

**FELICE FARINA**

(University of Naples L’Orientale, Naples, Italy)

ORCID: 0000-0002-0397-1780 

## Japan’s *washoku* or the making of a healthy diet

### Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the discourse around healthy eating in Japan from the post-World War II era to the present day. Drawing on the food discourses approach, which emphasizes the capacity of institutions to construct and control narratives about food, the study examines how the prevailing notions of what constitutes a healthy diet in Japan have been shaped by a range of economic and political factors. While traditional Japanese cuisine has become associated with healthiness, this was not always the case, as in the years following the Pacific war a Western-style diet was considered more beneficial to one’s body while the excessive consumption of white rice was strongly discouraged. The situation changed in the 1970s when the benefits of eating a “traditional” Japanese diet began to be extolled, while the “westernization” of eating habits was criticized as an unhealthy lifestyle. Through the analysis of historical and contemporary sources, this article seeks to shed light on how the concept of healthy eating in Japan has been influenced by more than just scientific studies on nutrition but has been also strongly shaped by economic and political interests.

**Keywords:** washoku, food discourse, healthy diet, nutrition, postwar Japan



## 1. Introduction

The French philosopher Edgar Morin argues that, since the 1960s, we have witnessed the rise and spread of what he refers to as the “neo-archaic mentality”.<sup>1</sup> This mentality is characterised by a rejection of modernity and a desire for a return to the “origins (arché)”. From the point of view of eating habits, this neo-archaic mentality involves a partial reversal of gastronomic hierarchy in favour of rustic and natural dishes, as opposed to processed and manufactured products. This shift in perception has led to a renewed appreciation for the simplicity and natural quality of traditional foods, which are often regarded to be healthier than modern, industrial ones. As a consequence, this belief has fuelled growing anxiety towards industrial food products, frequently perceived as a primary cause of various health issues, while traditional foods are associated with healing and restorative properties.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the idea of traditional cuisine being inherently healthier than contemporary dietary styles is a widespread belief across many cultures.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of their actual nutritional value, traditional foods are often seen by consumers as the healthier choice.<sup>4</sup> This perception has gradually gained ground in public and political discourses surrounding the promotion of healthy lifestyles. In this context, many countries have started to implement programs that promote their culinary heritage by emphasizing its positive impact on health. The Italian Ministry of Health, for instance, has acknowledged that a diet based on Mediterranean cuisine has a positive impact on health. Conversely, the Ministry has also noted that the abandonment of traditional food practices by the Italian population is a major contributor to the rise in overweight and obesity.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Colombian Ministry of Health has stated that the rejection of the traditional diet – based on natural foods – in favour of diets based on industrial foods, is the primary cause of various health issues, including cardiovascular risks and growth problems.<sup>6</sup> The Thai Department of Cultural Promotion has even claimed that

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre Poulain, *Alimentazione, cultura e società* (Italian translation. Original title: *Sociologies de l'alimentation. Les mangeurs et l'espace social alimentaire*), Bologna 2008, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Jamuna Prakash, Viduranga Waisundara and Vishweshwaraiah Prakash, *Nutritional and Health Aspects of Food in South Asian Countries*, Amsterdam 2020; Dwi Larasatie Nur Fibri and Michael Bom Frøst, ‘Consumer perception of original and modernised traditional foods of Indonesia’, *Appetite* 133 (2019), pp. 61–69; Kristberg Kristbergsson and Jorge Oliveira, *Traditional Foods: General and Consumer Aspects*, London 2016; Valérie Lengard Almlí et al., ‘General Image and Attribute Perceptions of Traditional Food in Six European Countries’, *Food Quality and Preference* 22/1 (2011), pp. 129–138; Michael Milburn, ‘Indigenous Nutrition: Using Traditional Food Knowledge to Solve Contemporary Health Problems’, *American Indian Quarterly* 28/3 (2004), pp. 411–434.

<sup>4</sup> There are some exceptions to this common perception, mainly concerning traditional cuisines that are considered bad for health due to their potential high-fat content and energy density and risk of microbial contaminations, resulting from their minimal preservation, processing, or packaging. See: Kristberg Kristbergsson and Jorge Oliveira, *Traditional Food*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ministero della Salute, ‘Parliamo di salute’, Viewed 15 September 2024, [https://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C\\_17\\_opuscoliPoster\\_500\\_allegato.pdf](https://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_opuscoliPoster_500_allegato.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, ‘Alimentación Saludable’, Viewed 15 September 2024, <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/VS/PP/SNA/Guia-Alimentacion-saludable.pdf>.

traditional Thai cuisine not only “has medical properties which contains countless health benefits”, but is also the “world’s tastiest medicine”.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most notable examples of national cuisine that has successfully associated its name with the concept of healthy and balanced eating is Japanese cuisine. Today, it is not uncommon to come across articles, blogs, TV shows or cookbooks that praise the nutritional and therapeutic benefits of *washoku* (traditional Japanese cuisine) and attribute the longevity of the Japanese population to this type of diet. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (MAFF) of Japan in 2020 has revealed that, according to Japanese people, the primary image associated with *washoku* is that of healthiness (*kenkō ni yoi*, lit. “good for health”),<sup>8</sup> an opinion also shared by many American consumers who have stated that they eat Japanese food primarily for its flavour and health benefits.<sup>9</sup> This perception is supported by scientific literature which has extensively demonstrated the numerous positive health effects of the traditional Japanese diet, including reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and respiratory diseases.<sup>10</sup>

However, the association of Japanese traditional cuisine with healthiness has not been a constant throughout history. With the opening of the country during the Meiji period (1868–1912), new eating habits were introduced and widely adopted across the nation, and they came to be seen not only as symbols of Japan’s modernization but also as nutritionally superior to traditional Japanese diet. In particular, the consumption of meat was considered beneficial for health and strength, whereas the consumption of white rice was considered one of the causes of certain diseases, such as beriberi.<sup>11</sup> The negative effects of consuming white rice as the main staple food were first studied by the military during the late Meiji era.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the Meiji authorities displayed a favourable

<sup>7</sup> ‘Thai Taste Therapy’, Viewed 15 September 2024, <https://www.thaitastetherapy.com/en/>.

<sup>8</sup> MAFF, ‘Kokumin no shokuseikatsu ni okeru washokubunka no jittai chōsa’, Viewed 15 September 2024, [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/keikaku/syokubunka/culture/pdf/02\\_zentai.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/keikaku/syokubunka/culture/pdf/02_zentai.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> JETRO, ‘Serving Japanese Food to the World’, Viewed 15 September 2024, [https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext\\_images/en/reports/survey/pdf/2013\\_11\\_other.pdf](https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/en/reports/survey/pdf/2013_11_other.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Unyaporn Suthuvoravut et al., ‘Association between Traditional Japanese Diet Washoku and Sarcopenia in Community-Dwelling Older Adults: Findings from the Kashiwa Study’, *Journal of Nutrition, Health and Aging* 24/3 (2020), pp. 282–289; Tsugane Shōichirō, ‘Why has Japan become the world’s most long-lived country: insights from a food and nutrition perspective’, *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 75/6 (2021), pp. 921–928; Tsugane Shōichirō and Yatsuya Hiroshi, ‘What constitutes healthiness of washoku or Japanese diet?’, *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 75/6 (2021), pp. 863–864.

<sup>11</sup> Katarzyna J. Cwierzka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*, London 2006, pp. 26, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Takaki Kanehiro was a Japanese physician who made significant contributions to the study of beriberi in the late 19th century. He conducted several studies on beriberi in the Japanese Imperial Navy and was the first to demonstrate that beriberi was caused by a dietary deficiency. Takaki’s studies, which were conducted between 1884 and 1887, were some of the first to link beriberi to dietary factors and helped establish the connection between beriberi and white rice consumption. His findings were later confirmed by researchers such as Christiaan Eijkman. The Dutch physician Christiaan Eijkman was the first to identify the relationship between beriberi and a diet based on white rice without germ (the outer part of the rice grain) in 1897 on his studies on poultry. Building on the research of Eijkman, in the 1910s, American, European, and Japanese scientists attempted to isolate the compound present in rice bran that protected against and cured beriberi. They identified vitamins B1 and B2 complex by 1927, but it wasn’t until 1933 that Robert Williams (1886–1965) successfully extracted crystalline vitamin from

attitude towards nutrition and encouraged the adoption of meat and dairy consumption patterns modelled after Western examples.<sup>13</sup> Debates concerning the relative healthfulness of traditional versus contemporary Western dietary practices have continued to shape Japan's food discourse in contemporary times too.

This article aims to explore how the idea of a "healthy diet" has been historically constructed and promoted in Japan from the post-World War II period to the present day. Combining historical analysis with the theoretical lens of food discourse studies, this work investigates the shifting perceptions of dietary health in Japan, paying particular attention to the international factors that have shaped dominant narratives around food and health. While not questioning the scientific consensus on the health benefits of the Japanese diet, this study explores how such claims have been framed, instrumentalized, and contested within different historical contexts.

The central focus of the analysis is the long-standing and often ambivalent debate over the relative nutritional value of the traditional Japanese diet as compared to the Western (namely "American" in the postwar years) diet. This controversy became particularly prominent in the immediate aftermath of World War II, a period that serves as a critical entry point for this study. During the 1950s, as American food aid flowed into the country and Western dietary practices were increasingly promoted, a widely held belief began to take root in Japan: that the consumption of white rice, a staple of the traditional diet, was potentially harmful to health, while a diet modelled on Western standards – especially one centred on bread and dairy products – was seen as more beneficial to the body and conducive to modernization. However, as the article will demonstrate, this perspective began to lose ground from the late 1970s onward. During this period, a new wave of scientific studies and public health reports started to highlight the superior health outcomes of the Japanese population, drawing renewed attention to the nutritional virtues of traditional Japanese cuisine. This marked the beginning of a significant discursive shift, culminating in more recent decades with a growing critique of the "Westernization" of dietary habits and a parallel celebration of *washoku* – the traditional dietary culture of Japan – as a model of health and longevity.

To frame this historical trajectory, the article is guided by two interrelated research questions: (1) What historical and international factors have shaped the development of a specific discourse on healthy eating in Japan from the postwar period to the present?; (2) How has the idea of a "healthy diet" been employed in official narratives to promote not only public health but also a culturally distinct and nationalistic vision of Japanese cuisine?

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a large amount of rice bran, definitively showing that it was not rice itself that caused beriberi, but rather the deficiency of vitamins that resulted from the polishing process of whole rice. See: Alexander R. Bay, *Beriberi in Modern Japan: The Making of a National Disease*, Suffolk 2012; Yamashita Seizō, *Meiji ni okeru kakke no rekishi*, Tokyo 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, 'Popularizing a military diet in wartime and postwar Japan', *Asian Anthropology* 1/1 (2002), p. 19.

By drawing on the food discourse approach, the article contributes to a broader understanding of how food becomes a site of cultural meaning-making and political negotiation, where definitions of what is “healthy” are always historically contingent and subject to reinterpretation.

## 2. Food discourse as theoretical framework

The concept of “food discourse” offers a useful framework for understanding the intersections between food, health, and political governance. Defined by Leach et al., as the “interplay of diverse, socially and politically positioned knowledge, narratives and discourses embodying power”, food discourse represents the power to shape societal perspectives by constructing and controlling narratives surrounding food and its meanings.<sup>14</sup> This perspective emphasizes that discourse, as Foucault (1972) suggests, is not merely descriptive but constitutive – it actively shapes realities, embedding ideological and cultural assumptions into societal norms and practices.<sup>15</sup> In the context of food, people have developed a distinct form of discourse, composed of language and symbols shaped through social interactions. These interactions constitute what food studies often refer to as “foodways”, a concept which encompasses the production, preparation, consumption, and all related practices associated with food. Foodways not only reflect cultural practices but also reinforce symbolic meanings, enabling communication through and around food. In this way, foodways expressed through food discourse become a medium for expressing identities, values, and power.<sup>16</sup> It should therefore come as no surprise that governments and authorities have long exploited the symbolic and discursive power of food to implement policies and shape public behavior.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most prominent ideas leveraged in food discourses concerns the connection between diet and health. This link has been central to public narratives, with food often portrayed as a key determinant of individual and societal well-being. Governments and health institutions have consistently emphasized this relationship, using it to justify policies aimed at improving public health and promoting specific dietary behaviors because, as Jean Retzinger said, “the concept of ‘healthy’ has the potential to serve as a powerful motivating force for human nature”.<sup>18</sup> The connection between food and health is supported by

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, New York 1972.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Frye and Michael Bruner (eds.), *The Rhetoric of Food. Discourse, Materiality, and Power*, London 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Bridin E. Carroll, ‘Rhetoric of “Buy Irish Food” campaigns: speaking to consumer values to valorize the “local” and exclude “others”?’’, *Irish Geography* 45/1 (2012), pp. 87–109; Jillian Linton, ‘The Canadian Dream: Multicultural Agrarian Narratives in Ontario’, in: *The Immigrant-Food Nexus*, eds. Julian Agyeman, Sydney Giacalone, Cambridge 2020, pp. 205–223; Elia Carceller-Sauras and Insa Theesfeld, ‘The Food-as-a-Commons Discourse’, *International Journal of the Commons* 15/1 (2021), pp. 368–380.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Retzinger, ‘The embodied rhetoric of “health” from farm fields to salad bowls’, in: *Edible ideologies: Representing food and meaning*, eds. Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato, Suny Press, New York 2008, p. 172.

extensive empirical evidence, with poor dietary quality widely recognized as a significant contributor to long-term health conditions, premature mortality, and reduced health-related quality of life. But the rhetoric of food as medicine is not just the result of scientific advancements and empirical evidence; as observed by Christina Hanganu-Bresch, it also reflects deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and historical narratives that position diet as central to health, well-being, and disease prevention.<sup>19</sup> Such associations, rooted in early medical traditions, have evolved to position food as a primary vehicle for public health interventions, particularly in the modern era. However, these interventions are rarely neutral. Governments and health institutions have long harnessed these discourses, employing strategies such as risk evaluation, dietary guidelines, and food safety regulations to ensure not only the well-being of citizens but also the maintenance of societal order or the pursuit of national interests. The historical analysis of food discourse in postwar Japan which we propose here highlights these complex interactions. Specifically, it reveals how the relationship between food and health has been framed either in discourses, at times, contradictory, which were xenophilic or nationalistic, depending on the economic, political, and diplomatic interests of a given historical moment.

### 3. “Eating rice will make you stupid”

At the end of the Pacific War in 1945, Japan found itself in a disastrous situation with regard to its food supplies. The loss of the colonies on which it had depended heavily for food imports during the entire period of militarism, the destruction of the main infrastructure due to American bombing, as well as unfavourable weather conditions such as storms and floods that hit the country in the autumn of 1945 were among the main causes that exacerbated Japan's already difficult food supply. The food problem was one of the main issues that the Occupation Forces had to deal with from the beginning, but it was only after the protests of May 1946 (*shokuryō mēdē*) – large demonstrations organized by labour unions and citizen groups demanding for greater food supplies – that the first food aid began to arrive and alleviate the starvation condition of many Japanese.<sup>20</sup> American food aid continued for some years even after the end of the occupation in 1952, allowing the Japanese population to have a large supply of nutritious and cheap food and thus be able to concentrate on the economic reconstruction of Japan. American aid led to the spread of hitherto little-used foodstuffs, such as bread or milk, in the daily diet of the Japanese, which underwent a process of westernisation.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of

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<sup>19</sup> Christina Hanganu-Bresch, ‘The rhetoric of food as medicine: Introduction to special issue on the rhetoric of food and health’, *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* 4/2 (2021), pp. 111–125.

<sup>20</sup> Felice Farina, ‘Dalla fame all’abbondanza: analisi internazionale del cambiamento dei consumi alimentari in Giappone negli anni Cinquanta’, in: *Riflessioni sul Giappone antico e moderno. Volume III*, eds. Paolo Villani, Naomi Hayashi and Luca Capponcelli, Roma 2018, pp. 301–322.

<sup>21</sup> Nathan Hopson, ‘Eiyō shidōsha: Amerika nōsanbutsu to sengo Nihon no shokuseikatsu hensen’, *JunCture* 11 (2020), p. 31.

new dietary styles reignited the debate that had already sparked in the Meiji period about which staple food had the best nutritional characteristics, in particular between rice and bread (*shushoku ronsō*, lit. “debate on staple food”).<sup>22</sup>

Although the situation was one of necessity, American authorities understood that, for the new ingredients to be fully accepted and integrated into the Japanese diet – even after the occupation had ended and food aid was no longer required – it was essential to intervene at the level of communication. This involved constructing a discourse in which the new foods were presented not only as delicious, but also as healthier than those of the traditional Japanese diet. One of the key points emphasised in this campaign was the fact that wheat flour possessed a protein content that was significantly higher than that of the traditional Japanese staple, rice. This served to not only highlight the generosity of the American aid but also to promote the consumption of the new food as a means of improving overall health and nutrition.<sup>23</sup> However, it was in the post-occupation era of the 1950s that scientific research began to surface, extolling the nutritional virtues of wheat-based products – particularly bread – over the traditional staple of rice. These studies further reinforced the shift in dietary discourses, positioning wheat as a superior alternative in terms of health and nutrition. This was done by reputable nutritionists and scientists, who used their scientific authority to advocate for the dietary practices of “bread-eating cultures” in the West, and attribute cultural and nutritional deficiencies to the traditional rice-based diets of Asian peoples, while also promoting the consumption of these wheat-based products as means of improving health and increasing industrial productivity.<sup>24</sup>

Among these, a study conducted in 1955 by the University of Tōhoku revealed that among the Japanese prefectures, the average life expectancy was found to be the lowest in Akita and the highest in Kōchi. The research posits that the primary cause for this discrepancy is rooted in the dietary habits of the two prefectures. Specifically, the study noted that in Akita, there was a high consumption of rice, as the prefecture was a major producer of the crop, while in Kōchi, a lower consumption of rice was observed and there was an increased consumption of fish.<sup>25</sup> However, the study emphasised that it was not the consumption of white rice *per se* that resulted in a decreased life expectancy, but rather the excessive consumption of this low-nutrient food, which led to a deprivation of essential nutrients for the consumers.<sup>26</sup> In the same year, the physiologist Sugi Yasusaburō also wrote that excessive consumption of white rice in the traditional Japanese diet was

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<sup>22</sup> Ogihara Yuki, ‘Seikatsu kairiyō fukyūin no shōwa 20–30 nendai no eiyō shidō no igi to kōseki’, *Nōgyō oyobi engei* 88/12 (2013), pp. 1184–1185.

<sup>23</sup> George Solt, *The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze*, Berkeley 2014, p. 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 98–100.

<sup>25</sup> Kodama Keizō, ‘Eiyō to jumyō’, *Eiyō to ryōri* 21/8 (1955), p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

the root cause of the sense of fatigue and drowsiness (*darusa*) that affects many Japanese in the early spring.<sup>27</sup>

In 1958, Hayashi Takashi, a professor of medicine at Keio University, published a book titled *Zunō – Sainō wo hikidasu shohōsen* (The Brain – Prescriptions to enhance capabilities), in which he analysed the effects of a diet based on white rice on the human brain. According to Hayashi's study, one of the key factors that contribute to the nutritionally inadequate nature of white rice is its deficiency in B-vitamins, specifically in B1, which helps the body convert food into energy and plays a crucial role in nerve, heart, and brain function. This is why in Japan, where white rice is the staple food,

people grow and develop with brains that are always lacking in function, which is very inconvenient for them as they grow up. Therefore, the consumption of white rice as a staple food must be considered a serious matter, especially for boys and girls. Parents who let their children eat white rice risk impairing the child's brain development, leading to foolish behaviour in adulthood.<sup>28</sup>

Professor Hayashi's study had such an impact that the expression “if you eat rice you will become stupid (*kome wo taberu to baka ni naru*)” began to spread and other people began to address the issue. In 1960, Iwao Hiroyuki, director of the Applied Food Department of the National Institute of Nutrition (*Kokuritsu eiyō kenkyūsho no ōyōshokuhinbu*), claimed that

It can be said that Japanese people are still in a state of nutritional imbalance. The theory that eating white rice makes you stupid is a bit of a stretch, but the fact is there is a problem with the way rice is consumed. It would be difficult to tell Japanese people who are so used to white rice to eat brown rice, so I personally recommend eating ‘mugimeshi [barley rice]’.<sup>29</sup>

Concomitant with these studies, there emerged various movements and campaigns aimed at enhancing the nutrition of the Japanese population (*eiyō kaizen undō*). A shared aspect of these movements was the promotion of foods or dietary styles typical of Western diets, like for example the “frypan campaign” (*furaipan undo*), which recommended the daily consumption of at least one meal prepared in an oil-fried pan (*ichinichi ikkai*).<sup>30</sup> As part of these promotional campaigns, the so-called “kitchen cars” were used to introduce new ingredients and methods of preparation to Japanese housewives. Funded by the US government and Japan's Ministry of Health and Welfare, the *kitchen cars* toured rural

<sup>27</sup> Sugi Yasusaburō, ‘Darusa to eiyō’, *Eiyō to ryōri* 21/7 (1955), p. 104.

<sup>28</sup> Hayashi Takashi, *Zunō – Sainō wo hikidasu shohōsen*, Tokyo 1958, p. 161.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Kome wo taberu to baka ni naru’, *Shūkan gendai* 2/7 (21 February 1960), p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Makuuchi Hideo, *‘Kenkōshoku’ no uso*, Tokyo 2011, p. 85.

villages throughout Japan for four years, “encouraging (wheat) flour-based food” (*funshoku shōrei*).<sup>31</sup> The program was so successful that many prefectures decided to continue it at their own expense until the early 1970s.<sup>32</sup>

During the years of the rapid economic growth (the 1950s and 1960s), significant transformations in everyday life were accompanied by a marked process of Westernization, evident in the domain of food and dietary practices as well. This era witnessed what has been described as a widespread “distrust towards tradition (*dentō e no fushinkan*)”, especially in matters related to nutrition and health. Traditional dietary staples, most notably rice, were increasingly supplemented or replaced by Western food products such as wheat-based items and dairy. The adoption of these foods was not merely a matter of taste or preference, but also part of a broader socio-cultural shift that associated modernity and progress with Western lifestyles.<sup>33</sup> The Ministry of Health and Welfare itself claimed that general improvements in the nutritional profile of the Japanese were attributable to increased consumption of wheat flour, milk, and other Western foodstuffs, alongside with a reduction in rice consumption. Yet, there was still room for improvement. The Ministry continued to express concerns about the fact that, especially in rural areas, the diet of the Japanese was still “heavily dependent on rice” (*beishoku izon ga takai*). In these regions, large segments of the population were still reported to lack important nutrients, such as high-quality proteins, fats, vitamins and calcium.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the relatively high cost of wheat-based products compared to rice raised alarms about potential inequalities in nutritional access. For low-income households, particularly in the countryside, the economic burden of purchasing Western foods posed a risk of further dietary imbalance.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. *The McGovern report and the “Japanese dietary style (Nihongata shokuseikatsu)”*

In 1977, the United States Senate’s Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs released a report titled “Dietary Goals for the United States”, under the direction of Senator George McGovern. This report, which is often referred to as the “McGovern Report”, outlined the need for dietary guidelines and recommendations to address the growing problem of malnutrition and diet-related health issues in the United States. The McGovern Report ultimately served as the basis for the development of the first Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which were published in 1980. The report also had a profound impact, albeit indirectly, in Japan. The report highlighted several concerns about the American diet, including that it was too high in fat, sugar, and salt, and too

<sup>31</sup> Hopson, ‘Eiyō shidōsha’, p. 30; Kishi Yasuhiko, *Shoku to nō no sengoshi*, Tokyo 1996, p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> US Department of Agriculture, ‘Japan. Agricultural Situation. History of U.S. Soybean Exports to Japan’, Washington 2009, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Morita Akira, ‘Nihon no shoku no henka no sengoshi’, *Nōgyō kenkyū* 34 (2021), pp. 277–278.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan, *Kōsei hakusho*, Tokyo 1956, p. 129.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

low in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. It was also stated that the American diet was a major factor contributing to the rise in chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. In this way, the report challenged the nutritional adequacy and healthfulness of the contemporary Western diet, implying that it posed a greater threat than benefit to overall health. At the same time, the report noted that communities maintaining less westernised dietary patterns tended to show a lower prevalence of certain illnesses. In reference to the Japanese, the report stated that.

Japanese who migrate to the United States and change to a Western diet from their traditional Japanese diet which contains little animal fat and almost no dairy products, dramatically increase their incidence of breast and colon cancer.<sup>36</sup>

In this way, the report seemed to challenge some of the central tenets of post-war Japanese nutrition and prompted Japanese specialists to reevaluate their prior stance that romanticised the consumption patterns commonly associated with “western” diets, such as an increase in daily bread consumption or, more generally, wheat flour-based products. By recommending increased consumption of unrefined grains, seasonal vegetables, seaweed, fish, and shellfish – foods central to traditional Japanese cuisine – the report indirectly validated Japanese dietary practices, marking a turning point in recognising the link between diet and illness prevention. This contributed to a growing global interest in Japanese food as a model of healthy eating, inspiring nutrition initiatives in Japan and boosting the popularity of Japanese ingredients abroad, particularly in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

The release of the McGovern Report coincided with a critical juncture in Japan's approach to food security. In the immediate postwar decades, Japan had become heavily reliant on the United States for food imports, establishing a relationship of structural dependency. However, the global food crisis of the 1970s – highlighted by the so-called “soybean embargo” imposed by the Nixon administration – served as a wake-up call for Japanese policymakers, exposing the vulnerabilities of overdependence on foreign supplies. A main factor behind this situation was considered to be the increasing Westernization of the Japanese diet, which had led to a growing demand for food products not readily available within the country and thus had to be sourced from abroad. In response to these concerns, the Japanese government adopted a twofold strategy: diversifying its foreign suppliers while simultaneously encouraging greater consumption of domestically produced foods.<sup>38</sup> In order to diversify its supply sources, Japan launched a strategy of investing in “new agricultural countries” (NACs) through official development aid (ODA) and tax incentives to support agribusiness abroad. The most ambitious example was

<sup>36</sup> Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, *Dietary Goals for the United States*, Washington 1977, p. XXVIII.

<sup>37</sup> JETRO, ‘Serving Japanese Food to the World’, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Felice Farina, ‘Coping with Food Crises. Japan's Preventive Approach to Food Security’, *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 22 (2023), pp. 289–294.

the PRODECER program in Brazil, which, starting in 1979, transformed over 334,000 hectares of the Cerrado into soybean farmland – laying the groundwork for Brazil’s rise as the world’s top soybean exporter and Japan’s main soybean supplier.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of promoting higher consumption of national products, the McGovern Report offered a timely opportunity to re-evaluate the nutritional discourse that had dominated the postwar period. It enabled the government to promote the traditional Japanese diet not only as culturally authentic but also as a healthier and more self-sufficient alternative to Western dietary models. These findings contributed to the report’s subsequent reception as an authoritative validation of the traditional Japanese diet. As Ueda Haruka has observed, the McGovern Report had a huge impact on nutritional food discourse in Japan as it promoted the traditional Japanese diet “as *ideal* [emphasis added] for combatting contemporary health issues”.<sup>40</sup> This statement is often attributed to the report, and regularly appears in a wide range of nutritional blogs,<sup>41</sup> books,<sup>42</sup> and documents<sup>43</sup> that seek to promote the traditional Japanese diet. However, all these documents appear to perpetuate a common but inaccurate interpretation – namely, that the McGovern Report explicitly promoted the traditional Japanese diet as the ideal model for health –, an interpretation that is not supported by the original document.

In fact, the McGovern Report explicitly rejects the notion of a single “ideal diet”. It clearly states:

The objective of meeting health requirements does not necessitate drawing up an “ideal diet” containing definite amounts of various foods. The goal can be reached through different combinations and amounts of food. Solutions must be selected which are suitable in regard to the supply situation, resources, family economy, mode of living and other practical circumstances, and which at the same time satisfy reasonable demands for taste and variety.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 293.

<sup>40</sup> Ueda Haruka, *Food Education and Gastronomic Tradition in Japan and France: Ethical and Sociological Theories*, Routledge 2011, p. 157.

<sup>41</sup> See for example: Viewed 15 September 2024, <https://kenta-hayashi.com/2022/05/31/meal/4374/>; Viewed 15 September 2024, <https://shareshima.com/info/3992990771>; Viewed 15 September 2024, <https://alter.gr.jp/about/page-590/page-1131/>.

<sup>42</sup> See for example: Ōta Yasuo, *Risō no shokuji: Mutamagawa ni miru Genroku no shokuji to McGovern Report*, Tōkaidaiigaku shuppankai, Tokyo 2009; Shin’ya Hiromi, *The Enzyme Factor*, New Delhi 2014, pp. 18–20.

<sup>43</sup> The Washoku School Lunch Promotion Group (*Washoku kyūshoku ōendan*), an initiative supported by the MAFF, wrote a document titled “Washoku and healthiness (*Washoku to kenkō*)”, where it is falsely attributed the following phrase to the McGovern Report: “There is only one country in the world that follows an ideal diet – that country is Japan, known for its longevity”. The document is available at: Viewed 15 September 2024, [https://washoku-kyushoku.or.jp/wp-content/themes/wodtemplate/pdf/booklet\\_01\\_first.pdf](https://washoku-kyushoku.or.jp/wp-content/themes/wodtemplate/pdf/booklet_01_first.pdf), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, *Dietary Goals for the United States – Supplemental Views*, Washington 1977, p. 850.

Furthermore, much of the secondary discourse tends to omit a crucial nuance: while the report acknowledged certain positive aspects of the Japanese diet, it also emphasized significant health concerns, including the excessive consumption of salt and the correspondingly high incidence of stomach cancer among the Japanese population.<sup>45</sup> This selective appropriation of the McGovern Report thus reflects broader patterns of how food discourses can mythologize national cuisines by simplifying or overlooking critical complexities.

Despite these misinterpretations, the McGovern Report nonetheless played a significant role in shaping official food policy debates in Japan, contributing to a growing institutional interest in redefining national dietary guidelines. Following the publication of the report, in 1980, the Agricultural Council (*Nōsei shingikai*) published its report *Basic Direction of Agriculture in the 1980s* (80nendai no nōsei no hōkō). The report stated that it was necessary to “establish a Japanese dietary lifestyle (*Nihongata shokuseikatsu*), necessary from both a nutritional and overall food self-sufficiency standpoint”. The first chapter, entitled “Formation and Establishment of Japanese dietary style – Future images of dietary style (*Nihongata shokuseikatsu no keisei to teichaku – Shokuseikatsu to sono shōraizō*)” praised the “Japanese dietary style” for its superior balance compared to Western countries. The report highlighted that the westernization of the Japanese diet had resulted in positive changes in the overall health and physical well-being of the population. Yet, it also pointed out the growing concern regarding the excessive consumption of animal fats and sugar, which were contributing to the prevalence of lifestyle diseases. The report emphasised the importance of re-evaluating (*saihyōka*) the traditional “Japanese food style” which was deemed to be nutritionally balanced and more suitable for Japan’s dietary needs compared to the Western eating habits.<sup>46</sup>

Two years later, in 1982, the same council published a new report reiterating the need to modify the population’s dietary habits. A definition was provided, albeit a general one, of “Japanese dietary style”, which did not reject post-war food innovations but incorporated them into the “Japanese tradition”. In fact, according to the report, the “Japanese dietary style” was based on “a traditional dietary pattern centred on rice, vegetables, fish, and soybeans, with a rich addition of meat, dairy and dairy products, eggs, oils and fats, and fruits”, and characterised by “diversity and good nutritional balance”.<sup>47</sup> The report also emphasised the importance of implementing measures aimed at spreading the new dietary style among the population, through health policies and promotional campaigns. In this process, school education would have played a fundamental role by providing young people with the necessary tools to understand and appreciate the new Japanese dietary style.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 148 and p. 312.

<sup>46</sup> *Nōsei shingikai, 80nendai no nōsei no kihon hōkō*, Tokyo 1980.

<sup>47</sup> *Nōsei shingikai, 80nendai no nōsei no kihon hōkō no suishin ni tsuite – kenkō teki de yutaka na shokuseikatsu no hoshō to seisansei no takai nōgyō no jitsugen wo mezashite*, Tokyo 1982.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

In 1983, the MAFF established a roundtable of experts (*shokuryō kondankai*) to consider the concept of a “Japanese dietary lifestyle” and culminated in the recommendation “Towards Our Desired Dietary Lifestyle: Seeking the Way of a Japanese Dietary Lifestyle (*Watashitachi no nozomashii shokuseikatsu – Nihongata shokuseikatsu no arikata wo motomete*)”. In this recommendation, it was stated that a desirable dietary lifestyle should meet at least four conditions: nutritionally, safety, effective use of land and resources, and culturally. From a nutritional perspective, despite the improvement in life expectancy and reduction in infant mortality, experts argued that the dietary habits in Japan had deviated from traditional norms and incorporated a higher intake of milk, eggs, meat, and oil.<sup>49</sup> This increased diversity of the Japanese diet raised concerns that it might eventually result in the same excessive calorie and fat consumption issues prevalent in Western developed nations. Furthermore, the westernization of the Japanese diet had been driven by the popular belief that Western diets were healthier and superior, however, new findings indicated a shift in this perception, with a growing recognition that traditional Japanese dietary practices were more healthful than their Western counterparts.<sup>50</sup>

This perspective became even more evident in the early 1990s, when the “Committee for the Study of the New Japanese Dietary Guidelines (*Nihongata shokuseikatsu shin-shishin kentō iinkai*)” was established within the MAFF, producing a new proposal for the improvement of the Japanese diet in the document titled “Towards a new food culture – Proposals for the ‘90’s tables (*Aratana shokubunka no keisei ni mukete – 90nendai no shokutaku no teian*)”. The use of the term “*shokubunka* [food culture]” in the title emphasises how the issues of food safety and nutrition had become strictly interconnected with cultural considerations. In fact, the document suggested that a return to traditional dietary practices was necessary for enhancing the health of citizens. Among other things, the text specifically recommended a diet centred on rice as the main staple, combined with a variety of side dishes, particularly vegetables. It suggested obtaining protein primarily from plant-based sources (soy) and seafood and incorporating green tea into the diet.<sup>51</sup>

Riding on the wave of this debate, the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare published its “Dietary Guidelines” in 1985. Although the guidelines never referenced the *Nihongata shokuseikatsu*, they were based on the assumption that the westernization of consumption had made the Japanese diet unbalanced with excessive fat consumption.<sup>52</sup> Since then, the Ministry has issued other dietary guidelines and, according to Ueda, they all possess three main characteristics: (a) the promotion of *shushoku-shusai-fukusai* (a specific meal pattern consisting of staple food, main dish, and side dishes) and the importance of “eating together” as a family; (b) the justification of these two elements based on their nutritional and psychological benefits; and (c) an emphasis on “quality of

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<sup>49</sup> Shokuryō kondankai, *Watashitachi no nozomashii shokuseikatsu – Nihongata shokuseikatsu no arikata wo motomete*, Tokyo 1983.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>52</sup> MHLW, ‘Kenkōzukurī tame no shokuseikatsu shishin’, Viewed 20 September 2024, [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/web/t\\_doc?dataId=00ta4659&dataType=1&pageNo=1](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/web/t_doc?dataId=00ta4659&dataType=1&pageNo=1).

life” without any substantial theoretical basis.<sup>53</sup> The 1985 guidelines marked the state’s initial effort to concretely reshape the national dietary model. However, between 1985 and 2005, little progress was made, and few comprehensive measures were introduced. This period of relative limited intervention came to an end with the enactment of the Basic Law on Food Education in 2005, which marked the culmination of decades of discourse on nutrition and food tradition. Through this legislation, the Japanese government assumed responsibility for the dietary education of its citizens, aiming to educate and inform on the recommended daily intake of specific food items through the incorporation of the Dietary Balance Guide. The primary aim of the legislation is to bolster the consumption of domestically grown agricultural goods, by advancing a nationalist ideal of Japanese cuisine. This is achieved through the correlation of local products with healthfulness, while associating imported food with potential risks.<sup>54</sup> The preamble of the Food Education Law states that it is essential “to help children develop their body and mind so that they will be able to take an active part in a global society in the future, as well as enabling all citizens to ensure their physical and mental health and a vigorous life.”<sup>55</sup> The law also recognises that there are various issues related to food in Japan, such as imbalanced diets, unhealthy eating habits, rising obesity and lifestyle diseases, and also a strong dependence on foreign food. These problems call for the need to educate people on food and nutrition to improve their diets and maintain food safety. Additionally, the preamble also highlights the importance of preserving the diverse and rich flavours of Japanese cuisine, which are in danger of being lost.

The Basic Law on Food Education does not specify what traditional Japanese cuisine is or which foods Japanese people should eat for their health, but merely states that

consideration must be given for Japan’s distinctive traditional food culture, diet reflecting their regional characteristics, and environmentally friendly food production, consumption and other stages of the food supply chain.

However, the 2006 Basic Plan for the Promotion of Food Education (*Shokuiku suishin kihon keikaku*) that followed adopted the concept of *Nihongata shokuseikatsu* to embody the notion of a desirable dietary pattern in all food education policies, a dietary style characterised by “a perfect nutritional balance (*eiyō ga sugureta baransu*)”, “centred on rice” (*kome wo chūshin*)” and which is suitable for Japan’s “climate and environment (*kikō fūdo*)”. The expression *Nihongata shokuseikatsu* continued to be used in the 2011 Second

<sup>53</sup> Ueda Haruka, ‘The norms and practices of eating well: In conflict with contemporary food discourses in Japan’, *Appetite* 175 (2022), p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Kimura Aya Hirata, ‘Nationalism, Patriarchy, and Moralism: The Government-Led Food Reform in Contemporary Japan’, *Food and Foodways* 19/3 (2011), pp. 201–27; Stephanie Assmann, ‘The Remaking of a National Cuisine: The Food Education Campaign in Japan’, in: *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones*, ed. James Farrer, New York 2015, pp. 165–185.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Basic Act on Shokuiku’, Viewed 15 September 2024, [https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech\\_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-19.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-19.pdf).

Basic Plan for the Promotion of Food Education. But starting from the 2016 Third Plan, a new term, “*washoku* (lit. “food of Japan”)” begins to be more frequently used. This shift does not imply that the two are synonymous; rather, *washoku* can be understood as one component within the more inclusive framework of *Nihongata shokuseikatsu*. However, the growing use of *washoku*, as we shall see in the next paragraph, in official nutritional guidelines reflects a deliberate attempt to align the notion of healthy and balanced eating with heritage and national identity.

### 5. *Washoku as a healthy diet*

The traditional dietary culture of the Japanese, known as *washoku*, was recognised by UNESCO as part of the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity on December 5th, 2013. In March 2012, the Japanese government submitted a nomination file to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which defined *washoku* as “a social practice based on a comprehensive set of skills, knowledge, practice and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation and consumption of food. It is associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature closely related to the sustainable use of natural resources”.<sup>56</sup> The nomination file emphasised the important role of *washoku* in Japanese society, highlighting its impact on cultural identity, community cohesion, and promoting healthy lifestyles. According to the MAFF, a typical *washoku* meal consists of rice as the main dish, accompanied by one soup and three side dishes, following the principle of *ichijū sansai* or “one soup, three side dishes”, and is characterised by four core elements that reflect a deep respect for nature: the use of fresh ingredients and the preservation of their natural flavours; *a balanced and nutritious diet*; an emphasis on the beauty of nature in food presentation; and a connection to various seasonal festivals and events. The recognition of *washoku* as part of the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity not only highlights the significance of this cultural practice in Japanese society but it solidifies in a definite manner the strong connection that exists between the traditional Japanese diet and a healthy lifestyle. Since then, there has been the emergence of a new discourse regarding food, centered on the foods to eat rather than the nutrients to consume. As previously mentioned, the 2016 Third Plan for the Promotion of Shokuiku (*Daisanji shokuiku suishin kihon keikaku*) contained the word “*washoku*” for the first time, emphasising the need to transmit to the new generations “the cuisine, flavours, and eating habits” of their parents.<sup>57</sup> The Plan also stressed the need for the promotion of *washoku*, which would occur through

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<sup>56</sup> UNESCO, ‘Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year’, Viewed 25 September 2024, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/washoku-traditional-dietary-cultures-of-the-japanese-notably-for-the-celebration-of-new-year-00869>.

<sup>57</sup> MAFF, ‘Dai sanji shokuiku kihon keikaku’, Viewed 25 September 2024, [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/plan/3rd\\_index.html](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/plan/3rd_index.html).

the dissemination of scientific publications that explain the nutritional balance and health benefits of consuming *washoku*.

Simultaneously with the release of the Third Plan, the MEXT, the MAFF, and the MHLW carried out a revision of the “Dietary Guidelines for the Japanese”, which were approved in 2000. The “2000 Dietary Guidelines” played an important role as a set of concrete guidelines for general people to aim for a “healthy dietary life” and create a “healthy, fulfilling, and active longevity society (*Kenkō de jūjitsu shita katsu katsudō teki na chōju shakai*)”.<sup>58</sup> Compared to the 1985 guidelines, which made no reference to Japanese food tradition, the 2000 Guidelines acknowledged the importance of consuming foods such as rice that are “suited to the Japanese climate and *fudō* [milieu]”. At the same time, they acknowledged the importance of incorporating new dishes into one’s local diet. In particular, at point 8 it was stated: “Take advantage of *your* dietary culture and local food products, *while incorporating new and different dishes*” [emphasis added]. Following the 2016 revisions, it was modified as follows: “Take advantage of *Japanese* dietary culture and local food products. *Preserve local dishes.*” [emphasis added].<sup>59</sup> In both cases, the emphasis is placed more on specific meal patterns and food intake rather than nutrients. However, while the 2000 Guidelines still allowed for the possibility of enriching one’s diet with dishes that may not necessarily belong to Japanese tradition, in 2016 this possibility was eliminated, with citizens being encouraged to preserve their local culinary tradition, implying that only the Japanese culinary tradition could ensure a healthy diet.<sup>60</sup> This vision was then reconfirmed in the Fourth Basic Plan for the Promotion of Shokuiku of 2021 which attributes the longevity of Japanese to *washoku*, a “nutritionally well-balanced” diet which “contributes to dietary habits with good nutritional balance and is reported to lower chances of death due to cardiovascular diseases, etc.”<sup>61</sup> The Plan also acknowledges the importance of promoting the health benefits of *washoku*, and aims to develop the necessary human resources to achieve this objective. This will involve training programs for dieticians and other individuals who engage in activities related to food

<sup>58</sup> MAFF, Consumer Affair Division, ‘Shokuseikatsu shishin ni tsuite’, Viewed 25 September 2024, [https://sugar.alic.go.jp/japan/frommaff/fm\\_0005.htm#5](https://sugar.alic.go.jp/japan/frommaff/fm_0005.htm#5).

<sup>59</sup> MHLW, ‘Shokuseikatsu shishin. Shin-kyū taishō hyō’, Viewed 27 September 2024, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/06-Seisakujouhou-10900000-Kenkoukyoku/0000129380.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> The concept of “traditional Japanese cuisine” and that of *washoku* have been the subject of extensive critical analysis in the academic literature. In particular, the work of Katarzyna Cwiertka has demonstrated that what is commonly understood today as “traditional Japanese cuisine” incorporates elements of foreign origin – especially from Western countries and other parts of Asia – forming what she refers to as a “Japanese-Western-Chinese tripod”. She further argues that the definition of *washoku* is the result of a “deliberate strategy” shaped by “ignorance and error, omissions, inventions, and exaggerations” (Cwiertka and Yasuhara, p. 119), designed primarily to facilitate the UNESCO inscription process. While a detailed critique of the *washoku* discourse lies beyond the scope of this study, readers are referred to the existing literature for further exploration. What is essential to highlight here, however, is that the category of “Japanese food” as promoted by national authorities also includes dishes of foreign origin that have become an integral part of the contemporary Japanese diet.

<sup>61</sup> MAFF, ‘The Fourth Basic Plan for the Promotion of Shokuiku’, Viewed 27 September 2024, [https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech\\_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-18.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-18.pdf).

and nutrition within communities. The Plan also highlights the significance of research and study in clarifying, disseminating, and communicating the cultural value of food and nutrition, with an emphasis on deepening the understanding of the nutritional balance of *washoku*. To this end, efforts to enhance domestic and international communication have been prioritised.<sup>62</sup> In recent years, the MAFF has conducted several workshops for teachers, nutritionists, and administrative staff to promote a greater appreciation of *washoku* and its cultural significance, in order to preserve and pass down this culinary tradition to future generations. The underlying belief is that by increasing awareness of the nutritional and health benefits of *washoku* and its pivotal role in the growth and well-being of children and families, the younger generation can be encouraged to consume more of these traditional foods.<sup>63</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

This study has argued that the idea of a “healthy” diet is not simply a matter of nutritional content but the outcome of a broader food discourse that assigns meaning to food in specific historical contexts. Rather than being grounded solely in scientific objectivity, the health value of a dietary model is constructed through narratives that reflect political priorities, economic strategies, and cultural identities.

In postwar Japan, food discourse shifted dramatically in response to changing national conditions and international influences. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, nutritional policies were dominated by concerns about food scarcity and reconstruction, and the promotion of a Western-style diet was framed as a step toward modernization and alignment with the American-led world order. Here, “health” was equated with abundance, growth, and departure from the past. Later, in the wake of the 1970s food crisis and rising concern over lifestyle diseases, the traditional Japanese diet began to be reimagined as a healthier and more secure alternative. The McGovern Report – despite not explicitly endorsing any single dietary model – was appropriated within Japanese discourse as a scientific validation of Japanese traditional diet. This marked a shift in the narrative: health was no longer just about overcoming hunger or adopting the modern; it became entangled with notions of cultural identity, self-sufficiency, and national pride. The growing institutional emphasis on traditional diet in food education policies, culminating in the inscription of *washoku* on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list, reflects a discursive strategy that links health, heritage, and identity. Through this reframing, *washoku* is not just presented as nutritionally balanced but as *the* model of good eating – precisely because it is seen as both traditionally Japanese and internationally recognized. Ultimately, what this case demonstrates is that food discourse plays a central role in

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<sup>62</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>63</sup> MAFF, ‘Wa-shoku-iku’, Viewed 27 September 2024, <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/keikaku/syokubunka/culture/attach/pdf/index-176.pdf> p. 8.

defining what counts as healthy, desirable, or modern. Nutritional science provides tools and data, but it is discourse that determines how these are interpreted and mobilized in the public sphere. This demonstrates how food discourse, far from being neutral, plays a central role in shaping public perceptions and national food agendas.

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