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Currents of Consumption: How National Narratives of Japanese Cuisine Collide with Localized
Forms of Sushi in Northern California

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Preface

In January 2017, I was a member of the University of San Francisco's delegation for the Japanese Government's kakehashi (bridge building) program.¹ For two weeks, we toured parts of Tokyo, Kobe, Osaka, and Nara in an effort to understand Japanese businesses and policymakers. After a day full of sight-seeing at Tōdai-ji, one of Nara's seven venerable temples, we retired to a ryokan or traditional Japanese inn. The day had been chilly, but we had gotten some great photos of the world's large bronze Buddha statue and I had survived the "deer cookie incident". Like many visitors before me, I purchased shika senbei (deer cookies) from one of the vendors and was swiftly besieged by the deer that inhabited the park. Said to be the messengers of the gods, I concluded they surely worked for the gods of humility and wisdom. Jostled and bruised, I was looking forward to trying a traditional Japanese meal. Our hosts graciously explained the art of washoku or traditional Japanese cuisine, and how it reflected Japanese sensibilities deeply in tune with nature. While I had some experience eating "Japanese food" in the United States, it occurred to me as I stared into the eyes of a prawn's head, with carefully curled persimmon-colored whiskers delicately arranged on my plate, that my idea of Japanese food might not be as accurate as I once thought.

Introduction

This paper examines how national narratives of Japanese cuisine collide with the expectations, preferences, and perceptions of American consumers (particularly in Northern California). More specifically, I compare and contrast how a global economy has contributed to

¹ The goal of *Kakehashi* was to improve U.S.-Japanese relations. At the conclusion of our tour, our delegation was asked to present our findings to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in Tokyo. While our specific program tour highlighted the economic aspects of Japanese-American relations, our primary takeaway was that it was about how people consumed, produced, and (re) imagined the world around them. Documents from a MOFA session in Kobe informed my initial inquiry into what Japanese food meant outside of a discourse constructed by Japanese officials.

the circulation of positive images of Japan managed by the Japanese government, but also how commercialization of Japanese sushi abroad is at odds with these efforts. Ultimately, I assert that marketing Japan as a brand is a double-edge sword for the Japanese government: the processes it uses to further Japan's soft-power agenda are also used in the disparate marketing and brand-building of businesses in the United States that offer Japanese and so-called "Asian" cuisine. While the Japanese government wishes to advance a singular narrative rooted in a political image of Japan and Japanese sushi as *authentic*, American consumers do not always understand (nor do they necessarily care about) the wider cultural context being referenced. While previous work has been done on the topic of authenticity (Creighton 2012; Handler 1986; Theodossopoulos 2013), the varied reactions to Japan's soft power and cultural branding underscore the continued critical relevance of the discussion as it relates to the disconnect between consumers, cultures, and societies.

In Japan, perhaps one of sushi's most popular forms is *nigirizushi*: sliced seafood and a daub of wasabi atop vinegared rice. But in America, consumers' deep-fried sensibilities often mean sushi is synonymous with Americanized *makizushi*: sauce drenched, tempura stuffed rice-rolls with ingredients not found in traditional Japanese cooking. In *The Washoku Way*, The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries writes:

For many people around the world, sushi is the most familiar type of Japanese cuisine... (but)... there are many aspects of making it well that are less familiar... The washoku approach stresses that these blessings of nature be handled with care and gratitude. The ingredients we use are the very source of life itself, so nothing is wasted. Respectful of the environment, washoku celebrates our coexistence with all living things on earth. (2017a: Inside Cover).

While Japanese narratives allude to a timeless connection to the seasonal rhythms of the natural world, many American consumers can't access the underlying cultural context that informs and

reinforces narratives in Japan. Instead, they rely on and refer to their own experiences, expectations, and preferences to determine what is and is not authentic Japanese cuisine. While the Japanese government attempts to circulate a cohesive, singular image of Japan as a brand, it is really a confluence of interdependent dynamic interests.² These interests include government agencies, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and everyday people. In other words, the currents of the global economy harnessed by the Japanese government to propel its own interests encounter cross-currents from businesses tailoring products to appeal to American consumers. As part of a wider dynamic confluence of commercial and state interests, they can alternatively work in concert or against one another. Furthermore, consumer's interpretations and perceptions can force Japan's national narratives off-course (and sometimes they even collide with competing national interests).³

National narratives about Japanese cuisine valorize sushi's elegant simplicity. Sushi, crafted from properly prepared rice and seafood sliced with the honed edge of a master chef's knife, reflects some of the deepest essences of Japanese culture and cuisine: the sea, a commitment to craft, and a carefully coordinated sense of taste. Working together Japanese business and political interests position Japanese cuisine – and by extension Japan itself – as timelessly distinct from the rest of mainland Asia. There is a long history of Japanese narratives steeped in *nihonjinron*, or 'theories of Japaneseness'. Preceding WWII but augmented by it and the aftermath of occupation, Japan has harnessed these narratives to manage the country's

² For the Japanese government, the Kakehashi program is one such tool to promote Japanese interests. Consequently, Kakehashi is primarily engaged with promoting Japan as a 'brand' for tourism and trade (Japan Foundation 2018). The Japan Foundation website is undated, but the mission statement of Kakehashi can be found at <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/intel/archive/youth/kakehashi/>

³ A 1994 Seattle Times article depicts Japan's own domestic bout of culinary colonization in replacing Korean *kimchi* on Japanese shelves with Japanese *kimuchi*. Formerly invaded, colonized, and occupied by Japan, Korean pride is tested by a country that once referred to them "contemptuously as 'garlic eaters'". (Spielmann 1994:Web); see also Cwiertka (2006:148-154) for additional history on Japan's history with Korean food.

‘brand’ at home and abroad with its “gross national cool” (McGray 2002). This brand management is a form of soft power: using culture, art, media, and diplomacy to manage the perceptions and attitudes of other nations and communities towards advancing one’s geopolitical and socio-economic interests.

One way that Japan’s soft power works is through *imagineering*. A term best associated with The Walt Disney Company, ‘imagineering’ was first used as a process of imaginative design and engineering in theme park construction. Meant to evoke strong feelings and establish moods that influence behaviors and expectations, imagineering can also be used in marketing and brand management. As Japan trudges through a third ‘Lost Decade’ of prolonged economic stagnation at home, soft power and imagineering help Japan jockey for influence on the global stage.

And yet “authentic” Japanese cuisine is frequently overshadowed by localized, domesticated forms preferred by consumers in America.⁶ Using scholarly sources juxtapositioned against an analysis of popular narratives and original ethnographic interviews, I interrogate how the *authenticity* of cuisine has two meanings. Per Creighton (2010), authenticity can be as much about lived experiences as they are about expectations of experiences, forms, and so on. Weiss (2011:77) highlights the ideological implications of authenticity (italics in original):

“...tradition without awareness of history and without possibility of change is mere stereotype, and that innovation without consciousness of genealogy and situatedness is sheer experimentation. Consequently, the proper question to ask is not, ‘Is it authentic?’ but rather, ‘*How* is it authentic?’ This is really to ask, ‘What does it mean for such a version of a dish to appear at this time and place?’”

⁶ In draft feedback for the paper, a colleague astutely suggested cost may also be a driving factor as much as taste. While extremely popular among younger consumers, sushi specialties such as *omakase* and *nigirizushi* can be prohibitively expensive. In Sacramento, *makizushi* can cost between \$7 and \$25 per roll depending on the quality and size of the roll. On average, \$12-\$15 is a fair market price for many restaurants. Depending on size, you could order 2-4 rolls per person and/or share them amongst everyone at the table.

The disconnect between the nuance of authenticity as a general ‘sense of something’ that also accounts for natural inherent variation vs. the abstract absolute suggested by the Japanese government informs the analysis of this paper.⁷ While authenticity refers to a sense of expectation, accuracy and representation, I assert that this association can be established (1) *personally* (by the audience) or (2) *proximally* (by an outside observer or point of reference). Such determination may occur informally through personal experience, anecdote, or social (media) networks or through more formal means like published guides or recognized authorities. Consequently authenticity can be established and contested by both individuals and outside experts (some even certified by government bodies).

Eager to spread Japanese culture but anxious about such (so called) misinterpretations, the Japanese government has attempted to course-correct sushi discourse by certifying foreigners as chefs of authentic Japanese cuisine.⁸ I underscore that even as these assertions of a more-or-less static food culture permeate the views of Japanese restaurateurs, these same businesses are conscious of the economic concessions they make to appeal to their customers. This study further contrasts these narratives with qualitative data collected from consumers as well as ethnographic interviews with a Chinese-American woman and a white man who have each spent over a decade involved in the management and operation of sushi restaurants in Northern California. Although focused on sushi as a case study of the politics of authenticity, this paper engages with themes of nostalgia, tourism, media, politics and communications that also

⁷ See Handler (1986) for a discussion of authenticity, anthropology, and nationalism. Theodossopoulos explores five different dilemmas of authenticity including the assumption that “in many respects, authenticity encodes the expectation of truthful representation” (2013:339).

⁸ Such standards have been leveraged by American sushi restaurants, where chef Tyson Cole of *Uchi* in Texas spent ten years as an apprentice in Japan. Trained in the traditional Japanese way, for the first 2-3 years Cole was only allowed to prepare rice, he didn’t touch the fish (Suzuki 2015). An appeal to traditional training methods is one way in which some restaurants position themselves as more prestigious or *authentic* than others.

highlight how there are many different currents that contribute to, and sometimes contest, the consumption of sushi globally.

Literature Review

Although a singular word, *sushi* can refer to many different types of sushi such as *makizushi* and *nigirizushi*.⁹ Western consumers are perhaps most familiar with *makizushi*. The California Roll is perhaps the most ubiquitous form of sushi encountered by American consumers.¹⁰ But in Japan, *nigiri* is closer to sushi's historical origins. *Nigirizushi*, where pickled rice is hand-molded and topped with a daub of wasabi and fish or other seafood, can be dated to early 1800's *Edo* (Tokyo) (Sand 2014:2-8).¹¹ While historically produced from local ingredients, today seafood 'from Turkey-to-Thailand' supplies Japan's sushi makers (Bestor 2004). Despite the global nature of many of its ingredients, Japanese cuisine is defined by and in part defines notions of 'Japaneseness': its simplicity, seasonality, dedication to quality, and so on. In turn, this sense of 'Japaneseness' becomes one of many features of Japan's soft power.

As mentioned in the introduction, soft power entails using culture, art, media, and diplomacy to manage the perceptions and attitudes of other nations' people and communities towards advancing one's geo-political and socio-economic interests. Nye outlines how "soft power" allows a country to "structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own" (1990:166-168). Soft power is one of the

⁹ Sushi historically referred to the vinegared and pickled rice alone, devoid of other ingredients (c.f., Sand 2014).

¹⁰ Made "inside out" (*maki* [< *maku* 'to roll'>, <*zushi* 'sushi'>] are rolls wrapped with *nori* or seaweed on the outside) and cut into rice studded segments; California rolls come filled with avocado, a crab or imitation crab mix, and carrots and rolled in such a way that the rice is on the outside of the roll. They offer a safe introduction to sushi for those unfamiliar with Japanese food or who are anxious about the idea of eating raw fish.

¹¹ It is important to note that "sushi" is defined by the vinegar/seasoning of the rice itself: without the vinegar, rice wrapped in *nori* (seaweed) becomes *onigiri*. But with the vinegar, suddenly it is a sushi roll.

primary ways Japan is able to appeal to the international community, and Japanese food helps reflect Japanese sensibilities to consumers. In other words, food becomes a point of experience for a country, promoting the nation-by-proxy with “gastro-diplomacy” (Choi et. al. 2012: 7).

But food is only a singular aspect of Japan’s soft power, which is comprised of many facets that contribute to Japan’s “brand”. Such branding has helped Japan leverage its intangibles in the “Lost Decade(s)” after the economic bubble of the 1980s, and in the wake of disasters such as the 1995 Kobe quake, the 2011 Fukushima earthquake-*tsunami*, and subsequent nuclear meltdown. Officials seek to define Japan as “cool” in an uncertain world where Japan can no longer rely on self-evident economic success or purpose to define itself (Valaskivi 2013:501). Consequently, Japan (the nation) must carefully engineer its cultural imagery into a cohesive campaign that produces a political narrative about the country (Daliot-Bul 2009). In other words, Japan as a brand is Japan-the-nation *imagineered* for global consumption.

The power of imagineering is not in creating an exacting 1:1 replica or “authentic” experience, but rather evokes emotions (and in some instances nostalgia) that powerfully resonate with an audience to establish the *feel* of a place (Walt Disney Imagineering 1991: 2, 5-7). Imagineering establishes and moderates behaviors and ways of thinking (Ren 2007: 98, 106-107). Imagineering can also be political, used as a form of self-promotion to create a sense of timelessness in a ‘bubble’ unaffected by the outside world (Salazar 2013: 669, 689-691). This ‘self-othering’ or ‘self-orientalism’ can be seen in Japan’s *nihonjinron* narratives, positioning Japan and Japanese culture as timelessly distinct from East Asia at large. Drawing on theories and ideas established during the Pacific War of how Japanese culture is inscrutable and mysterious, *nihonjinron* has since become a political tool to justify Japanese agendas and preferences because of asserted fundamental differences between Japan and everyone else. Now,

Japan uses the ‘strangeness’ of its differences (suggested by *nihonjinron*) to instead demonstrate its exceptionalism. Primary source documents from the Japanese government illustrate how Japanese food is used this way.

Two documents provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) showcase Japan’s branding using cuisine. Together, they detail Japan’s traditional *washoku* cuisine as timeless, deeply in-tune with the seasons and natural world (MAFF 2017a, 2017b). In the preface of *The Washoku Way*, the authors assert “sushi is the most familiar type of Japanese cuisine”, but that there are many hidden elements to traditional food, production, and preparation attributed to descriptors like “ancient wisdom” and “the old ways”.¹³ Under Japan’s *washoku* banner, sushi is valorized and celebrated as a thematic representation of Japan. Sushi becomes representational of the nation-by-proxy; its rise in popularity is seen as a rise in Japan’s popularity and influence.

As a process, globalization has allowed people to come into contact with new forms of art, food, and ways of thinking. But being exposed to new cultures, ideas, and ways of thinking, the possibility of change (and change into something unfamiliar) looms large. Because globalization as a system often circulates cultural goods as commercial products, these products are modified or localized to ‘fit’ into new markets and communities. In the case of Japanese food, this domestication for new preferences and expectations means there is a risk that the traditions and reasons that make globalized Japanese food what it is (seasonal, freshly prepared seafood with a rich cultural tradition) can be compromised. As the representation of the nation-by-proxy, this compromise can be seen as a threat by politicians and those with vested interests

¹³ Interestingly, some categories of food are more elastic than others: The Washoku Way proudly highlights the wide varieties of regional specialties in *rāmen*. Nevertheless, as a branding strategy *washoku* reemphasizes Japanese culture and cuisine that is deeply sensitive, concerned with freshness, presentation, and in touch with nature.

in the political implications of sushi. Consequently, there is some consternation over how sushi has been reproduced abroad.

Shizuo Tsuji, considered the 20th century ‘godfather’ of Japanese cuisine, once lamented in a 1981 article in *The New York Times* about the assault of Western consumer culture on traditional Japanese sensibilities. Despite a fondness for “freshness” closely associated to a “seasonal consciousness”, Tsuji suggested that “there is a danger that a Japanese may live his whole life without tasting a Japanese meal” (Chira 1981). Despite Japan’s economic prosperity in the 1980s, it carried an undercurrent of fragility that was all too-aware of the powerful influence of America and other Western countries. More recently, Japanese officials have gone so far as to ‘police’ images and interpretations of Japanese cuisine abroad that ‘violate’ tradition by offering to certify restaurants “that uphold the values of traditional Japanese cuisine” and discourage those peddling ‘sushi burritos’ and Asian-Fusion cuisine (Leschin-Hoar 2016).¹⁴ The certification doesn’t just test technical skill, it incorporates residency in Japan as part of the qualification (with two years considered the minimum for a top rating) (Japan Times 2016).

Other organizations such as the *Japanese Restaurant Association of America* (JRAA) also engage in gate-keeping. Isao Hatano of the JRAA has said they monitor and critique restaurants that fail to use the correct ingredients such as non-sushi rice, a lack of *dashi* (a soup stock known for its savory or *umami* flavor profile) in miso soup, or have gathered a largely non-Japanese customer base (Suzuki 2015). But other forms of Japan’s “culinary nationalism” attempt to assimilate new “globalized” interpretations of sushi as novelties, as nation-states ever-consciously attempt to “re-establish their claims of ownership of culture” (Sakamoto and Allen

¹⁴ Leschin-Hoar also notes that “until 2013, foreign chefs were legally barred from working in restaurants specializing in traditional Japanese food”, a semi-ironic reversal of cultural protectionism or elitism to instead assimilate these influential producers of food branded as Japanese (2016).

2011:116-117).¹⁶ While some may attempt a bit of political footwork to redirect the influences of globalization in Japan's favor, the effects are unwanted at least as far as Japanese officials with a vested in nationalist narratives of monolithic food culture are concerned. The end result is a delicate balancing act of preservation and propagation that must navigate the unpredictable dynamics of foreign markets while keeping such influences at bay domestically.

Despite concerns of Japan's brand being altered or misinterpreted, American conceptions of sushi reinforce many Japanese stereotypes. Jiro Ono, the first sushi chef to receive a coveted Michelin Star, was personally showcased in the documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2012). The director went so far as to proclaim how he was captivated by Jiro's singular style and food and "how much greater it was than any other" (Dale 2012). Rather than showing a plurality of sushi shops, styles, and philosophies, Jiro Ono is made into a modern figurehead of sushi for English-language audiences. The image of the wizened old Japanese man, running a family business (in Ginza, Tokyo) but globally renowned in its "relentless pursuit of perfection" reinforces stereotypical images of the sushi chef.¹⁸ Furthermore, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* presents an expensive, world famous sushi restaurant in one of the most elite neighborhoods in Tokyo as the 'default' sushi restaurant. Such negotiations and assumptions of 'default' cuisine is further explored in the Discussion section.

Methods

Interested in what 'popular' sushi production and consumption in Northern California looks like and in consideration of how social media informs consumer decision-making, I

¹⁶ This process has also been referred to elsewhere as 'the Pizza Effect'. See Rosen for a description of how pizza was launched from the food of the impoverished to one of gourmands after it came to America via immigrant families: "The new product was eagerly accepted and even given pride of place in Italian cuisine." (Rosen 2015)

¹⁸ The documentary *Wa-shoku: Beyond Sushi* (Suzuki 2015) provides another narrative thread regarding Japan's national narratives of sushi that I examine later in the discussion section of the paper.

utilized the internet and my own personal network for some potential research leads. A brief internet search turned up local news station KCRA 3's annual "Best of Sacramento" contest, which had a "best sushi restaurant" category. I contacted the top ten establishments listed. Two replied but only one ended up responding to the questionnaire. That interviewee was Ken, the executive chef for a popular chain of sushi restaurants based in Sacramento with over 25 years of experience.²⁰ I further supplemented my inquiries with personal referrals and was put into contact with Irene, the owner-operator of a chain in nearby Davis with 20 years of experience.²²

The ethnographic interviews were informed through a survey that examined how consumers felt about different aspects of sushi consumption and dining. Snowball sampling techniques resulted in an opportunistic sample of people located in the greater Northern California region extending from Sacramento to the San Francisco Bay Area. I chose ten questions that would ask consumers a range of questions about their feelings on sushi from the practical (affordability) to preferences (ingredients) and to the more political (race and gender):

- 1.) How important is a chef's formal training? [Scale of 1-5]
- 2.) How important is it that a sushi chef needs to be a man? [Scale of 1-5]
- 3.) How important is it for sushi chefs to use "authentic" ingredients? [Scale of 1-5]
- 4.) How important is the décor of the restaurant (atmosphere)? [Scale of 1-5]
- 5.) How important is the clothing of the staff to you? [Scale of 1-5]
- 6.) How important is the size of sushi rolls? [Scale of 1-5]
- 7.) How important is the price of sushi to you? [Scale of 1-5]
- 8.) Would you eat at an all-you-can-eat sushi restaurant? [Y/N]

²⁰ Not his real name. All identifying information has been altered to allow interviewees to speak candidly and protect their active businesses and/or organizations. Because no identifying information was collected, the University of San Francisco's IRB (Institutional Review Board) informed us we were not required to go through an approval process.

²² Additional inquiries were made to the Buddhist Church of Sacramento and through personal networks in the Bay Area. Further research would benefit from a more in-depth consumer survey that gauges not only respondent demographics but asks more detailed questions about their experiences with Japanese culture.

- 9.) Should a restaurant that serves sushi also serve other kinds of cuisine? [Y/N]
- 10.) Does a sushi chef need to be Japanese? [Y/N]

I deliberately chose to hint at “authenticity” as a problematic term, curious to see if any respondents caught on.²³ This data, combined with the literature review, forms the basis of the Discussion section.

Qualitative Findings

My interviews with Ken and Irene brought an immediate contrast to Japanese nationalist narratives of sushi. Contrary to popular imagery of sushi chefs being Japanese men, Ken is a Caucasian man and Irene is a Chinese-American woman. Irene immigrated to the United States at the age of 13, growing up in San Francisco and attending school in the greater Bay Area. She originally established her restaurant as a way to earn money while going to college, but what started as a temporary business that eventually lasted over a decade. She had no formal training in sushi. However, she did work in a Chinese restaurant in downtown San Francisco for about a year in high school. She supplemented her previous experience with a 3-month stint in an unspecified restaurant (she did not name what cuisine they served) to gain the general skills needed to manage her own. What started as a small-scale business that sold prepackaged entrees at the supermarket eventually grew into several ‘brick-and-mortar’ locations.

Irene described being a woman sushi chef as “quite difficult”, which combined with her age (early twenties) made it hard for many to accept when first starting her business. When asked to describe what sushi meant to her, she described it as “food art” that may start as “a piece of fish and a ball of rice”, but has the potential to be much more when a chef infuses it with their creativity. Overall, Irene felt “choice and freshness of (sushi) ingredients are the basic but the

²³ Several respondents astutely questioned the meaning of the word “authenticity” and why it was in quotes.

most important keys” to craft great sushi.²⁵ When asked about whether customers wanted *authentic* sushi, Irene remarked that most cuisine has been localized for consumer palettes and preferences. While narratives and assumptions of a “national cuisine” are circulated by the Japanese government, this is contrasted with Irene’s commentary that sushi varies regionally.²⁶

My interviews with Irene concluded that the idea of authenticity must be qualified by what a person is told or believed to be authentic: as Irene asserted, authenticity is “more a matter of how and who was that food introduced to”. In other words, a personal experience can influence a person’s expectations surrounding sushi – much like my own experiences with Americanized sushi rolls set my own expectations for dining in Japan. For a small segment of Irene’s guests, they assumed everything in the restaurant (including the employees) was Japanese. Others would insist that the only “authentic” way to experience sushi would be for it to be prepared by a Japanese man. Nonetheless, Irene stressed that before starting her business they had been to many different sushi places from the fancy and chic to the mom and pop style joints, and in the end, wanted a place that was friendly, calm and welcoming. That meant having food that guests would enjoy and expectations that were comfortably bounded by American preferences, palettes, and menu choices. While sushi is normally bite-sized, American appetites usually meant they would purposefully make entrees larger, with more rice and heavier sauces.

When asked if she ever argued with customers about sushi, she couldn’t “remember encountering arguments about sushi,” probably due in part to designing her own menu and her willingness to experiment in order to please her guests. Irene said that she generally didn’t have

²⁵ Irene described her business as having its own unique style, but did not elaborate on what that style was, only that they have used everything from quinoa to marshmallow to fresh fruits and truffle oil.

²⁶ Irene alluded to different “styles” of sushi, but I was never able to quite pin down what she meant. Speculatively, she may have been referring to Osaka-style or *Oshizushi* (*osu* ‘to push/press’ thus ‘pressed sushi’), where a box is used to press layers of rice and other ingredients together and nori or ‘seaweed’ is not typically present.

issues with customers because once people understood her style, most were really more interested in enjoying their food. When they experimented with new offerings, they typically would invite trusted guests to come and test their creations. In terms of specific rules in making, preparing, or consuming sushi, Irene said “a good sushi chef should be able to feel the rice, vegetable, fish and other ingredients by hand.” As for her guests, Irene said that they should eat sushi however they like and not feel restrained by rules against mixing wasabi and soy sauce.²⁷ In her own words, most of these rules were “unnecessary” because they were really only meant to please a chef’s ego: i.e. that a sufficient amount of wasabi had been used. Ultimately, Irene said she is in the business of serving guests and that making sure they had a great experience was her top priority. Irene did not recount specific details of customers objecting to her being Chinese-American, but she did encounter customers who mistook her for being Japanese.²⁸ In 20 years, only a couple of guests have walked out when they discovered she was a woman; her ethnicity/national origin was not as much of a problem for them as her being a woman.

My second interviewee, Ken, also grew up in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. Ken knew he wanted to be a chef since he was 5 years old. Similar to Irene, he came to sushi incidentally. Working in a nightclub to earn money for culinary school a friend suggested he work in a sushi shop that was looking for English-language employees. Ken describes his first experience with sushi:

They gave me a plate of sushi and told me to eat it all and not ask what it was. [After eating it all] They hired me on the spot... it was funny. I started out and thought to myself I would try this for a year or so, then go to chef school. But, I really fell in love with sushi and Japanese culture.... That was 25 years ago.

²⁷ Nguyen (2018) notes the popularity of sushi guides that advise against biting food in half, proper chopstick positions, lid etiquette and more (see <https://japantoday.com/category/features/food/10-little-known-rules-for-eating-japanese-food>)

²⁸ In Irene’s own words, the most common issue was a sentiment from some that “all Asians look the same”.

Like Irene, Ken experienced resistance of his own because his appearance did not match the customers' expectations: he was a man, but he was not Japanese. However, he apprenticed "with an experienced chef from Japan for 6 years," and that despite his ethnicity he said it's "not hard to prove (himself) to good, traditionally-trained Japanese chefs. But, it's a constant challenge dealing with others. Especially those of Asian but non-Japanese descent." Ken had a fair amount to say about the difficulties he had encountered because of his race, although did not go into detail. In contrast, Irene mentioned some resistance for being a woman and spent most of her responses speaking towards the art and craft of sushi. Both stressed they are in a customer-oriented business that has a flexible, adaptive menu.

Based on these initial interviews, it is then obvious that 'authenticity' can be determined in multiple ways: personally and proximally. Quantitative data collected also suggests that there may be more focus on the race of the sushi chef over the importance of a chef being a man. While individuals may rely on guides or official 'experts' to help them navigate and determine what is and is not 'authentic', others may rely on their own experiences, biases, and preferences. And for at least some consumers and producers race plays a factor in the qualifications of the chef in Northern California.

Qualitative Findings

Amongst the four data sets, I received 87 responses from a cross section of social types in total (refer to the methodology section for list of full questions). When asked about the importance of a chef's formal training, the answers gravitated towards importance. When asked if a sushi chef needed to be a man, 90% of respondents ranked it a "1", whereas 80.5% of respondents said training was at least "somewhat important", ranking it a "3" or higher. 80.5% of respondents said it was at least "somewhat important", ranking it a "3" or higher in of least

Table 1: Questions Rated on a Scale of 1-5 in Importance (1 being least, 5 being greatest)

Importance		1	2	3	4	5
Training	<i>80.5% Ranked Somewhat Important or Above</i>	9.2% (8)	10.3% (9)	29.9% (26)	18.4% (16)	32.2% (28)
Chef as a Man	<i>90% Ranked of Least Importance</i>	90.8% (79)	4.6% (4)	2.3% (2)	1.1% (1)	1.1% (1)
“Authentic” Ingredients	<i>83% Ranked Somewhat Important or Above</i>	10.3% (9)	6.9% (6)	22.3% (20)	27.6% (24)	32.2% (28)
Décor	<i>44.82% Ranked Somewhat Important</i>	9.2% (8)	12.6% (11)	44.8% (39)	20.7% (18)	12.6% (11)
Staff Clothing	<i>79% Ranked Somewhat Important or Below</i>	21.8% (19)	23% (20)	34.5% (30)	10.3% (9)	10.3% (9)
Roll Size	<i>90.8% Ranked Somewhat Important or Above</i>	6.9% (6)	2.3% (2)	32.2% (28)	29.9% (26)	28.7% (25)
Price	<i>96.5% Ranked Somewhat Important or Above</i>	1.1% (1)	2.3% (2)	21.8% (19)	29.9% (26)	44.8% (39)

Table 2: Questions with a Yes/No Response

Would you eat at an “All You Can Eat” Sushi Restaurant?	67.8% Yes (59)	32.2% No (28)
Should a sushi restaurant serve other cuisine?	67.8% Yes (59)	32.2% No (28)
Should Chef be Japanese?	8% Yes (7)	92% No (80)

importance. When asked about the importance of “authentic” ingredients, 83% of respondents rated it a “3”, at least “somewhat important”, or above. When asked about the décor of the restaurant, 44.82% said it was somewhat important, ranking it a “3”. When asked about the clothing of the staff, 34.5% of respondents said it was somewhat important compared to 44.8%

who ranked it a “1” or a “2” in importance. When asked about the size of sushi rolls, respondents overwhelmingly considered it at least somewhat important, with 90.8% ranking it a “3” or above. Size of Rolls was only surpassed in importance by the price, which ranked at 96.5% at “3” or above. 21.83% said it was somewhat important, with a rank of “3”, whereas 56.55% said it was of greater or most importance at rank of “4” or “5”. As my data shows, the most important concerns were with regards to the value-aspect of sushi, with the price or size of rolls being considered relatively more important than training or use of ingredients.

Simultaneously, there seemed to be little concern with a chef being a man, where overwhelming 90% said it was of least concern. This contrasts with the narrative(s) established by Japanese officials and sushi experts that stress a sushi chef ‘must’ be a man because of pheromones or body temperature.³⁰ When asked if they would eat at an all-you-can-eat sushi restaurant OR if a restaurant that serves sushi should also serve other kinds of cuisine, 67.8% of respondents said “Yes” while 32.2% said “No”. Much like the importance of a chef being a man, when asked if a sushi chef needs to be Japanese, 92% said “No” while 8% responded “Yes”.

The preliminary data thus reinforces that practical concerns of value rival that of *authenticity* for consumers in Northern California in the Sacramento and Bay Areas. Meanwhile, most consumers seem unconcerned about the gender of a sushi chef, contrasting against Japanese national narratives of a male sushi chef. However, the interviews with Ken and Irene suggest that race (or perception of race) of a sushi chef and staff is at least a point of consideration for some consumers that will be expanded upon in the Discussion section. Respondents had strong feelings regarding décor (33% felt this was more than somewhat important), clothing (20% more

³⁰ In popular food and travel memoir *Super Ramen Sushi Express*, Yukio Hattori of Hattori Nutrition College asserts that ‘women can’t be sushi chefs’ because of differences in pheromones, perfume, and skin temperature (Booth 2010: 96). As the influential head of one of Japan’s two ‘regional schools’, Hattori propagates a misogynistic mindset based on pseudoscientific reasoning.

than somewhat important), and a small segment felt strongly about the race of the chef themselves (8% responded a chef should be Japanese). And finally, the question remains about who or what establishes *authentic* cuisine. As this data shows, the Japanese government has not always been completely successful in embedding its brand campaign in the minds of sushi consumers. Potentially left to their own devices, I discuss next how consumers determine for themselves what is and is not *authentic* sushi.

Discussion

Generally speaking, authenticity is defined as standards that are ‘loosely’ agreed upon by a group of people. Cobb (2014) identifies the relationship between ‘authoritarian’ and ‘authenticity’, and the politics of a “single authority who imposes a master narrative of meaning” on what is and is not to be qualified as authentic (2014: 1). In other words, the establishment of ‘authenticity’ is negotiated between parties and their interests. Furthermore, there is an ambiguity to the term not always evident, because we engage in discussions of “not the concept per se, but the *perception of it*” (2014: 5). Again, the politics of appearances and adherence to a set of socially-negotiated standards and the management of expectations sometime matter more than what reflects actual reality. Irene’s observation about how people are introduced to (specific configurations) of sushi further reinforces their assumptions and expectations. My own data suggests that some consumers care about the “feel” of a restaurant in terms of how it is decorated (less so for the clothing of staff), although what precisely they do and do not care about, their *perception* of the restaurant, is left unexplored. Creighton reflects upon how authenticity is interpretative or relative, because while “authenticity enshrines expected standards and behaviors... authenticity is (also) considered to be what people actually do” in their everyday lives (Creighton 2010:112). This is a consequence of a globalized world, but not one just left to

the forces of localization or domestication for consumer tastes.³³ Sometimes time, money, or geographic limit people's access to ingredients. In her review of Cwierka's work on modern Japanese cuisine, White highlights the problem with asserting and maintaining authenticity:

...is what you are eating in Amsterdam, Boston, or Los Angeles real sushi? If a Hispanic itamae-san prepares the nigiri, is it Japanese? When Japanese foods first came to America, they arrived with the Issei whose food was home cooking, and few questions of authenticity were raised, unless grandmother mourned the lack of Japanese rice. But now, it is the Western connoisseur who is anxious about such matters... (2008:406)

Prepared by everyday people, food is frequently consumed while bounded by practical considerations (these are the ingredients on hand, affordability, etc.). For a family of *Issei* (first generation Japanese) immigrants, Grandmother may indeed mourn the lack of proper rice. But for the *Nissei* or second generation born in America, isn't that substitution reflective of an authentic experience? Is it not still "*authentic* home cooking" in its own way? Yano underscores the power associated with memories of food (2007:58). The food made by family is perhaps most powerful of all, even more so than a nationalized cook book.

Appadurai discusses how (Indian) cook books serve two important functions: (1) they provide a generalized sense of the culinary traditions of a region, and (2) they establish broad "food-based characterizations of the ethnic *Other* (italics added)" (1988:15). Similar to a cookbook, Japan's *washoku* campaign presents certain aspects of Japanese culture: it's deep connection to nature, seasonality, and specific sensibilities that reflect core values and traditions that are intrinsic and vital to Japan the country. But as Appadurai also observes, the 'representative' dishes selected are a deliberate political act: they are contested, re-aggregated

³³ 'Localization' is a term typically used in the video game industry [e.g., Thayer and Kolko 2004], when gameplay and other elements such as text and voice acting are adapted for the local consumers of a new market. The term 'domestication' was suggested to me by one of my professors at USF.

and negotiated to present a singular image (1988:17-18). While MAFF asserts “Washoku is clearly multifaceted” (2017a:14), it also contends that as “varied as their tastes and cooking styles are, all regions of this island country share one dish in common.” Sashimi “appears without fail in celebratory menus” across the country and sushi “is the unquestionable star of regional fair” (MAFF 2017a: 36).

But these regional variations’ individuality is superseded by allusions to “the body of collective wisdom on proper handling for the freshness (that) is, naturally, extensive” (MAFF 2017a: 36). Consider again Appadurai (1988): The political act of representation through cookbooks means that what is thought of as an objective set of “rules” to establish authenticity are at least partially based on preferences. These “rules” are established by “experts” who are invested in how they define what is “authentic”. Appadurai alludes to how such acts can be an exercise in gate-keeping, dividing “high” and “low” forms of cuisine that “always seek to distance themselves from their local sources” (1988:4). While regional variation is acknowledged by MAFF, it is only under the auspices of the *washoku* banner’s nebulous collective of cultural knowledge and traditions.

Jiro Dreams of Sushi further reflects the segregation of “high” and “low” cuisine, with an exclusive world-renowned sushi chef’s business becoming the default representation of sushi for popular audiences (2012).³⁴ This image creates an elite’s idea of sushi as a monolith that overshadows all other forms. For those with the proper knowledge, they can distinguish and segregate their consumption and production of cuisine as elite ‘connoisseurs’. While Japanese national narratives of cuisine aim to popularize and protect *washoku* sensibilities, the traditional

³⁴ Jiro Ono’s restaurant is also an *omakase* or chef-selected tasting menu style establishment. The guests do not select what to eat but rather are served by the chef, who determines what they will eat based on their preferences and the quality of ingredients on hand. Such establishments are part of the Japanese *haute cuisine* or high cooking style, once again privileging a specific form of elite food as the representational form of sushi.

forms of Japanese cuisine may not appeal to local consumer tastes who patronize businesses aimed at appealing to consumer preferences over nationalized forms of food. Furthermore, the experiences and knowledge possessed by a connoisseur who is an enthusiast expert differ from the average lay-consumer. Our sense of authenticity is thus necessarily contextualized in its formative stages by socio-economic status and other experiences that shape *habitus*.

Bourdieu (1977) discusses *habitus* as the sensibilities, preferences, attitudes, and behavioral framework(s) that dictate how individuals navigate, negotiate, act, and react in society. Subjected to the forces of globalization and localization, a consumer's *habitus* (their expectations, education, socio-economic status and experiences) can inform what is authentic relative to them. While Japanese national narratives can powerfully shape how Japanese cuisine is presented, perceived and consumed domestically in Japan, these narratives lose cohesion as they cross time and space into new markets. They no longer present the carefully curated image that the Japanese government relies on as part of its soft power initiatives. In turn, the Japanese government's ability to effectively influence neighbors and foreign consumers is compromised. Unless personally guided on a tour of Japanese cuisine at a government-sponsored event, the independent philosophies and priorities of businesses can overtake or 'skew' the 'essence' the Japanese national narrative seeks to present.

Therefore, authenticity (of cuisine) can be established or interpreted in (at least) two ways. First, it can be established *personally*, by an individual's experiences and expectations. Or, it can be established *proximally*, by a third-party expert or authority.³⁶ The Japanese government's attempts to police sushi authenticity through certifications and a master narrative

³⁶ Some may argue for notions of "subjectivity" or "objectivity", which speaks to a broader conversation that escapes the bounds of this paper. I suggest that for the most part we are all *interpreting* data and experiences which in turn informs our expectations.

are an exercise in establishing and maintain a proximal sense of authenticity. But as my own preliminary fieldwork shows, and in a careful analysis of interviews with sushi chefs in the literature to follow, producers' adherence to national narratives loses cohesion in light of the preferences and preconceptions of consumers and their personal senses of authenticity.

While Gelb (2011) documents the story of Jiro Ono's sushi business in Japan, Suzuki (2015) examines how Japanese officials, businesses, and restaurateurs operate in the United States. In particular, interviews with LA-based Katsuya Uechi (owner of 13 successful restaurants worldwide) underscore Japanese concerns: that foreigners are making sushi without knowing anything about the (Japanese) process (Suzuki 2015). This has given rise to organizations such as the *Sushi Institute of America* (SIA) and the *Sushi Chef Institute of America* (SCIA) (both based in LA) which want to stop the spread of "shocking" sushi. Chef Andy Matsuda of the SCIA attempts to teach chefs with 'The 3 S's: seasons, simple, and sublime' (Suzuki 2015). And yet, Uechi is faced with the same problems that my interviewees Irene and Ken confronted: market demand (or, customer preference] drives the flow of business. If they don't make food that appeals to their local customers, the business won't survive (Suzuki 2015). In turn, producers like Uechi come to a compromise: they follow the 'spirit' of traditional Japanese cooking but work to appeal to customer preferences. Sometimes, it is a delicate balancing act of "selling" the authenticity of cuisine, but also a level of familiarity and fusion. Per Kome's website in Austin, Texas, owner-operators Takehiro and Kayo Asazu state (with bold and underline added for emphasis):

... We've found it hasn't been easy to find **authentic** Japanese restaurants to give ourselves comfort. We want to introduce **real family-style** Japanese comfort food as well as unique foods that we enjoy at our own family dining table at home – from our mom's and grandma's recipes; from where we came from... The food we are serving is not exactly traditional Japanese **restaurant**

food, **but authentic home-style** Japanese cooking – the food we eat every day, and has many influences from other culture and cuisines. It's special because it has some of our family history, with our family recipes and reflecting our backgrounds from Japan, New Orleans, and Austin and also traveling throughout Asia. It's probably more accurate to call our food "Asazu cuisine"! (our last name)... (2018)

The Asazus make an appeal to authenticity, while also rationalizing (and marketing) their cuisine as more particularly *homestyle* cooking. They can avoid any critique of a *proximal* authenticity, because their food is *personally* authentic.³⁷ Other establishments, such as Uchi (also in Austin) also position their authenticity as a unique brand (italics added for emphasis): "Award-winning Chef Tyson Cole's signature *non-traditional* Japanese food has delighted Austin's *diverse* dining crowd as well as visitors from *across the country* and *around the world* since 2003" (2018).³⁸ Here, Cole and Uchi make a similar sort of appeal to Japaneseness that might be a little more cosmopolitan (and thus more familiar) with a large domestic and international following. Anderson (2018) recounts how Tyson Cole of Uchi is now "responsible for rewiring Austin's collective palate", but only by (italics added) "integrating Japanese cooking with the *traditional* foods of Texas." In other words, Japanese cuisine is welcomed to provide a novel variation to decidedly *Texan* preferences.³⁹ Texas-style BBQ is alluded to as a western-style counterpart to sushi with its own careful craft traditions, but only as long as it is safely and securely *Texan* cuisine first: "We're not going to rub yellow curry over brisket" (Anderson 2018).

³⁷ See Yano (2007) for a *fascinating* examination of family-run Japanese delicatessens in Hawai'i. While beyond the scope of this paper, Yano explores how familial elements attach cooking to nostalgia, apprenticeship through experience in the family business, the iterative nature of recipes and succession in the business, and some great "mom and pop" perspective on the amalgamation of local lives, identities, and experiences.

³⁸ From Cole's Chef Profile: "Employing classical cooking techniques with a Pacific Rim perspective, Cole marries global ingredients with traditional Japanese flavors, resulting in inspired combinations of flavor, texture, color, technique, and style." (2018)

³⁹ Much like Japanese-style *kimuchi* is pushing against the original Korean *kimchi* in Japan (see footnote 3).

While Ken and Irene must appeal to Californian tastes, restaurants like *Kome* and *Uchi* must appeal to their particular customer preferences which requires the inclusion of more cooked (animal) proteins. The most popular *Kome* items include a “Texas Surf and Turf” roll with cooked steak, shrimp tempura, and candied jalapenos (Suzuki 2015). Tyson Cole of *Uchi* stresses a customer-focused approach – the customer is first; the fish is second. But he sees this as an opportunity to get customers ‘hooked’ on Japanese cuisine (Suzuki 2015). Celebrity chefs like Nobuyuki Matsuhisa (the “most successful Japanese chef in America” according to Suzuki) have embraced outside influences: Nobu recounts his exposure to Peruvian cuisine and lemon-marinated ceviche which changed his attitude towards Japanese cuisine. Nobu also sees Japanese cuisine as an opportunity to introduce people to new things, one at a time, so they appreciate what comes next (Suzuki 2015).

And despite Japan’s national narratives of cuisine, regional preferences continue to fuel debates among connoisseurs of cuisine. On the topic of tempura alone there is fierce debate domestically on many particulars of the craft such as color and doneness of tempura from golden brown to ‘pale and more interesting’ (Booth 2010:46). Such divides, no matter how deftly managed, undermine Japanese national narratives and betray any notion of a static, engineered, monolithic singular Japanese cuisine. If anything, these debates suggest that even among “experts”, a level of interpretation and political jockeying is in play. This interpretation is supported per Appadurai’s observations of gate keeping and fabrication as mentioned above (1988:4). By extracting regional cuisines, national interests can rely on local experts’ legitimacy and reconfigure local cuisines for national narratives.

And for those lacking experiences with another culture, they may rely on imagineering and other “markers” to navigate potential eateries. In my interview with Ken, he mentioned that

he often could prove his competence to Japanese chefs and consumers by technical skill. Fukuzawa (2008) references the dynamics of credentialism in Japan: how education and social ranking, along with social perceptions and reactions influence individual's agency. In other words, they form additional variables for the configurations of Japanese *habitus*. Among non-Japanese people, he encountered considerable more resistance to his authority and ability as a chef. While his experiences suggest that race is possibly tied to a layperson's assessment of cultural competency, the narratives surrounding race and our perceptions of culture are also powerful. Lallani (2018) investigates how cruise lines and cruise ships are developing encounters with 'authentic' cuisine for passengers. Marketing a "genuine representation of the cultures it seeks to emulate" at onboard food establishments, cruise lines aim to facilitate the consumption of "as many cultures as possible" (Lallani 2018:7). But simultaneously (as Chefs Nobu and Katsu have also concluded) they balance their craft against consumers' finicky eating habits limited by "how the overly unfamiliar became unpalatable" when introduced to foods outside their comfort zone (Lallani 2018:13).

In instances like this, businesses produce a collision of imagineering and the buffet line, where Royal Carribean wields "tokenistic reference to Japanese culture" with a restaurant staffed by 'Asian' laborers, 'Oriental' paintings and *katana* ['sword'] mounted on the walls (Lallani 2018:15). Lallani (2018) also references *The Invention of Tradition* by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1984), where in the introduction Hobsbawm underscores how traditions are manufactured to allude to a primordial past that creates a sense of continuity and certainty for "the nation" (Hobsbawm 1984:1-14). In turn, such manufactured traditions aid in imagineering a sense of the nation that appeals to audiences domestically (for pride and consumption) and to

consumers abroad. But for the continuity of cohesive national culture to continue, it must be preserved, policed, and carefully curated.

Similarly, Blommaert and Varis (2013) have noted five elements often used to “brand” commercialized ethno-cultural businesses such as the ubiquitous “Irish Pub”. This includes names that reference culturally relevant surnames and symbols, lettering or imagery that “looks” Celtic, “stock symbols”, music or entertainment associated with the culture, and finally imported cultural products and brands (e.g., Guinness Beer) (Blommaert and Varis 2013:154). As Lallani (2018) observed, businesses engage in similar practices by relying on such archetypes or stereotypes (rather than credentials) as signposts for consumers to judge the perceived quality or “authenticity”.⁴¹ Sushi restaurants in America rely not so much on a Japanese national narrative of cuisine but rather *accoutrements* and markers that form a commercial shorthand to appeal to consumers. Katana, images of koi gold fish, Pan-Asianesque art that conflates images of China and Japan, symbols that resemble the *kanji* or Chinese characters used in written Japanese, and names like Yamada, Fuji, and so on. These elements quickly communicate culture and race as a brand to consumers, but their superficial qualities sabotage the Japanese government’s efforts to convey the deep-rooted sensibilities of Japanese culture.

While globalization has generated a wide breadth of exposure to different cultures and experiences, it is often at the expense of depth and nuance. Many businesses’ use of cultural branding has proliferated a reliance on stereotypes as a catalog of shorthand for consumers. Branding may vary in its sophistication, from the stereotypical “Asian” to a more nuanced

⁴¹ Owners Take and Kayo Asazu describe their restaurant’s interior in Austin, Texas appealing to craftsmanship and the ‘family’ connection. On their website, they recount how a close friend and designer personally flew all the way from Japan to create an intimate, personal space that reflects Japanese craftsmanship and attention to detail: “Because the design was done by our close friend who has known us for a long time, the restaurant interior is a real combination of his style and also it represents us, Také and Kayo. Really, like family!” (2018)

imagineering employed by governments. At the level of imagineering, government initiatives are finely honed to evoke a deep emotional reaction for the (intended) audience. As Mainstreet USA in Disneyland evokes a sense of nostalgia for “Middle America” to American consumers, consumers without the context simply (re)interpret this as a form of mass produced Americana.⁴² Similarly, in the case of sushi restaurants, Japanese culture is generically labelled as “Asian”.

Conclusion

In a global economy, the Japanese government continues to struggle with managing Japan as a “brand” that is hampered by private commercial ventures domestically and abroad. As consumers come into contact with new and different cultures, it is difficult to establish a depth of understanding over a breadth of new contacts. Oftentimes, it means consumers rely on informal knowledge or their own experiences to determine what is or is not “the real deal.” As governments and businesses struggle to establish a meaningful, cohesive framework for global exchange, perhaps the best solutions are ones from outside these sectors of society. As I have noted elsewhere, global exchange often means renders culture decontextualized, reinterpreted or misinterpreted (Ostermiller 2018).

Therefore it is up to specialists, academics, and researchers to facilitate and mediate better discussions and exchanges.⁴³ If the Japanese government seeks to build its brand on the foundation of commercialism and consumption, its culture will inevitably be changed by the consumers it is marketed to. Presently, the circulation of commercialized Japanese culture relies heavily on consumption practices tied into popular (mis)conceptions of Japan. If Japanese

⁴² Somewhat similarly, The documentary *The Search for General Tso* investigates the origins of the American-Chinese food dish General Tso’s chicken, which was specifically crafted to appeal to American consumer’s tastes while also crafting a mythic connection to the historical person (Cheney 2014). Using Chinese personages, American-Chinese cuisine appeals to American consumer assumptions to expand and drive business.

⁴³ Brewer (2006) has said much the same when it comes to folklorists working as public interpreters to foster a better understanding between peoples and societies.

officials wish to preserve Japanese culture and drive an appreciation for Japanese sensibilities, then outside consumers must understand it to effectively help protect it.

The Japanese government attempts leverage imagineering and Japanese cultural goods/practices to further Japan's soft power interests. Processes like imagineering and branding are commercial methods that commodify rather than communicate a true-understanding of culture. As Japan circulates Japanese cuisine abroad to solicit interest in Japan, competing messages come from various other businesses that send Japan's brand off course. As Japan polices its branding, it positions nationalized images of cuisine as the authentic default. But 'authenticity' itself is often crafted personally and proximally. Socially negotiated, authenticity reflects dynamics of power, prestige, and influence. In truth there is no static or singular 'Japanese cuisine' or 'authenticity'. Both are interpretative acts that rely on a contextualized multiplicity of assumed meanings and experiences. Cuisine and culture are nuanced and varied, formed from a confluence of many different dynamics driven by individuals who each contribute to local, regional, and global communities.

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