers that it was put on the inside of sushi rolls to hide its physical presence and hence conform to the consumer's sensitivities.

⁴ Interviews with the owners of Sushi Train franchises in Auckland, New Zealand and Cairns, Australia, and with Nick Karoutsoulis, the owner of New Zealand's biggest sushi chain, St. Pierre's, corroborate this perception.

⁵ There are two other *shinsho* books on sushi that contains a chapter on overseas sushi boom, which we did not include here (Watanabe 2002; Okubo 2008).

⁶ On the other hand, those who do not eat sushi are described as 'customers with conservative taste' (Kato 2002: 60).

⁷ And with a lot of mythologies about the length of the training and history, sushi has a particular affinity to this kind of discourse. When Michelin awarded stars to some Tokyo sushi restaurant in 2007, there was a substantial response: how can foreigners tell what is good sushi?

⁸ Similarly, Ikezawa's assertion that the Japanese are the 'master of fusion' (Ikezawa 129-30), citing tarako spaghetti (spaghetti made with fish eggs), anpan (red bean buns), and katsukarē (deep fried pork cutlets with Madras curry sauce) as examples of culinary fusion in Japan, gives Japan a privileged position as an agent of intercultural merge.

⁹ In this sense it is revealing that the 2005 report to the government that provided the basic understanding of Japanese version of soft power was titled: "*bunka-kōryū no heiwa kokka' nihon no sōzō o* (Towards the creation of Japan as a nation of peace and cultural exchanges)."

¹⁰ Interestingly, while Nye's work identified three sources of soft power (culture, political ideals and foreign policy), Japanese discussion of soft power has almost exclusively revolved around popular culture such as animation, manga, computer games, fashion, and food.

¹¹ Bunka-gaikō no suishin ni kansuru kondankai (An informal gathering regarding the

promotion of cultural diplomacy). Its 17 members consisted mostly of academics, but also included some practitioners of traditional Japanese arts, and other business people. It was chaired by Prof. Aoki Tamotsu, an anthropologist.

¹² The last decade has seen a rush of books on the popularity of Japanese manga, anime, J-pop etc. overseas, including some books written by American fans of Japanese popular culture. A TV series, 'Cool Japan' (where foreigners in Japan talk about what they think are 'cool' about Japan), also started.

¹³ The Council of Advisors for the Certification of Japanese Restaurants outside Japan consisted of one academic and mostly heads of various food companies.

¹⁴ MAFF estimated that in 2006 in the US alone there were 9,000 Japanese restaurants, and their number was increasing at a rate of 8.5 % per year.

¹⁵ This scheme was initially carried out in France as an experimental measure to promote Japanese food as emblematic of the 'Japan Brand'. Its managing body, Comite d'evaluation de la Cuisine Japonaise, consisted of 'influential Franco-Japanese individuals' and was supported by JETRO Paris. Embassy of Japan in France and The Japan Cultural Institute in Paris were also involved as 'observers'. It is worth mentioning that such a project is not uniquely a Japanese phenomenon. The Thai and Italian governments have run similar certification schemes since 1999 and 2003 respectively to promote their national cuisine overseas; and in 2009 the Korean government launched the '*Hansic* globalisation project' to provide a 'comprehensive and systematic drive to globalise [Korean] food' (Chang Tae-pyong, Minister for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, quoted in *The Korea Times* [2010]).

¹⁶ This is a little like Italy claiming that pizza is an Italian dish, and issuing authenticity certificates over its production, or the US claiming 'southern fried chicken' as a US product.

¹⁷ That is, restaurants that used Japanese ingredients from Japan – Japanese rice, seafood products, dashi, miso, pickles etc – were recommended, even if they sold fusion food. Equally ethnic Japanese or Japan-trained personnel were highly regarded.

¹⁸ The closest expression to ‘authentic’ in this document is ‘good Japanese cuisine’, which is used only once in the 6-page proposal. The word ‘traditional’ appears a few times, but only in relation to ‘ingredients’, not ‘food’ or ‘cuisine’.

¹⁹ Though this was not without some concern within the LDP about wasting national budget on a frivolous issue.

²⁰ Interview, Tokyo, 1st February, 2009.

²¹ Interview, Tokyo, 1st February, 2009.

²² One should note, however, that the notion of being ‘beautifully presented’ and other ‘images’ associated with ‘traditional’ Japanese cuisine are in fact a modern invention. Cwiertka (2006), for example, discusses how in the 20th century *kaiseki* (traditional multi-course Japanese meal) aesthetics has extended to the rest of the national cuisine, creating *washoku* (Japanese style food) as the national cuisine.

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