CHAPTER SIX

DIPLOMACY AND THE DESIRE TO IMPRESS

Fukuzawa Yukichi and other Meiji-era statesmen understood that for Japan to appear enlightened it had to adopt the diplomatic protocol and the visual splendor at which the West – particularly Victorian England, arguably the richest nation at the time – excelled.1 Fukuzawa captured the essence of why such pomp and ceremony were necessary: “If you stand at someone’s door in tattered rags and beg for a little money the world calls you a beggar, but if you wear silken cloth and enter a fancy room asking to borrow a little, people will call you a gentleman.” He noted: “A beggar and a gentleman are only a hair’s breadth apart.”2 To avoid being seen as a beggar at the international banquet table was of such importance to nineteenth-century Japanese rulers that the government that emerged after the Meiji Restoration published an extensive internal guidebook on how to host parties and observe proper imperial protocol. The instructions included directions for crafting menus and deciding where servants and guests should stand, as well as who should take coats and hats and the order of seating arrangements, covering the minutest details of hosting an international banquet. One initial problem was to find an appropriate venue. The preferred site was the Enryōkan, a former Tokugawa residence converted for use as a hotel-cum-early-modern-convention-center to house and entertain foreign dignitaries. Later, at great expense, the Meiji government built the larger and more palatial Rokumeikan, the Deer Park Pavilion, to serve as a Western-style diplomatic entertainment hall.

The various dishes and their accompaniments at these international gatherings were so confusing to most diners and guests that these sorts of menus had to include three sections of explanations. The top section listed each dish’s basic ingredients. Underneath, a guide in katakana, the phonetic Japanese syllabary for foreign words, explained pronunciation of the name of the dish. The bottom section gave a detailed description

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1 Takashi Fujitani details the gradual process to fit the Japanese emperor with such frills in Splendid monarchy: power and pageantry in modern Japan.
2 Watanabe Shōyō, Meiryū hyakuwa, p. 92.
Figures 30 and 31. The first image is of the cover of the instruction manual for evening events. The second image is of a partial menu, showing the foreign dishes spelled out in *katakana*, with a Japanese explanation below. The menu is read right to left and top to bottom. The word soup, written phonetically as the French term *potage*, is translated as “*geng,*” the Chinese word historically used for a thick soup. *Poisson*, the French term for fish, is explained as “fish meat,” and the delicacy *foie gras* simply as “chicken meat.”

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