

Sweet Memories: Confectionary and History in Japan

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Introduction

This project examined practices, attitudes and memories surrounding confectionary as a lens on historical consciousness in contemporary Japan. Building on a growing scholarly literature that shows food and eating practices to be a potent arena key developments in recent history through the lens of sweets, considering practices that have remained relatively stable and those which have seen considerable change as Japanese society has itself undergone radical transformations.



Orientations

In a wide range contexts, food has been found to be a powerful vehicle for spurring both conscious and unconscious memory, emblemized most famously in Proust where the taste of tea-soaked cookies are the catalyst for a seemingly endless waterfall of remembrance. Examples of food's power in memory processes abound in anthropology and other fields. Smells and tastes can ineffably transport one back decades to otherwise forgotten occasions. Childhood memories of family are often engraved through foods one ate, were forced to eat, or notable meals, good and bad; Time-honored dishes serve to define ethnic identities; National cuisines are developed to define the past through "invented traditions"; Food-centered memories can capture intimate experiences of controversial macro-level social processes, providing windows into perspectives that may be invisible in public debates. Sweets in Japan similarly play a potent role in memory making. For instance, the hand-made *wagashi* pictured above was made by an older woman who is an expert in the tea ceremony, and was designed to evoke the appearance of whale meat, in order to recall a time from her youth when she ate whale in Kyoto.

Varieties of Sweets in Japan



Sweets in Japan today take a wide variety of forms. The archetypal sweets are *wagashi*, typified by very elaborate and visually beautiful creations, that are supposed to evoke a feeling for the season, and thus designs mimic aspects of the natural world that are typical of a particular time of year. There are also a number a wide range of traditional Japanese sweets that are cheaper and therefore more widely eaten. Many of these use *mochi* (glutinous rice, which takes on mild sweetness in processing) as a main ingredient, and may be made into balls filled with *anko* (azuki bean paste) to make *manju*.

Alongside these traditional sweets, "European sweets" have also become extremely popular, and many have become so ubiquitous in Japan that they are to a great extent viewed by Japanese as their own and/or have been modified to a distinctly Japanese version. Among baked goods, one of the more popular is "Shu-cream" (Choux cream; or a cream puff), which was adopted at least by the early 20th century and is now a commonplace item. Euroamerican candy is also found in many varieties. While items such as chocolate are sometimes found in forms that differ little from those that are common elsewhere in the world, often they come in shapes and flavorings that would be odd or unfamiliar elsewhere. Sweets shops may offer chocolate in three or more flavors (e.g. green tea, strawberry and chocolate). Other unusual flavors include "purple potato," as seen in the seasonally offered "Purple Potato Crunky Bar," pictured above.



Methods

The project has emphasized a food-centered life history approach, in which informants are asked to discuss their memories of particular foods, and life experiences in relation to foods they have eaten. This approach can yield rich data both because food can be such a rich arena for memory, but also because descriptions of everyday events often prove to capture details and meanings that might be absent in macro-level descriptions of processes of change, or in more stylized accounts of typical behavior. Approximately 25 interviews have so far been carried out in Kyoto, Japan, which have also delved into other issues regarding food and eating, attitudes towards sweet foods, and issues such as changing gender relations, which are tied closely to sweets, because, for instance, sweets have traditionally been regarded as a feminine food, and one of the food the most visible uses of chocolate in contemporary Japanese society is in their adoption of Valentine's Day, in which women are required to give "obligation chocolate to male co-workers. Participant observation has also been conducted in venues where sweets are prominent.

Findings to Date

While data is still being analyzed, sweets-centered interviews have presented a rich arena to understand everyday life and social change in Japan. For instance, experiences of the post-war years were captured humorously and poignantly by one man in his 60s who characterized his generation as the one "running behind G.I.s shouting 'Give me chocolate!'" Many women discuss both changing gender relations and the malaise of the Japanese economy through their discussions of Valentine's Day over time. An older proprietor of a high end sweets shop inadvertently cast "tradition" in a different light, when—after emphasizing his shop's dedication to purely time-honored Japanese sweets—revealed that in the 1930s he had delighted in cream puffs left over daily when his father owned the shop. Analysis of the data is continuing, and data collection is planned to be expanded through extramural funding

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