THE CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY AND AESTHETIC VALUES IN WASHOKU – TRADITIONAL JAPANESE CUISINE

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ABSTRACTS

Washoku is a traditional Japanese food culture that has developed in close relationship with Japan's distinctive natural environment and regional cultural traditions. Throughout its long history, Japan has developed washoku not only as pure food but also as something that transcends culture. This study uses a literature analysis method to clarify the characteristics, philosophy, and cultural values of Washoku in the context of globalization. The results show that Washoku not only reflects the philosophy of "living in harmony with nature", but also demonstrates the spirit of restraint, respect for food, and a sense of community. The study contributes to the literature by examining Washoku through the interconnected perspectives of cultural philosophy and aesthetics and by extending the discussion beyond traditional cuisine to its potential applications in education, sustainable tourism, and cultural exchange in Vietnam. In doing so, the study strengthens the theoretical foundation for understanding Washoku and offers an interdisciplinary perspective for comparative cultural research.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research context

Washoku, the traditional dietary culture of Japan, is recognized not only for its culinary characteristics but also as a complex cultural practice encompassing environmental, social, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions. In 2013, UNESCO inscribed "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year" on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This recognition emphasizes Washoku as a social practice encompassing knowledge, skills, and customs related to the production, preparation, and consumption of food, while highlighting its close association with respect for nature and the sustainable use of natural resources (UNESCO, 2013).

The Japanese government gave the following four characteristics as the main features of washoku (i) Diversity and freshness of ingredients, and respect for their inherent flavors; (ii) An exceptionally well-balanced and healthy diet; (iii) An expression of natural beauty and the changing seasons; (iv) Close links with annual events. (JETRO, 2023).

These characteristics illustrate how Washoku transcends mere cuisine, it is a cultural

system emphasizing identity, cohesion, and sustainable living. Despite this, the current challenge concerns how to understand and teach its philosophical and aesthetic values outside Japan.

In Vietnam, studies related to Washoku are not just about food and ingredient, rather than delving into its cultural philosophy and aesthetic values. For example, the works of Nguyen (2019) and Le & Tran (2021) both analyze Washoku as a specific tourism product, emphasizing its cultural appeal and potential to attract international visitors. However, this approach has not yet clarified the philosophical depth and humanistic significance of Washoku as a comprehensive cultural system. To address this gap, the present study examines the philosophical foundations and aesthetic values of Washoku and considers its role and relevance in contemporary society.

1.2. Research objectives and questions

Against this background, this study re-examines the cultural and philosophical significance of Washoku and identifies the aesthetic principles embedded in its practices. This research considers the role of preservating identity and promoting sustainable lifestyles. Based on these objectives, the study answers the following questions: (1) What cultural and philosophical principles are embodied in Washoku? (2) How are aesthetic values expressed through Washoku practices? (3) How does Washoku contribute to the preservation of Japanese cultural identity in contemporary society?

1.3. Theoretical framework

1.3.1. Definition and characteristics of Washoku

Washoku refers to the traditional dietary culture of Japan and encompasses the harmonious integration of ingredients, cooking methods, and presentation (Ishige, 2014). Its underlying principles emphasize harmony between humans and nature, taste and nutrition, and aesthetics and spirituality. UNESCO (2013) recognizes Washoku as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. It is described as connecting an essential spirit of respect for nature with the use of natural resources. Washoku is characterized by delicate flavors, fresh and seasonal ingredients, and careful attention to visual presentation.

1.3.2. Cultural Philosophy: Wa, Shun and Kansha

Three fundamental elements distinguish authentic Washoku: Wa (harmony), Shun (seasonality), and Kansha (gratitude). Wa has the meaning of harmony between man and nature, including aesthetics and ethics (Nishida, 2017). Shun emphasizes the use of ingredients at the height of their natural season, thereby reflecting attentiveness to seasonal rhythms and sustainable consumption. Meanwhile, Kansha teaches gratitude for food sources and the people involved in its preparation, providing the moral foundation for Japanese eating etiquette.

1.3.3. Aesthetic values: Wabi-sabi and the art of presentation

The aesthetic value of Washoku is derived from the wabi-sabi beauty of simplicity, imperfection, and naturalness (Kumakura, 2018). Washoku enjoys seasonality by decorating dishes with natural beauty, along with using implements and plates that match the season. Doing arrangement of tableware (mori-tsuke) is really important, to make sure that food presentation is a sphere of visual art. Such aesthetics appeal not only to the senses but also communicate humility, restraint, and emotional depth, reflecting the Japanese pursuit of harmony and serenity in everyday life.

1.3.4. Theoretical relevance

This study looks at the theoretical lens of cultural aesthetics and symbolic interactionism to analyze Washoku as a way of expressing culture. From this point of view, Washoku becomes a medium among values of respect, harmony, and mindfulness. Washoku continues

to be recreated and passed down through generations. As proposed by Barthes (1997), food acts as a "communication system", transmits the moral and aesthetic rules in society. Thus, Washoku clarifies the way cuisine can serve as a cultural object and a living tradition.

1.4. Literature Review

The study of Washoku can be approached from some academic perspectives. This reflects different conceptualizations of food as a cultural system. According to Ishige (2019), the bonds of family, relatives, region and community are strengthened through Washoku. When food has a tendency to anthropology, which means the role of food as a cultural symbol and a traditional form of knowledge.

In contrast, Yoshino (2020) and Hara (2018) thought that Washoku can lead to the view of aesthetics and philosophy, thanks to the presentation, color, and flavor of the food. These elements describe the philosophy of "harmony" (wa) – a central point in Japanese identity. Eating practices carry cultural and spiritual meanings.

However, some recent research on food systems and sustainability frameworks (e.g., Murata, 2021; FAO, 2020) indicates that to order to understand Washoku, it is necessary to place it in relation to global culinary systems and sustainable development models. So to understand, Washoku becomes a form of cultural heritage, presented in the ecological practice, stored in local ingredients in the kitchen, based on different seasons, so people can reduce food waste. The concept of Washoku can provide a theoretical framework for “sustainable food culture.” Clearly, it is good to help raise awareness of protecting environment and understand how to achieve the sustainable social development.

In addition, sociologists such as Koyama (2016) criticize that much of the research on Washoku focuses on describing the phenomenon. There is insufficient analysis of power structures, gender, and social class in practice. Under the sphere of sociology, a food approach allows for a deeper understanding of how Washoku reflects cultural stratification and variation in global consumption.

From the above view, this study inherits and synthesizes the above approaches to build a theoretical framework. Washoku is regarded as a system linking culture, aesthetics and ecology. Moreover, it has symbolic value and practical meaningfulness in the context of contemporary development.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Selection Criteria and Data Collection

To ensure academic reliability and contemporary relevance, the data collection process was strictly limited to the period between 2013—the year Washoku was inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage—and 2024. Academic materials were retrieved from reputable scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, SpringerLink, and CiNii, using strategic keyword groups such as "Washoku philosophy," "Cultural Aesthetics," "Heritage Politics," and "Japanese food sociology". From an initial pool of 120 primary sources, the authors conducted a thematic review and selected the 45 most significant documents, prioritizing peer-reviewed journals, international conference proceedings, and official reports from recognized organizations such as UNESCO, FAO, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of Japan.

2.2. Qualitative Coding and Thematic Categorization

The analytical procedure involved a multi-layered qualitative coding process designed to move beyond descriptive analysis. In the initial phase, data were categorized based on the four core features of Washoku identified by the JETRO (2023) framework: the diversity and freshness of ingredients, nutritional balance, the expression of natural beauty through seasons, and the link with annual events. This categorization allowed for a systematic

organization of the philosophical and aesthetic values embedded within traditional dietary practices.

2.3. Critical Analysis and Comparative Framework

The study further employed a critical analytical layer by confronting official "heritage discourses" with contemporary sociological realities. By synthesizing findings from various academic perspectives, the research identified the gap between Washoku as an idealized cultural model and its lived practice in modern society, specifically addressing challenges such as solitary dining (kodoku no shoku) and the westernization of eating habits. Finally, a comparative framework was used to synthesize these insights into a “Value Triangle” (Nature–Aesthetics–Ethics), providing a conceptual model for interpreting Washoku’s relevance to the Vietnamese cultural and educational context.] BB-00308-E

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The literature analysis highlights the spiritual relationship among humans, nature, and society embodied in Washoku. The findings identify five key aspects of Washoku: nutritional balance, spiritual harmony, respect for seasonality, aesthetic appreciation of simplicity, and acceptance of transience. Each of Washoku's principles describes harmony with nature, aesthetic minimalism, social cohesion through communal meals, and mindfulness in preparation. All of these contribute to a broader understanding of Japanese identity and also maintain sustainable cultural values.

This chapter is organized into thematic sections that explore these aspects in detail. The findings demonstrate how Washoku integrates environmental awareness, philosophical principles, and aesthetic sensibilities.] BB-00308-E The study demonstrates that Japanese cuisine is a form of nourishment, and open to the world through the act of preserving environment and educating people in ethical wisdom.

3.1. Core Value Systems of Washoku: The Intersection of Philosophy and Aesthetics

This research establishes that Washoku is not merely a system of culinary techniques; it is a cultural entity built upon profound philosophical and aesthetic pillars. Through systematic analysis, these values are categorized as follows:

The Philosophy of "Wa" (Harmony) and "Shun" (Seasonality): Approaching the ideal of "harmony with nature" is considered the spiritual foundation of Washoku, deeply reflecting the Japanese worldview regarding the relationship between humans and the environment. According to Ishige (2019), Washoku transcends being a way of eating, functioning as "a cultural system that shows respect for nature through each season, each dish, and the way it is presented." Selecting ingredients based on seasons (shun) demonstrates an understanding of natural rhythms and a sense of restraint in consumption - a central value in Japanese culture. However, from a critical perspective, this study argues that the philosophy of shun faces significant challenges in modern society. The prevalence of imported goods and greenhouse cultivation has blurred seasonal boundaries, causing the perception of "nature" in contemporary Washoku to become a symbolic concept rather than a grounded ecological practice.

Multi-dimensional Connectivity and Sustainability: Cwiertka (2015) argues that Washoku connects a "three-dimensional relationship" between the environment, society, and personal identity. Cuisine becomes the language for human interaction with the natural world. MAFF (2020) further affirms that respecting resources is expressed through the total utilization of raw materials and the avoidance of waste. This natural philosophy maintains Washoku’s ecological sustainability. The original contribution of this paper lies in highlighting that these values are not merely traditional but are highly compatible with global

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), positioning Washoku as an ethical food model relevant to developing nations, including Vietnam.

Aesthetic Perspectives and "Unified Divinity": From an aesthetic standpoint, each Washoku dish is "a miniature picture of nature," utilizing colors, compositions, and utensils in harmony with the seasons and surroundings (Ashkenazi & Jacob, 2013). This results in a “unified divinity”- a state where human beings are integrated into nature under the laws of the universe. A deeper analysis reveals that aesthetics in Washoku (such as minimalism or the Wabi-sabi style) functions as a "psychological therapy." It creates a sense of spiritual tranquility for the consumer, serving as a vital counterweight to the high-pressure environment of urban life. This aesthetic and structural harmony is most clearly embodied in the traditional meal format.



Figure 1. A traditional ichiju-sansai Japanese meal featuring steamed (photos: Courtesy of Professor KUMAKURA ISAO)

3.2. Comparative Analysis and the Synthesis of a Conceptual Model

To establish a robust academic foundation, this study first situates Washoku within a global context by comparing it with the Mediterranean Diet (a fellow UNESCO heritage) and Vietnamese cuisine. This comparison is essential to isolate the unique philosophical markers of Washoku that warrant further generalization.

Table 1: Comparative Philosophical Frameworks of Washoku, the Mediterranean Diet and Vietnamese Cuisine

Analytical Dimension	Washoku (Japan)	Mediterranean Diet	Vietnamese Cuisine
Philosophical Foundation	Harmony with nature – aesthetic minimalism – ethical moderation	Health-centered lifestyle – balance – longevity	Yin–yang balance – communality – adaptive flexibility
Relationship with Nature	Emphasis on seasonality (*shun*), respect for local ingredients, minimal intervention	Rooted in Mediterranean ecology (olive oil, seafood, seasonal produce)	Shaped by tropical ecology, wet-rice agriculture, river-based systems
Typical Meal Structure	Ichiju-sansai (one soup, three side dishes, rice)	Shared multi-dish meals, plant-forward, olive oil central	Rice-based meal with main dish, vegetables, soup, dipping sauce
Aesthetic Values	Minimalism, visual balance, refined tableware	Rustic simplicity, natural presentation	Harmonization of flavors and vibrant color contrasts

Analytical Dimension	Washoku (Japan)	Mediterranean Diet	Vietnamese Cuisine
Ethical/ Normative Dimension	Moderation, avoidance of waste, respect for natural cycles	Moderation for preventive health	Sharing, hospitality, collective dining ethics
Social Dimension	Embedded in seasonal rituals and family structure	Strong emphasis on commensality	Centrality of family meal and communal bonding
Contemporary Discourse	Cultural heritage, national identity, soft power	Public health model, longevity science	National identity, street food culture, adaptability

The data from Table 1 indicates that while all three traditions value sustainability, Washoku is uniquely defined by its aesthetic-spiritual integration. Based on these comparative findings, the research synthesizes the multifaceted values of Washoku into a structured framework: The Washoku Value Triangle (Table 2). The socio-ecological feedback loop in Washoku is a dynamic cycle where visual aesthetic appreciation drives ethical responsibility, which in turn motivates sustainable behavior toward environmental conservation. This model moves beyond descriptive listing to provide a tool for assessing cultural resilience.

Table 2: The Generalized Model: The Washoku Value Triangle

Pillar	Core Philosophical Values	Manifestations in Practice	Critical Contribution (New Findings)
Ecological (Nature)	Shun (Seasonality) & Wa (Harmony)	Use of local, fresh, and minimally processed ingredients.	Acts as a resilient strategy against the homogenization of global industrial food systems.
Aesthetic (Emotion)	Wabi-sabi (Simplicity) & Mori-tsuke	Minimalist presentation, use of handicraft ceramics, and “negative space.”	Provides "emotional healing" and mindfulness in high-pressure urban environments.
Ethical (Society)	Kansha (Gratitude) & Mottainai	Rituals like Itadakimasu, communal dining, and waste reduction.	Strengthens social cohesion and offers a model for responsible consumption (SDGs).

The proposed model in Table 2 demonstrates that the significance of Washoku extends far beyond its culinary appeal. By synthesizing these elements, we can observe that Washoku functions as a “socio-ecological feedback loop”. The socio-ecological feedback loop in Washoku is a dynamic cycle where visual aesthetic appreciation drives ethical responsibility, which in turn motivates sustainable behavior toward environmental conservation. To substantiate this structural framework and avoid descriptive isolation, empirical evidence from contemporary Japanese culinary practices reveals the real-world operationalization of these three pillars:

Ecological Pillar Evidence: The preservation of Kyodo ryori (regional cuisine) across various Japanese prefectures demonstrates a strict adherence to natural biological cycles and

regional ecology (Ishige, 2019). For instance, the consumption of bamboo shoots (takenoko) in spring and Pacific saury (sanma) in autumn explicitly restricts the carbon footprint by minimizing food miles and avoiding greenhouse cultivation, thereby sustaining ecological harmony (wa) (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries [MAFF], 2020).

Aesthetic Pillar Evidence: The dynamic connection between emotional fulfillment and aesthetic minimalism is observable in the deliberate pairing of seasonal tableware with food temperature (Kumakura, 2018). Japanese culinary establishments utilize glass or light celadon porcelain during shun summer to induce visual coolness, while shifting to heavy, coarse, unglazed earthenware - such as Bizen or Shigaraki ware - in winter to evoke sensory warmth, reflecting the core wabi-sabi values of simplicity and naturalness (Ashkenazi & Jacob, 2013).

Ethical Pillar Evidence: The traditional normative value of Mottainai (waste reduction) translates into highly structured, efficient kitchen resource management (Cwiertka, 2015). Chefs and households systematically practice the total utilization of raw materials, such as repurposing vegetable remnants for umami-rich dashi broths and rendering discarded fish bones into calcium-dense snacks (hone-senbei), which directly fulfills the spirit of Kansha (gratitude) and sustainable consumption (UNESCO, 2013).

The establishment of this “Washoku Value Triangle” serves as the primary theoretical contribution of this study. It moves away from mere descriptive listing of ingredients or history, offering instead a versatile tool for comparative cultural analysis - specifically in assessing how these values can be strategically integrated into the Vietnamese educational and tourism sectors to promote sustainable lifestyles.

3.3. Critical Analysis: Internal Challenges of Washoku in Modern Japanese Society

This study further analyzes contemporary lifestyle shifts through a critical lens to highlight the “cultural ruptures” within modern Japanese society.

3.3.1. The Paradox of Heritage and the Rise of “Solitary Dining” (Kodoku no shoku)

While Washoku was recognized by UNESCO for its role in social cohesion, modern Japan faces the "heritage paradox." The fragmentation of traditional nuclear families, as previously noted, has led to the rise of Kodoku no shoku. This research argues that this is not merely a social change but a fundamental erosion of the communal dining table - the primary site for cultural transmission. When individuals eat alone, the shared rituals of gratitude (Kansha) and the communication of seasonal knowledge are lost, turning Washoku from a living practice into a performative symbol.

3.3.2. Erosion of Philosophy via "Konbini Culture" and Industrialization

As discussed in the earlier analysis of modern dietary shifts, the dominance of convenience stores (Konbini) and processed foods has fundamentally challenged the Ichiju-sansai model. From a critical perspective, this represents a transition in the underlying value system: from an emphasis on "Aesthetics and Restraint" to “Efficiency and Caloric Optimization.” The reliance on global industrial food chains severs the connection between the consumer and the local Shun (seasonality), rendering the “harmony with nature” philosophy increasingly difficult to practice in daily urban life.

3.3.3. Heritage Politics and Cultural Homogenization

Heritigization refers to the institutional process of transforming living cultural practices into official heritage, which risks over-idealizing

or commercializing the cuisine at the expense of its authentic, daily meaning. A critical challenge often overlooked in descriptive accounts is the role of "Soft Power" in standardizing Washoku. By promoting an idealized, high-end version of the cuisine for global tourism, there is a risk of marginalizing the diverse regional traditions (Kyodo ryori). This study contends that the "heritigization" process may inadvertently hollow out the internal meaning of Washoku, leaving only a decorative shell that serves commercial interests rather than the spiritual needs of the Japanese people.

3.4. Applied Values and Transculturation in the Vietnamese Context

Transculturation denotes the process whereby cultural values from one context (Japan) are selectively adopted, transformed, and adapted to fit the specific needs and realities of another culture (Vietnam). In this context, the analysis of Washoku's philosophical framework and its modern challenges provides significant lessons for the preservation and development of culinary culture in Vietnam. This research identifies two primary areas where Washoku's values can be integrated into the Vietnamese context:

3.4.1. Formalizing Food Education (Shokuiku) in the National Curriculum

To counter the "Konbini culture" and the erosion of traditional dietary patterns, Japan's most successful intervention has been the Shokuiku (Food Education) Law. This study argues that Vietnam should adopt a localized version of Shokuiku to address rising food safety anxieties and the dominance of industrial diets. Beyond mere nutritional science, this application focuses on integrating the spirit of Kansha (gratitude) and Shun (seasonality) into school meals. Such an initiative would empower younger generations in Vietnam to reconnect with local agricultural cycles, fostering a sense of ecological responsibility from an early age.

3.4.2. Leveraging the "Value Triangle" for Sustainable Culinary Tourism

The effort to revitalize Kyodo ryori (regional cuisine) in Japan to mitigate cultural homogenization provides a vital roadmap for Vietnam's tourism sector. By applying the "Washoku Value Triangle" (Nature – Aesthetics – Ethics), Vietnam can rebrand its regional specialties. Instead of mass-market commercialization, culinary tourism should emphasize "cultural storytelling"- linking each dish to its specific ecological origin and the craftsmanship of local artisans. This strategic approach ensures that the cultural identities of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups are preserved rather than "hallowed out" by the pressures of global tourism.

3.4.3. Ethical Consumption through the Synergy of "Wa" and "Yin-Yang"

Finally, the fundamental synergy between the Japanese principle of "Wa" (harmony) and the Vietnamese "Yin-Yang balance" provides a solid foundation for promoting ethical consumption. The Japanese struggle with food waste and the loss of seasonality can be avoided in Vietnam if the concept of Mottainai (waste-not) is promoted alongside local food movements. Encouraging urbanites to support small-scale local farmers not only preserves intangible heritage but also builds a resilient food system capable of balancing rapid economic growth with cultural integrity.

4. CONCLUSION

This research has confirmed that Washoku is far more than a traditional culinary system; it is a profound cultural entity that integrates human agency, nature, and aesthetic values. Through the analysis and synthesis of diverse literature, the study has successfully conceptualized Washoku as a dynamic cultural model. This model plays a pivotal role in shaping Japan's ecological consciousness, consumer ethics, and global cultural identity.

The primary contribution of this research is the development of the "Washoku Value Triangle" (Ecological, Aesthetic, and Ethical). This theoretical framework moves beyond descriptive accounts to demonstrate how Washoku functions as a socio-ecological feedback loop, connecting individuals through education and spiritual fulfillment. Furthermore, by situating Washoku in a comparative dialogue with the Mediterranean and Vietnamese cuisines, the study identifies critical pathways for transculturation. Specifically, it suggests that Japan's preservation strategies, such as the Shokuiku law, provide a strategic mirror for Vietnam to enhance its own food education and sustainable tourism sectors.

However, the study acknowledges certain limitations. Being based primarily on secondary literature, there is a lack of primary empirical data to measure the specific socio-economic impacts of Washoku in real-time. While a preliminary comparison with the Mediterranean diet was conducted, a more exhaustive, systematic analysis involving Northern European or other Asian cuisines remains outside the current scope.

Future research should aim to expand into qualitative and quantitative surveys to measure the actual effects of Washoku on modern lifestyle diseases and mental well-being. Additionally, deeper intercultural comparisons will be essential to further validate the universality of the "Value Triangle" model and its adaptability to other developing cultural contexts, including Vietnam.

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TRIẾT LÝ VĂN HÓA VÀ GIÁ TRỊ THẨM MỸ TRONG WASHOKU – ẨM THỰC TRUYỀN THỐNG NHẬT BẢN

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TỪ KHOÁ

Ẩm thực Nhật Bản;
Di sản văn hóa phi vật thể;
Giá trị thẩm mỹ;
Triết lý văn hóa;
Washoku.

TÓM TẮT

Washoku được xem là biểu tượng của tinh thần hòa hợp trong văn hóa ẩm thực Nhật Bản, thể hiện sự gắn bó giữa con người và thiên nhiên cùng những giá trị nhân văn, thẩm mỹ sâu sắc. Nghiên cứu này sử dụng phương pháp phân tích tài liệu nhằm làm rõ đặc trưng, triết lý và giá trị văn hóa của Washoku trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa. Kết quả cho thấy Washoku không chỉ phản ánh triết lý "sống hài hòa với tự nhiên" mà còn thể hiện tinh thần tiết chế, tôn trọng thực phẩm và đề cao ý thức cộng đồng. Đóng góp mới của nghiên cứu nằm ở việc tiếp cận Washoku dưới góc nhìn triết học và thẩm mỹ học văn hóa, mở rộng hướng nghiên cứu từ ẩm thực truyền thống sang giá trị ứng dụng trong giáo dục, du lịch bền vững và giao lưu văn hóa tại Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu góp phần bổ sung cơ sở lý luận và mở ra hướng tiếp cận liên ngành trong lĩnh vực văn hóa so sánh.ứng dụng Washoku trong giáo dục văn hóa và phát triển du lịch bền vững.