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For international consumption? Depictions of the Japanese diet and local foodstuffs in the news section of the NHK World-Japan website

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Abstract

With food representing an important part of national identity and cultural heritage, this article presents a short overview of the depiction of the traditional Japanese diet (*washoku*) and local foodstuffs on the news website of NHK World-Japan, the English-language international arm of Japan's public broadcaster NHK. It firstly briefly highlights the importance and relevance of culinary traditions, before summarising the growing role of the media in international diplomacy, especially with regard to the nascent field of gastrodiplomacy. It subsequently outlines the chosen methodology (a qualitative content analysis), before presenting the results of the analysis, showing how the selected news items can be categorised into two groupings, one centring on sustainability in the domestic context and the other with a distinctly external focus.

Keywords: gastrodiplomacy; Japan; media diplomacy; media portrayal; *washoku*

Introduction

General considerations surrounding food supplies and systems, food security, sustainability, the rising cost of living, and climate change have become a topic of growing global concern. As such, these interlinked concepts are frequently the subject of analyses in traditional and online media in various countries across the world. With food often representing a key marker of identity (be it ethnic, cultural, or national), discussions regarding shifts from traditional cuisines founded on local produce to Western-style diets can be regarded not only as a question of nutrition and wellbeing, but also as something relevant to issues pertaining to cultural heritage and society.

Accordingly, some traditional diets have been recognised at the supranational level. As demonstrated by its inclusion in a World Health Organisation report, these include such as the “Mediterranean Diet” popular in southern Europe (WHO, 2018). And in Japan, the country’s traditional *washoku* diet has been listed as part of UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage since 2013. In addition to specific food preparation practices, *washoku* consists of the “consumption of various natural, locally sourced ingredients such as rice, fish, vegetables and edible wild plants” (UNESCO, 2024). Yet, though these aspects have been a part of Japan’s culinary culture for centuries, the notion of *washoku* is in fact a modern one; as Cwiertka (2005, p. 420) states, its nomenclature arose in contrast to and as a response to the presence of other cuisines (for example, Chinese or Western) in the country.

As such, with its focus on local and healthy dietary components, the ideals underpinning *washoku* also align well with the public health image of Japan on the world stage. Indeed, and especially when compared to other developed nations, the country is lauded globally for its low rates of overweight and obesity as well as cardiovascular diseases. In this regard, the Japanese diet has been viewed as an important contributory component (Gabriel et al., 2018). Therefore, this study provides an analysis of aspects pertaining to the traditional Japanese diet and local foodstuffs as portrayed on the website of Japan’s international English-language news channel, NHK World-Japan.

Media, diplomacy, and NHK World-Japan

In all of its forms, media has become an inescapable and irreplaceable part of 21st century existence. Indeed, the agenda-setting role of mass media has been well-attested for over five decades (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), as has its ever-growing ability to contribute, shape, and influence discussions in manifold fields, geographies, and contexts. A key vector in this regard began in the last couple of decades of the 20th century, when technological and regulatory advances led to the opening up of domestic television markets and the ensuing creation of international television news channels. From the 1990s onwards, the major players have included well-known names such as BBC World, Al Jazeera, Deutsche Welle, and France 24 (see Rai & Cottle, 2007).

The media has always played a crucial role in transmitting specific cultures, languages and worldviews, with noted scholar Eytan Gilboa highlighting its impact within public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008). In this regard, with their original roots in the national broadcasters of specific countries, it has been advanced that these international news channels are forms of media diplomacy (Lim, 2017, p. 17). Indeed, as the 21st century progresses

with all of its various challenges, changes and opportunities, the role and importance of trusted news organisations in the current era is clear. As such, scholars have stated that there are moves towards the concept of digital media diplomacy (for example, see Saliu, 2022; Saliu & Abrashi, 2023, etc.), of which such international news channels can certainly play an important part.

Noting Japan's status as a major world economy and a member of the G7 (Laš & Kloza, 2018) it is perhaps unsurprising that this archipelagic nation of over 123 million people (Janssen et al., 2024) has its own international news television channel. NHK World-Japan is part of NHK (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*), the Japanese national broadcaster, and forms part of Japan's soft power initiatives as exercised through media diplomacy (see Snow, 2019, pp. 17-18). The channel was created in 1998 as an English-language channel which is available worldwide via satellite transmission, and it presents domestic Japanese news as well as coverage of regional and international news, in addition to other programmes about contemporary aspects of Japanese culture and society. In going beyond providing coverage about politics and other newsworthy events, the news portion of the channel also provides up-to-the-minute details about various societal and cultural aspects, and it is the latter which will be the focus of this study on the portrayal of the traditional Japanese diet and foodstuffs. Therefore, in presenting this overview, the current contribution can be considered as an exploratory link between an instrument of (digital) media diplomacy – i.e., NHK World-Japan – with analyses on the role played by food in diplomacy – i.e., the domain of gastrodiploacy (for example, see Chapple-Sokol, 2013; Parasecoli, 2022, etc.) which of late is garnering more and more scholarly interest.

Research approach

In view of its preliminary and exploratory characteristics, it was decided that the present study should take the following approach to the core research aim: i.e., to see how the local Japanese diet and foodstuffs are depicted in the news section of the NHK World-Japan website. This contains news articles (both in text-based and video format) in English associated with a wide range of topics featured on the television station. For ease of analysis, and noting the interconnection between text-based and video formats, it was decided to centre on the text-based articles which were featured on the website. Therefore, qualitative content analysis (see Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) of relevant online news articles pertaining to Japanese diets and foodstuffs was conducted, with the objective of scrutinising the key subject matter. In addition, noting the role that editorial and reporting practices can play in the

selection and presentation of news (for example, see Earl et al., 2004), the study also aimed to outline the general societal and cultural impact of the relevant news items, paying special attention to how – where relevant – the domestic and international dimensions were presented.

In practical terms, the articles were found using the inbuilt search function on the NHK World-Japan website, utilising search terms relating to “food” and “diet”. In common with other such studies by the author on different topics (see Hoyte-West, 2020a; 2020b), manual thematic analysis of the results was conducted; in the context of the present study, this was certainly required as “Diet” is also the English-language name for the Japanese parliament, resulting in a large number of hits that were unconnected with the current research focus. And in order to ensure that the results were as relevant as possible in temporal terms, it was decided to limit the time period to cover the last five years, thus ensuring that the findings can be said to be applicable and recent. Accordingly, the search parameters were set from 1 January 2019 until 31 December 2023.

Research findings

Further to the rubric outlined above, a search for the term “diet” returned 198 results, and “food” returned 532 items. Of these figures, 20 items were judged to be relevant to the purpose of this study; in addition, of this total 1 was also found via the ‘Related Articles’ suggestion on the webpage. The selected articles – the majority of which are referenced in this contribution – primarily came from the ‘Backstories’ section of the NHK World-Japan website. In general terms, it was observed that there was a preference for short, descriptive article titles which contained the essential information relating to each text. Therefore, two main classifications were identified, both of which will be presented in more detail below.

The first category is related to articles dealing with various aspects of sustainability. Given the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ramifications of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, these included concerns about food security. With regard to the former, these included articles entitled “Fighting food export restrictions amid the coronavirus pandemic” (NHK World-Japan, 2020a); “Japanese consumers feel the pinch as coronavirus drives up pork prices” (NHK World-Japan, 2020b), with more recent articles observing that “Japan turns to corn to improve food security” (NHK World-Japan, 2023a), “Global appetite for fresh fish sends prices soaring in Japan” (NHK World-Japan, 2023b). The environmental impact of foodstuffs was also mentioned, notably with regard to alternative food sources. Articles included “Beyond impossible: Fake meat is having its moment” (NHK World-Japan, 2019a) and “Synthetic meat and less gassy

cows to cut emissions” (NHK World-Japan, 2019b), and there was even an item on how insect-based foods had revitalised the fortunes of a local newspaper in Nagano prefecture: “Newspaper catches bug for eating insects” (NHK World-Japan, 2022a). Information about other alternatives to meat was also highlighted in “Plant-based cuisine takes root in Tokyo” (NHK World-Japan, 2023c). Lastly, the issue of food waste was tackled in two articles: “Convenience stores tackle food waste” (NHK World-Japan, 2019c), and the potential for wastage from the traditional delicacy prepared during the Setsubun holiday, “Ehomaki sushi rolls spark controversy” (NHK World-Japan, 2019d). In short, the analysed articles falling into this category can be said to display a primarily domestic focus on sustainability and associated aspects.

This contrasted with the second grouping, which centred largely on the external image of Japanese foodstuffs abroad. As such, one article entitled “Evolution the secret to washoku's success” (NHK World-Japan, 2019e) focused on the changing nature of the famous diet, highlighting quality Japanese products such as oysters, wagyu beef, and yuzu. Among other items underlining the export of traditional foods across the globe – for example, a dish involving fermented soybeans (“Natto going global” (NHK World-Japan, 2023d)) and candy (“Sharing Japanese sweets with the world” (NHK World-Japan, 2022b)), the export of Japanese cuisine was also highlighted in an article which drew attention to the nascent popularity of Japanese curries on the Indian market (“India gets a taste for Japanese curry” (NHK World-Japan, 2020c)). This interlinks with media coverage of the role of foreigners in popularising Japanese foodstuffs – for example, “Indian CEO delivers Japanese rice crackers to the world” (NHK World-Japan, 2023e) – and thereby articulates how Japanese cultural identity is expressed and promoted through its food and culinary culture. The accent here appears to be placed on authenticity, with international attention and recognition sought for foods which are of high quality but are perhaps less well-known outside of the country – for example, there was no mention of the ubiquitous global success of sushi.

Some brief conclusions

The aim of this study was to see how the Japanese diet and local foodstuffs were portrayed in the news section of the NHK World-Japan website. This was done via a qualitative content analysis based on the evaluation of online sources, which observed two main classifications of the relevant articles featured on the website between 2019 and 2023: these were sustainability (with a predominantly domestic focus on issues such as food security, the environment, food waste etc) as well as the impact of Japanese foodstuffs

abroad (with an external focus). Thus, in terms of gastrodiploacy, it could be said that the wider image of Japanese food and food production is important, both in terms of reflection on the domestic context as well as the external image. As a consequence, this could arguably be considered part of broader nation-branding and differentiation initiatives, however, further research would be required. Other studies could, therefore, delve deeper into the external image of the Japanese diet and foodstuffs as projected in specific regional and global contexts (for example, in Europe or elsewhere in Asia). In addition, the range of potential sources for analysis could be enlarged (for example, to include relevant items on the websites of Japanese English-language print and online media). Accordingly, building on this preliminary overview, this issue is certainly a valuable topic which merits deeper scholarly exploration.

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