

The reconstruction of authentic Japanese food in a foreign context

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【要旨】

海外における日本食「真正性」の再構築

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本稿はアイルランド・ダブリンにおける日本食業界に関わる人々が、日本食の「真正性」とはどのように定義付けて再現しているかを考察する。ディアスポラ・移民研究においてはこの「真正性」の問題は移民たち自身のアイデンティティの根拠の理由付け、そして他者との差異を確立する言論として論じられることがある。しかし、アイルランドのような1600人程度の日本人在住者が居住している土地では、「真正性」の問題は日本人ではなく「他者」である非日本人によっても投げかけられる。レストランといったパブリックの社会空間においては、日本人は日本食レストラン業界に関与することはほぼ無く、「本物」の日本食の概念を再表象するのは、日頃日本食レストラン業に関わるシェフ、マネージャー、オーナーといった経営者たちである。本稿はダブリンの日本食レストランに関わる3人に行ったインタビューを基に、「他者」の立場である彼らがどのように日本の理想的なイメージと「真正性」を概念化・再表象しているかを考察する。このように多様なアクターが文化の価値観作りに関与しているプロセスを考察することで、現代のグローバリゼーションの一端を明らかにすることを目的とする。

The rhetoric of 'authenticity' is a persistent issue in transnational circumstances. I follow Long's (2004) conceptualization of 'authenticity' as "a mutually negotiated concept where the diner's perceptions are as responsible for the construction of authenticity" (Long 2004: 61). Long suggests that 'authenticity' is a socially constructed concept by both proprietors and clients so that this 'reality' is unique to individual contexts because of "a new definition of authenticity" biased by its local conceptualization (ibid.: 62). Conventionally, the idea of 'authenticity' is laden with an exclusiveness that hampers the evolutionary mode of human/social reality. Particularly in migration/diaspora studies, this concept has been heavily employed by deterritorialized populations as a rationale for advocating their 'difference' in their settled places. However, in the new phase of ongoing multiculturalism that contemporary Irish society has and continues to experience, the idea of 'authenticity' has been subjected to various essentialistic ideologies and portrayed to represent what is believed to be 'Japanese authentic' mostly by non-Japanese actors.

Today, the Japanese food culture in Dublin involves a more diverse actor to redefine and represent what 'authentic' Japanese food is. In the circulation of commodified cultural peculiarity, what is evidently salient in the Dublin

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context is an absence of Japanese agents engaging in this reconfiguration process of Japanese ‘authenticity.’ The Japanese food industry is operated by Filipino, Malaysian, English, Chinese and local Irish people; an absence of Japanese agents in this value-making process substantiates the process of cultural diffusion of a specific aspect of culture, which fundamentally entails a worldwide scope for its analysis. The agents who produce a new Japanese cultural material are not always Japanese. Thereby the question of ‘authenticity’ has arisen from these foreign actors.

This article is an ethnographic study about how the ideas of ‘authenticity’ of Japanese food are defined by non-Japanese people involved in the Japanese food industry. From my ethnographic data of recent fieldwork from October 2010 to September 2011, I draw on several narratives of three non-Japanese people —chefs and owner of Japanese restaurants located in Dublin, Ireland. In Ireland where only 1,600 Japanese reside, the emergence of ideal Japanese images is fundamentally delineated by non-Japanese populations who impose, and are rigidly committed to, an ‘authentic’ mode of Japaneseness in their food presentations. By exploring the ways in which they conceptualize the ideas of ‘what Japanese food should be,’ my ethnography reveals a glimpse into the process that allows for various constructions of new ethno-space in this phenomenon called globalization. Hence, I address the following questions: How do the owners/managers/chefs conceptualize their version of ‘authentic’ Japanese food from the viewpoint of proprietors? How do they put into practice the creation of ‘authentic’ Japanese cultural space?

The conceptualization of ‘authentic’ food by ‘Others’

I am angry at them [other Japanese restaurants that provide fusion style food], ...they are not doing Japanese food. It is as same as lying to customers. (Yu, Malaysian chef)

I'm personally not believing in doing that [fusion cuisine]. Because I saw what happened to Indian food in this part of world. Like, Indian food is not Indian anymore, it's British, British-Pakistani, British-Bangladeshi or British-Nepali.... I don't want to do anything which is not ‘authentic’ or ‘right’ to serve food.... We get a lot of Irish customers who lived in or travelled to Japan, and they say ‘oh, this is as good as they find in Japan.’ So, that is the most complimenting thing for me and the chef and for everyone. (Indian owner)

These are the commonplace views presented by chefs and owners of Japanese restaurants. I was eating the lunch bento-box cooked by this male Malaysian head chef in his late twenties when he explicitly expressed his criticism about the recent circumstances surrounding the Japanese food industry in Dublin. In the context of Dublin, fusion style restaurants initiated the Japanese food industry in the early 1990s, followed by the so-called ‘authentic’-oriented restaurants. Yu is one of the newcomers who recently entered this ethnic food market. His business vision has been constrained by pragmatic dilemmas; his affluent background of being a Japanese food chef with more than ten years of experience does not allow him to speak highly of fusion style food. For this Malaysian chef, the interpretation of fusion style is “wrong” in that it is “wrong to put curry powder in *ramen*.” Alternatively, he reluctantly admits that the widespread fusion style Japanese food has created more prosperous business as compared with his newly opened restaurant. Such authentic versus fusion dispute never disappears from food scenes. The vocabulary of ‘right’ that they often use encompasses a set of issues that unfolds the dimensions of ‘authenticity.’ ‘Right’ adaptation and

presentation form a coherent mode of ideal images of Japan. In this social setting, the implications of ‘rightness’ and ‘authenticity’ can be approached from three perspectives: 1) correct to an original form; 2) match their taste; and 3) correct to the representations of food.

1) Correct to an original form

In relation to the first perspective, a Filipino chef, legitimized cooking ‘authentic’ style food as follows:

Authentic food means old ones, original ones. Because new ones are mixed up. The old ones, why it is called authentic is, because they don't change. Actually, fusion is more difficult to explain to customer than traditional.... You might be using Japanese ingredients. But your taste is like... you know, fusion style. Then how do you explain?.... We open Japanese restaurant, so we should do simple, basic food. (Filipino chef)

In this understanding, ‘right food’ is equated with “identical as original model” (Lu and Fine 1995: 538). The argument of authenticity is fundamentally framed within the boundary of ‘tradition’ that traps its phase in the mode of ‘what it should be.’ As many scholars point out, ‘tradition’ is a concept situating itself in a continuum of the construction of ideology and is often exploited to create socio-political cohesion for a manipulation of heritage or a political unity (Maher 2001: vii). This is where Hobsbawm (1983) poignantly conceptualizes the interplay between “invented tradition” and ideology, utilizing the past as a set of fixed practices, implying historical continuity. For Hobsbawm, most traditions are “invented” through “a process of formalization and ritualization” (ibid.: 4) with “invented practices” that help inculcate vague values such as “patriotism, loyalty, duty” (ibid.: 10). As Chakrabarty (1998) synchronizes Hobsbawm’s idea, the process of “traditionalizing” begins to function as “ideology” at times of a society’s reformation (ibid.: 287). Applying these theories to the Filipino chef’s interpretation, the emphasis of the image of ‘traditional’ Japan on his food presentation locates Japan in a spatial continuum of history in highlighting ‘difference.’ Such projection is a common practice exercised by these non-Japanese populations. As Nagatani and Tanaka (1998) remark, the portrayal of Japan as “the immutable Other” (ibid.: 3) is an imposition by both insider and outsider. The projection of the traditional image of Japan is equally employed by ‘Others’ who render the transhistorical application to the concept of authenticity.

Equally, this adaptation of the ‘traditional’ mode of Japan is visibly reflected in restaurant décor. As seen in other ethnic social spaces, the omnipresence of an extracted Japanese image is, regardless of its degree, easily found in any Japanese restaurant. For example, beautiful calligraphies of *Heikemonogatari* on the wall that guides customers to the dining space, and the dining space upstairs embellished with various Japanese materials such as a sword, lantern, origami paper craft and rush grass cushion, distinctively manifest their bias of Japanese images. Likewise, music played in the restaurant, a gentle *syakuhachi* tune, and Japanese outfits covering the Japanese waitress’ body, invoke a sensory linkage with exotic and folklore images. Replete with these distinctive materials and other mediums, their bias proclaims that their version of Japaneseness is significantly associated with the buried past, and it re-emerges in a foreign context.

2) Match their taste

Regarding the second perspective, 'right' food is interpreted with reference to 'taste' for the Filipino chef. This 'taste' is exclusively reliant on subjective senses that these chefs/owners schematized through the bodily experiences. This chef proudly described his know-how gained through previous working experience in an influential restaurant, Benihana in Philippines and Dubai. He commented:

It's not like we learnt it [how to cook Japanese food] from book. Because the sauce I inherited was made by Japanese. I don't know if in Japan there is a different way, different taste, different area...don't know.

In particular, the secret recipe of sushi vinegar sauce inherited from his godfather's teacher is fundamental to give him "trust what they teach me is right." He continued, "If it's not right, I can't be proud to be a Japanese food chef." It is not only him but also most of the key chefs in each restaurant I interviewed who have certain pre-experiences of associations with Japanese food in their home countries. Their confidence in 'right' taste much derives from such previous experiences that developed their consciousness as a responsible knowledge/skill holder of Japanese food.

3) Correct to representations of food

With regard to the final perspective, demarcating the framework of 'right' food is excessively attributed to an awareness of the risk of jeopardizing their credit, which in part has an overlap with the first perspective I discussed.

This question [authenticity] only comes from Japanese people.... Some other Filipino working with Japanese can cope with the taste and everything. Once there is no Japanese, Japanese chef, in the restaurant, it's not a 'real' Japanese restaurant. Because it's not Japanese who makes it. If Japanese people make food, people say 'this is real authentic Japanese food,' ...so Japanese will think we are using Japanese name to make business if there is no Japanese in our business. (Filipino chef)

As I touched upon earlier, the engagement of Japanese in the Japanese food scene is hardly observed. Accusations of a misrepresentation of Japanese food are, according to this chef, generally delivered by the Japanese people. Through his long-term engagement in Japanese food circumstances, this chef was informed the template thinking amongst the Japanese that 'real' Japanese food can only be cooked by Japanese chefs. His legitimization that non-Japanese actors are equally able to produce 'authentic' food appears to carry a dilemmatic tone in his statement. The criticism casted by the Japanese is predominantly situated at the core of proprietors' concerns. Equally, an Indian owner expressed the similar view. He said:

I don't want anybody to get a chance to say 'oh, this guy is an Indian and not honest with food, not giving much of thoughts because it's not his food. (Indian owner)

Throughout the interview, he repetitively emphasized the phrase that "I don't want to be blamed." His claim that "the food should be Japanese-Japanese" is potentially an alternative act of risk avoidance. The seemingly de facto

idea that real Japanese food should be cooked by Japanese is, in turn, equally inscribed in their consciousness. In this sense, their food presentations must be equivalent to the Japanese version of authentic paradigm. Within this framework, their culinary practices are conducted based on the ideas that the engagement of Japanese actors is indispensable. That is, in order to schematize their version of authentic framework, the presence of Japanese in the establishments on any side—either the producing or the consuming side—validates to announce the justification of the cultural construction of authenticity.

That [finding non-Japanese diners only at his restaurant] is something I did not want to do! You understand?... Because if I don't get Japanese customers, I will be very worried, I will be very concerned about it.... If I don't get them, that means I'm doing something not 'right.' (Indian owner)

For them, an absence of Japanese diners in their restaurants proves a 'wrong' presentation. Their deliberate deployment of a Japanese body in the restaurants was evident. The Filipino chef told me that in order to provide more 'authentic' experiences for diners, "even if chefs are Filipino, the front people should be Japanese." This display of a Japanese body is tightly linked to the idea of 'staged authenticity' advanced by Dean MacCannell (1973) from Goffman's (1959) theatrical performance. MacCannell theorizes the degree of tourist experiences by categorizing it into six stages, corresponding to social space constructed within a front-back dichotomy.¹ Within his theoretical framework where a back region is interpreted as 'authentic' reality, crossing over between the front and back regions potentially leads a disorder of spatial distinction of its 'authentic/inauthentic' and 'Japanese/non-Japanese' social reality.

A few restaurateurs among the eleven I interviewed deliberately deploy substituting faces in front, that is, Chinese, Korean and other Asians nationals concealing their nationality and superficially disguising themselves as Japanese. This is commonly and instantly achieved by another object—clothing. It is in this context that the human body becomes objectified, and an externalized Asian body is daringly laid out in the ethno-cultural space. In the Filipino chef's case, despite his attempt to employ Japanese staff for his restaurant, he was introduced to two Korean students by his Japanese acquaintance. Yet, his bewilderment was soon banished in the midst of final preparations for its opening. Consequently he hired the two students. This example illuminates his viewpoint of the presentation of body in the public sphere where an objectified body embraces a connotative linkage with Japan and such body's visible performance staged for the outside/outsider. In this framework, body merely exists as an extension of décor as if it is a showcase material portrayed as part of authentic exhibition.

In his case, the decoration of a pseudo Japanese body under the elusive boundary of 'Otherness,' successfully

¹ Stage one refers to Goffman's front region that allows tourists to "attempt to overcome, or get behind"; stage two denotes the front region embellished some particular cultural elements from back region; stage three is a social space where it is designed to look like back region; stage four indicates a back region "open to public"; stage five enables tourists to enter a certain organized back region not to the extent that they violate stage six that is what Goffman defines as 'back region' where tourists are intrigued to enter to find 'real' experience (ibid.: 598). Elements constructing Japanese social space, such as food ingredients and décor, are found within these discursive layers of consciousness and reality, which are all fundamental to make their own authentic Japanese food.

attained the appropriate perceptions by outsiders, to such an extent that a magazine writer who visited his Japanese restaurant on Sunday Independent put it: "As I stepped through the door, I was greeted immediately by three very welcoming Japanese girls in kimono-style outfits," while the restaurant accommodated only a Korean/Macanese floor staff (On page 42 on the 16th of March in 2011).

Conclusion

As discussed, the form of their conviction of doing 'Japanese' is performed in a multi-layered defining process. Various reasons of loyalty to Japanese food 'origin' play out in the presentation practices. However, does their attitude preserving the prototype or 'original' mode of food suggest the simplistic reproduction of 'traditional' food in the same way as producing stereotypical take-away food? The images of 'real' Japanese food constructed through the process of redefining Japanese food are indeed the interconnectedness of locally contextualized interpretations and presentations. I believe that such 'local' reality does not limit its exercise to reproduce only the homogeneous authenticity but allows for the wider perceptions of Japanese, because such food/presentation itself is a composition of Japaneseness and foreignness. Their conceptualization of 'right' food and 'right' presentation centered around the ideas of 'origin' and 'tradition' also leads to the question of a bearer of knowledge and its responsibility to protect and transcend.

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