Japan's Food Culture – From *Dango* (Dumplings) to *Tsukimi* (Moon-Viewing) Burgers

OANA-MARIA BÎRLEA

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to present how Japanese eating habits have changed in the context of globalization. We start from the premise that eating is not merely about meeting a basic need, but about creating a relationship with nature. It can be regarded as a ritual practice because it reveals a culture and its people's beliefs, values and mind-sets. As Geert Hofstede et al. note, life in Japan is highly ritualized and there are a lot of ceremonies (192). Starting from the idea that food consumption is based on rituals too, we intend to explain the relationship between eating habits and lifestyle change in contemporary Japan. Considering that the Japanese diet is based on whole or minimally processed foods, we ask ourselves how Western food habits ended up being adopted and adapted so quickly in the Japanese society. With this purpose in mind, we intend to describe some of the most important festivals and celebrations in Japan, focusing on the relationship between special occasions and food. In other words, we aim to explain the cultural significance of food and eating and to see if and how these habits have changed in time.

Keywords: Japan, Japanese culture, gastronomy, globalization, traditional eating, modern eating, food studies, eating habits, change, food-body-self relationship.

Introduction

The Japanese are known for their attention to detail, balance and desire to improve (Sarkar 134). These particularities are also reflected in Japan's food culture, based primarily on whole or minimally processed foods, carefully served according to seasons and special occasions. Typically, a Japanese dinner includes small individual servings, each having an important part in the sensory aesthetic journey proposed (Ashkenazi and Jacob, *Food x*). Served in different types and styles of bowls, the ingredients are carefully chosen and prepared according to the season. This brief description of the Japanese eating habits highlights an important characteristic of this culture: its being highly ritualized.

As Geert Hofstede et al. point out, life in Japan is extremely ritualized and prescriptive, and thus people dislike having to deal with unfamiliar situations or to be spontaneous (192). According to these researchers, cultures and societies can be characterized and compared based on their predominant values. Hofstede et al.'s model started off with 4 dimensions of cultural difference, and it is currently based on six: *power distance*, *individualism/collectivism*, *masculinity/femininity*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *long/short term orientation* and *indulgence/restraint*. The proposed scale runs from 0 to 100, with 50 as a mid-level. By correlating the estimated scores of each of the six dimensions, we can understand a society's "profile." This is a complex model, highly efficient especially for the study of advertising and cultural differences. For the purpose of this essay, we shall take into account the *uncertainty avoidance* dimension because it has to do mainly with a society's way of perceiving the "unknown" or the "unfamiliar." In this case, we believe that Japan's high *uncertainty avoidance* score (92) can explain Japan's strict etiquette and the strong bond between ceremonies and culinary traditions. Moreover, this dimension can also explain why and how Western trends have influenced Japan's food culture. We shall start with the relationship between food and culture, in general, and move on to the particularities of *washoku* (Japanese cuisine) and *Nihon bunka* (Japanese culture).

In the next section of the essay, we shall briefly discuss Japan's first encounter with Western ingredients and food in order to gain a broader perspective on the topic. From *saké* to French wine, green tea to coffee, *tsukimi dango* (round rice dumplings) to KFC or McDonald's *tsukimi* (moon-viewing) burger, KFC "party barrel" for Christmas or Godiva Belgian chocolate offered as a token of gratitude for one's superior, globalization has made a significant change in the way in which people eat and in terms of food symbolism. We are mainly interested in how foreign products and customs were perceived, and if and how they have influenced Japanese culinary choices.

Western Influence on Japan's Food Culture

Banana Yoshimoto's novel *Kitchen* (1988) reflects perfectly the impact of Western culture on the young Japanese, portrayed as products of Western consumer culture. Moreover, in her masterpiece, Yoshimoto uses the production, preparation and consumption of food as a pretext to suggest people's alienation and loneliness in modern society. As a literary motif, "food" was often used to suggest class, gender or cultural division (Aoyama 112), and it is not surprising that many authors have the tendency to include in their writings details about their character's eating habits and norms. These descriptions are much more than simple accounts of people's living conditions; they contain a subliminally embedded message. In other words, representations of food and food metaphors indicate how people from different cultures express joy or sorrow, celebrate or mourn, or, at a macro scale, help the reader understand traditions, religious perspectives and cultural backgrounds. For example, in Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, Mikage Sakurai, the narrator-protagonist of the novel, enjoys ordinary Japanese dishes like *sashimi* (fresh raw fish), *katsudon* (a bowl of rice topped with a deep-fried pork cutlet, egg, vegetables, and condiments), noodles or fried tofu, but also enjoys Western-style dishes like stew, salad, pudding, croquettes, Chicken Kiev and drinks like wine or coffee from the vending machine. She also finds

it convenient to use kitchen tools like vegetable peeler, porcelain bowls, gratin dishes, beer mugs or gigantic platters. Her enthusiasm for foreign products is reflected in her observations: “A Silverstone frying pan and a delightful German-made vegetable peeler” (9); “There were things with special uses, like ... porcelain bowls, *gratin* dishes, gigantic platters, two beer steins. Somehow it was all very satisfying” (10). Moreover, Yuichi’s (Mikage’s friend) poor “culinary choices” like “instant dinner” are a symbol of people’s loneliness and anxiety in the modern world: “[...] there were lots of “instant” dinners: a clear indication of his recent eating habits” (60). For Mikage, the kitchen becomes a place of refuge, and it is a reference to traditional Japan. In fact, the protagonist uses food to express her emotions and to bond with people.

As stated in the introductory part, the Japanese have a strict etiquette when it comes to eating, especially on special occasions. There are many festivals (*matsuri*) in Japan, and each is celebrated with eating and drinking. There is a saying in Japanese, *me de taberu*, meaning the Japanese “eat with their eyes.” This saying indicates the importance of food aesthetics and presentation. When eating *washoku* (traditional Japanese food), the Japanese find pleasure in small and simple things, like the colour and shape of the vessel, and are moved by natural elements, like a maple tree or any seasonal flower carefully placed on the plate, marking the transience of the seasons (Ashkenazi and Jacob, *Food* 20). Given these particularities, it seems that there is quite a difference between the Japanese and the Western perception of an “ideal meal.”

In the 16th century, the Portuguese brought to Japan the first foreign products (Ashkenazi and Jacob, *Food* xviii). Firearms, meat, sweets, new vegetables and other foreign products were received by the Japanese with great enthusiasm. This wind of change has also influenced the cooking style and people’s expectations, and, almost three centuries later, eating beef or meat became a symbol of modernization among the Japanese (Ashkenazi and Jacob, *Food* 10). More precisely, after commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy arrived in Japan in 1853, eating

meat became popular. His arrival brought significant change in the way the Japanese perceived the world and their role on the global stage. Moreover, in the 1870s, the first Western food restaurant opened in Yokohama, and the increasing interest in foreign cuisine led to the opening of another restaurant in Tokyo (Ashkenazi and Jacob, *Food* xviii). In the 1970s, cheesecake became a popular dessert, shadowing Japanese confectionary, *wagashi*. Cheese and milk prevailed over *adzuki* beans and *mocha* rice. These preferences not only indicate people's culinary taste, but also reveals the Japanese curiosity and interest in foreign cultures, which are believed to have "modelled" "Japan's national sense of Self" (Iwabuchi 59). By contrast, during World War II and afterwards, all things foreign (including words) were considered hostile, thus foreign goods were neither valued, nor admired, quite the opposite (Ashkenazi and Jacob, *Food* 11). This tension disappeared gradually, and, as a result, in the 1960s, fast food giants like McDonald's and KFC entered the Japanese market. In order to enhance their chances of success, the foreign restaurant chains adapted their signature meals and sandwiches, like Big Mac or Crispy Sandwich, or even the flavour of drinks and desserts, to the Japanese taste, and, more importantly, to Japanese traditions. It is said that the Japanese manager of the first KFC franchise, Takeshi Okawara, had a dream in which all the Japanese were sharing chicken strips and wings from the well-known "buckets" during Christmas time. Sometimes dreams come true, and in this case Okawara's concept was turned into a national marketing campaign: "*Kurisumasu ni wa Kentakki*" ("Kentucky for Christmas!"). We do not intend to analyze the success of the campaign, but rather to discuss what is more notable, that is, the symbolism of Kentucky Fried Chicken in Japanese culture. Via Okawara's concept, the Christmas-themed buckets made the Japanese feel more "Western" and thus, more modern (Chandler 130). It practically became an indispensable tool for celebrating a Christian holiday, which is not even a national holiday in Japan. This is an eloquent example which illustrates that a nation's culinary choices signal the people's beliefs, values and mind-sets.

Eating KFC party barrels, especially during Christmas, is basically a way of saying “I embrace Western-style customs.” We shall elaborate on the intrinsic relationship between culture and food in the following sections.

As Rodica Frențiu convincingly points out, in Japan, like in many other countries for that matter, “cultural borrowings” in the global world have led to the rapid spread of American products, but it seems that it is more appropriate to speak about “glocalization” since iconic products and recipes are adjusted to local tastes (79). Thus, at the beginning of spring, the Japanese can enjoy a limited-edition of Coca-Cola *Sakura* (cherry blossom) bottle or have a delicious KitKat *Sakura* chocolate bar or even a *Tsukimi* (moon-viewing) burger while admiring the autumn moon, and still preserve centuries-old traditions.

The Influence of *Kawaii* Culture on Japan’s Food Culture

Besides the influence exerted by foreign cultures, there is another phenomenon worth discussing for understanding Japanese food culture: *kawaii* culture (“the culture of cuteness”).

Kawaii (“lovely, cute, adorable”) is a popular adjective used to describe small, innocent, vulnerable entities, objects or moods. Due to its versatile nature, a unanimously accepted definition of the concept of *kawaii* is difficult to formulate; nonetheless, there are a few common elements found in all these attempts to define it: the power to arouse emotions in people and to create a sense of belonging. Its versatility transcends the limits of linguistics and implicitly permits multiple interpretations, depending on the context of use. In most studies, the term is not translated, and this fact indicates its complexity and the impossibility to convey its essence in another language.

The idea of making anything and everything “cute, loveable” started to gain popularity in the second half of the 20th century, more precisely after the Japanese company Sanrio produced a series of “fancy goods” for teenagers (Kinsella 225).

The company drew inspiration from the peaceful student riots at that time, through which teenagers expressed their discontent regarding Japanese conservative moral demands, such as responsibility (*sekinin*), self-discipline (*enryō*) and endurance under severe conditions (*kurō*, *kudō*) (Kinsella 251). The standard of *kawaii* “*purrfection*” is considered to be Hello Kitty, a sweet cat living in London, which turned out to be in fact a third-grade girl, according to her creators.¹ Owning and displaying a *kawaii* item made people feel more relaxed and closer to the lifestyle in the West. Besides the craze for “fancy goods” like stationary, fluffy toys, toiletries or bags, there was also a high demand for *kawaii* lunchboxes (*bentō*) or sweets. Thus, this “cute mania” not only influenced the lifestyle of the Japanese, but also their culinary preferences. As Sharon Kinsella states, “the crucial ingredient of a fancy good is that it is small, pastel, round, soft, loveable, *not* traditional Japanese style, but a foreign [...] style, dreamy, frilly and fluffy” (226).

In Japan, there is a long history of appreciation of small, miniature, minimalistic things, and this fact can be easily observed in the design of Zen gardens, the interior design of Japanese homes, trees (bonsai), art or writings (*haiku* poems). Moreover, this tendency to reduce the size of objects (reductionism) can be seen in Japanese cuisine too. A platter of sushi consisting of small bite-size pieces, arranged in a harmonious manner is a perfect example of this vision, clearly suggesting that “less is more.” *Kawaii* culture is based precisely on this fondness for anything small, thus it has significantly influenced the Japanese culinary experience, especially after Sanrio’s success.

Traditional Japanese food (*washoku*) has been recognized by UNESCO in 2013 as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and, with *kawaii* aesthetics as a standard, dishes have become more and more *kawaii*, even the traditional ones. In this regard, we mention *kyaraben* or *charaben*, an abbreviation of the word “character *bentō*,” a type of Japanese lunch boxes in which food is decorated to resemble all sorts of cute animals, beloved characters like Hello Kitty or Naruto, or lovely symbols like hearts and stars.

The origin of the *bentō* box can be traced back to the 5th century (Yuko and Noriko 5), and its practicality makes it highly valued even today. Used strictly for its utility (preserving worker's food) at the beginning, it has now become an art, a vivid expression of *kawaii* culture. If in the 17th century only the Japanese upper class kept food in lacquer ware as a sign of aristocracy and wealth (Yuko and Noriko 5), nowadays it is not so much about the container *per se*, as it is about the “cuteness” of the food it contains. Alongside sushi, *bentō*, and especially *kyaraben*, has become a worldwide known symbol of Japanese food. The elaborated *kyaraben* has gained popularity especially among Japanese mothers, because made vegetables seem less tedious, and thus, it has offered them the possibility to make children eat healthy. Moreover, this type of *bentō* is considered a means of conveying love and affection, adding joy to everyday life. We can state that this “branch” of *washoku* is a means of communication between people.

Bentō is highly tied to celebrations in Japan. For example, the cherry-blossom (*sakura*) viewing (*ohanami*) or the New Year, two major festivities in Japan, are celebrated with box lunches. For the New Year, there is a special, elaborated, multi-tiered box called *jūbako*, containing special food, *osechi*. The small compartments of the box and the food arrangement reveal the Japanese definition of beauty and elegance: small, petite, equilibrated. Nevertheless, there is a *kawaii* alternative to this special *bentō*, and it involves Hello Kitty's face and pastel colours (Fig. 1). The text from the promotional advert in Figure 1 highlights the intrinsic relationship between *kawaii* and tradition: “*Poppuna kawaisa no naka ni, honkaku menyū ga irodori yutaka ni gyū. [...] Harō Kiti no tōki no utsuwa ya suitsu nado kazoku minna de tanoshimeru osechi desu*” (“Authentic menu full of colours in pop cuteness. [...] Hello Kitty porcelain vessels, sweets and so forth are *osechi* dishes that the whole family can enjoy” [our translation]). An entire industry has developed around these boxes, and *kawaii* culture has contributed significantly to the popularity of these products. The “*kawaii*-fication” of *osechi ryōri* is a good example, illustrating how the Japanese “polish” and make traditional Japanese cuisine “cool”

again or more appealing especially to youngsters through “cute” elements and symbols. This is even more important because *osechi ryōri* had a central role in the decision of including *washoku* in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage, and, as we can see from the example above, the Japanese way of eating and enjoying food was considerably influenced by the “culture of cute.” *Kyaraben* is also a great example for illustrating the power of *kawaii* in uniting people worldwide, since the Japanese craze for small, heart-shaped food and meals with popular cartoon characters has spread around the globe through hashtags (#) on social media.

Fig. 1: Hello Kitty *osechi* set, 2015.

Source:

https://monthly.bellemaison.jp/reg/kitty/kitty_osechi_index.html?DM2_KBN=sht_kitty2#bellne

As stated in the previous section, for the Japanese, to eat with the mouth is as important as to “eat with the eyes,” which explains the popularity of *kawaii* food. We have discussed here only the “*kawaii*-fication” of *osechi ryōri*, but there are many other traditional dishes and desserts such as *wagashi* (Japanese sweets) or even sushi, that have gained the public’s heart. This technique helps to preserve tradition, while keeping up with the times and meeting people’s needs and expectations. In fact, one of the characteristics mentioned by the government with respect to the uniqueness of the Japanese cuisine was the close evolution of food with traditions and

annual festivities.² We shall develop this idea in the following section.

Case Study

1. *Ohanami* – Flower-Viewing

Ohanami or *hanami* is a centuries-old practice of admiring the beauty of cherry blossoms (*sakura*), and perhaps one of the most cherished celebrations in Japan. According to the Japanese worldview, the value of *sakura* comes from the fragile nature of the flower and its ephemerality (Chwalkowski 161). It is a symbol of the transient nature of life, a reminder that the physical life is just a phase in our journey. The bloom of *sakura* is celebrated in a variety of ways, from picnics with friends and family under the pink trees, to thoroughly tested recipes or junk food with a twist of *sakura*. Nevertheless, as we can see, food is highly tied to celebrations, superstitions and cultural practices. For example, for Christians, wine represents the blood of Christ and Easter eggs Jesus' resurrection, and thus sacrifice; for the Jews, *maror*, a bitter herb, is a reminder of the bitterness of slavery, while for most Asian people, rice is a symbol of wealth and a means of expressing gratitude to the gods. This means that, from the beginning of times, people chose what and when to eat certain foods, or even to follow a strict dietary on specific occasions, in order to express and perpetuate their culture and traditions; more importantly, through culinary choices, people have the impression that in this manner they can "interiorize" the symbolism of the rituals and practices. As Anna Meigs states, "Food and eating [...] are understood as means that unite apparently separate and diverse objects and organisms, both psychologically and mystically, in a single life" (95).

In Japan, one of the most common "food treats" during *sakura*-viewing season is *bentō*, the traditional lunch box which we discussed in the previous section. Besides traditional food, like *makizushi* (sushi rolls), *inarizushi* (sushi rice stuffed in fried tofu pouches), *tamagoyaki* (Japanese-style omelette) or *kamaboko* (pink and white fish cakes) and meat dishes accompanied by a variety of

salads with vegetables cut into *sakura* shapes, and traditional *sakura mochi* (cake filled with red bean paste), it has become common for people to enjoy limited-edition KitKat *sakura* or even *sakura* Coca-Cola with actual *sakura* flavour, instead of an ordinary soft drink or tea. People's food choices for celebrating a centuries-old tradition like *ohanami* are a form of expression of their beliefs and worldviews. From the examples above, we can see that tradition blends perfectly with modernity and Western trends. We argue that the insatiable curiosity and interest of the Japanese in foreign cultures has contributed significantly to this outcome, but the important thing here is to notice that foreign customs and traditions have not replaced traditional ones, they only made them more "up-to-date," thus more appealing, especially to younger generations. Japan is considered "highly ritualized," according to Hofstede's theory, and this particularity can be identified also by analysing their culinary choices. In this case, the fact that the traditional *bentō* includes special *sakura*-themed dishes and drinks, being enjoyed only in certain parks and conforming to very specific rules, is a clear sign of conformity. For example, women and family members usually enjoy *ohanami* with *bentō* during daytime in the proximity of their houses, while on the weekends it is common to spend the day with the head of the family (Ohnuki-Tierney 224), perhaps in an even more organized and ceremonial manner.

As we have seen in the examples above, in Japan, seasons are communicated visually through dishes even today. What has changed is perhaps the presence and high demand of foreign (Western) and pop culture elements, which accompany or influence the traditional meals and celebration rituals. This explains the popularity of *kawaii* dishes, specially made for festivals like *ohanami* or *tsukimi* (moon-viewing).

Another example of "glocalisation," using Roland Robertson's term, is KitKat's entrance on the Japanese market. The British chocolate bar owned by Nestlé became a huge success with the Japanese mainly because of the advertising strategies and campaigns constructed around local customs and traditions. The word "*katsu*" means "to win" in Japanese, and before sports

competitions or exams, the Japanese usually eat a variety of foods which include this word because it is believed to bring good luck: *katsudon* (pork cutlet rice bowl), *tonkatsu* (pork chop), *katsusando* (pork chop sandwich). This superstition was adapted and used in KitKat's promotional ads in order to integrate the Western chocolate bar into this Japanese tradition. In an advert from 2009, on a background full of *sakura* flowers, a Japanese teenage girl leans against what appears to be a mailbox. On the right side of the ad, the following text is written in bold red: "*Kitto, sakura saku yo,*" literally meaning "Cherry blossoms (*sakura*) will surely (*kitto*) bloom (*saku*)!" The similarity between the Japanese adverb *kitto* ("certainly, surely") and the name of the chocolate bar rendered into the phonetic *katakana* syllabary constructs the pun. In Japanese, the word "KitKat" becomes "*KittoKatto,*" and although it does not exactly contain the construction "*katsu,*" through excellent advertising, *KittoKatto* managed to become a "lucky amulet" among traditional foods and desserts. The pun further used is constructed with the help of the phonetic similarities previously mentioned: "*Kitto katsu, KittoKatto,*" which translate as "You will definitely win, KitKat." Through this advertising series, in which two key elements of Japanese culture and sensibility (*sakura* and superstitions) are recurrently used, the foreign chocolate ends up in the category of lucky Japanese food. The advert is addressed mainly to teenagers, to encourage them to pass their final exams: "*Saigo made akiramenaide. Ganbare!*" ("Don't give up until the end! You're your best!") The *kawaii* ("cute") KitKat mailbox also has its specific purpose: to create a joint experience for all the members of the family, close friends and even acquaintances: "*Kitto mēru de jukensei o ōenshiyō*" ("Let's encourage students who are taking their entrance exam via KitKat mail!").

2. *Tsukimi* – Japan's Harvest Moon Festival

Another important festival in Japan is *tsukimi*, or the Harvest Moon festival. It is usually celebrated in September and October with family and friends. Like *ohanami*, it is a centuries-old tradition, celebrated all over Japan with special food and drinks. *Tsukimi* or

otsukimi is a rather solemn celebration. It involves traditional foods, decorations (pampas grass), and the beauty of nature. Some people visit shrines, burn incense, or make food offerings to Shintō gods. The Japanese usually eat *tsukimi dango* (dumplings) because of their round shape, a symbol of the full moon, chestnuts, Japanese pumpkin, taro (a root vegetable) and other foods associated with autumn and some of the first goods of the harvest (Rath 17). On the evening of the full moon, the Japanese gather to admire the splendour of the celestial star, while enjoying traditional food and drinks, collectively called “*tsukimi* dishes/drinks.” *Tsukimi dango*, like *ohanami dango*, are traditional rice cakes filled with sweet red bean paste, usually having a spherical shape in order to resemble the full moon. These may be stacked in displays of 15 to represent the fifteenth day of the month, or 12 to represent the months of the year. Eating *tsukimi dango* is said to bring health and happiness. Unlike typical *dango*, *tsukimi dango* are not served in a bamboo skewer. Another typical dish is *tsukimi udon* or *soba*, “a bowl in which a raw egg and sheets of *nori* (seaweed sheets) evoke a moon hidden by clouds” (Ashkenazi and Jacob, *The Essence* 140). Because of the association between the shape of the full moon and the roundness of the egg yolk, the word *tsukimi* has taken on other meanings; thus, it is used to describe dishes topped with egg, raw or fried. The Japanese company Sanrio, “the father” of *kawaii* commercial products, has also embraced this idea and created in 2013 a character resembling an egg yolk. *Gudetama* is known and loved for its laziness and lack of motivation simply because the character represents genuine human dispositions and shows its true self without thinking about repercussions. There is a variety of *Gudetama* goods and products, and its appearance changes according to celebrations and festivities in Japan. For example, for the occasion of *tsukimi*, *Gudetama* is presented on top of a *tsukimi dango* stack in a funny manner, as usual: “*Gudetama ga otsuki san da wa e? Marukunai?*” (“*Gudetama* is the man in the moon, huh? I’m not round enough?”).³ Many other traditional *tsukimi* dishes are reinterpreted in a *kawaii* manner in order to be more appealing. One can buy *tsukimi dango* with Hello Kitty’s face or even a burger.

Bentō boxes, too, evoke the holiday spirit through rabbit-shaped boiled eggs, moon-shaped vegetables and *tsukimi dango*-like balls, made from rice.

Besides the traditional dishes mentioned above, the Japanese can enjoy McDonald's or KFC's limited-edition specialties, like *Tsukimi bāgā* ("moon-viewing burger") or *teriyaki*, an American-style burger topped with a fried egg to represent the full moon. Even desserts from the two American giants come with a twist during the festival: people can buy *Tsukimi* McFlurry with *warabimochi* (bracken starch dumplings), *kuromitsu* (brown sugar syrup) sauce, and crushed cone bits flavoured with *kinako* (roasted soybean flour), or even *Tsukimi* pie. Eating these specialties during the moon-viewing festival has become so normal in Japan, that most children do not even consider them "foreign" (Stalker 348). The very first *tsukimi* burger was released by McDonald's in the 90s,⁴ and, since then, it has been considered a part of the "food rituals" during the moon-viewing festivities.

It is noteworthy that even though Japanese culinary choices were and still are influenced by Western trends and *kawaii* culture, the main ingredients and their symbolism have neither been forgotten, neither replaced. Due to globalization and the rapid pace of intercultural exchanges, the nation's culinary horizons have expanded, but traditions and rituals are still well preserved in Japan.

3. Valentine's Day

In the first sections of the essay, we have discussed two important national celebrations in Japan, focusing on the way culinary choices reflect people's beliefs, values and mind-sets. In our last case study, we intend to expand the scope and describe how an American holiday, Valentine's Day, is celebrated in Japan and how it has been "adapted" to fit Japanese cultural expectations and sensibility.

Traditions and rituals are highly valued in Japan; thus, they are often evoked in adverts in order to persuade the audience. As many other foreign celebrations, Valentine's Day came to Japan via marketing initiatives in the '60s (Buckley 549). As opposed to the

USA or other countries in Europe which have adopted this holiday, in Japan, Valentine's Day is basically a "chocolate gift day," in which only women express gratitude to their superiors, male colleagues and friends. In order to avoid being accused of favouritism, it is common for women to give small chocolates to all work colleagues. There is also a domestic holiday established on the 14th of March, called "White Day," in which men can return the "favour." On this day, it is common for men to offer white chocolate to women friends and colleagues. As we can see, neither of these holidays is perceived as the "day of love," or an occasion to express affection to one's love-relationship partner. On the contrary, the "romantic side" of the American Valentine's Day was quickly replaced by the sense of gift-giving obligation, or "courtesy gifts," a centuries-old practice in Japan. This custom was and still is frequently evoked in adverts, especially in campaigns for confectionery products like chocolate, candies, lollipops and other sweets. In Japan, chocolate given out of obligation is called "*giri choco*," as opposed to "*honmei choco*," which is an expression of one's genuine feelings, usually towards a romantic partner.

In a 2018 issue of *Nikkei*,⁵ published shortly before Valentine's Day, a one-page advertisement for the Belgian chocolate maker Godiva Chocolatier caught the viewer's attention with the following slogan: "*Nihon wa giri choco o yameyō*" ("People of Japan/Japan, stop giving chocolate out of obligation!"). As stated above, gift-giving is a deeply ingrained custom in the Japanese culture; it is not limited to social practices, but extends to "social obligations" (*giri*) and refers to the "payment of debt" to a business partner, a superior, colleagues, etc. The gift itself is less important, the "ritual" is what makes the difference. In many Asian cultures, the act of giving is considered essential in maintaining healthy relationships (Frith 23). In light of this aspect, the Godiva Chocolatier advertisement aims to make the Japanese audience get emotional and intends to put an end to predetermined social behaviours based on gender (stereotypes), considered groundless. The conflict between *giri* ("duty") and *ninjō* ("feelings") was one of the main themes in classical Japanese *nō* and puppet theatre

(*ningyō jōruri*, *bunraku*), and it is considered a key concept for understanding human nature. This dichotomous relationship reflects the universal dilemma, the conflict between the “mind” and the “heart.” If *giri* is “moral obligation,” *ninjō* represents detachment from responsibilities and self-indulgence (Doi 49). This idea was developed and majestically integrated in the Belgian chocolate producer’s marketing campaign.

Special attention was given to even the smallest details: pale colours used for the background, text written in brown, with small *kanji* (Chinese logograms), in contrast to the slogan, evoking something similar to a “modern” conflict between *giri* and *ninjō*, as in Chikamatsu’s traditional *nō* plays from the Edo period (1603-1868). The chocolate brown heart in the upper right corner of the advertisement and the *kawaii* colours (different shades of pink and yellow) used, are meant to make the viewer realize that it is time to leave behind centuries-old customs that no longer reflect reality, according to the chocolate manufacturer. Conventionally, chocolate is a symbol of love and affection (Danesi 134), but, in the Japanese culture, it seems to be more related to *giri*, than to *ninjō*. Through this advertisement, the Belgian chocolate maker tried to dismantle, to destabilize the habit of giving men “chocolate out of obligation” on Valentine’s Day, because it seems an unnecessary burden carried by Japanese women, although it is not explicitly expressed. The main purpose of this campaign was to change people’s perceptions about the act of gift-giving, to make it a way of expressing real feelings towards the loved ones and to separate this ritual from relationships based solely on *giri* (“obligation”).

The advertisement offers a clear and real explanation of the implications of offering chocolate in Japan on Valentine’s Day: “*Barentain dē wa kirai da, to iu jyosei ga imasu. Naze nara, giri choko wo dare ni ageru ka kangaetari, jyunbi o shitari suru no ga Amari ni mo taihen dakara, to iu no desu.*” (“There are women who don’t like Valentine’s Day. [...] Because they have to think to whom they are supposed to offer ‘chocolate out of obligation,’ and this is tiresome”) and continues by arguing the need for change: “*Somosomo Barentain wa, junsui ni kimochi o tsutaeru hi. Shanai*

no ningen kankei o chōsei suru hi de wa nai” (“Valentine’s Day should be a day when we convey our most sincere feelings to our loved ones”). The advertising message makes the viewer reflect on the true meaning of Valentine’s Day, February 14th, and White Day, celebrated on the 14th of March, therefore it is not a simple advertising propaganda. The mix of *kawaii* signs (colours, symbols) with words like “*ima made*” (“so far”), “*kono jidai nai hō ga ii*” (“it would be better without this custom in these times”), “*happyī*” (“happy”) or “*tanoshinde hoshī*” (“I would like you to enjoy it”), sends a message of encouragement to Japanese women to live “*jiyū*” (“free”) in a new, emancipated world.

Based on the above example, we argue that the influence of foreign companies and their vision can add positive value to the Japanese society. Food, or in this case sweets, is a means of removing stereotypes and of making people feel more easily understood and united. The Belgian chocolate maker has entered the Japanese market by using Japan’s respect and appreciation towards traditions and managed to stir deeply rooted emotions and change perceptions. It somehow confirms the saying that “chocolate makes everything better.”

Conclusions

As we have seen in the examples discussed in this essay, foreign food companies have acknowledged the importance of seasonal food and traditions in Japan and used it in their advertising campaigns. Even though the influence of Western culture (especially American) is significant, tradition and traditional practices are still quite well preserved and valued, and we argue that this is due to the strong sense of balance, specific to the Japanese culture. Balance and harmony create the appropriate environment for foreign and aboriginal elements to coexist. Balance can explain the acceptance and the increasing popularity of burgers and other foreign dishes and drinks along the traditional cuisine enjoyed during national festivities such as *ohanami* (“flower viewing”) or *tsukimi* (“moon-viewing”).

On the other hand, there are cases in which through advertisements, foreign companies have quite an impact on people's perception. Godiva's campaign is a good example which shows that stereotypes and clichés can be approached in an indirect, friendlier manner *via* food (in this particular case, chocolate). The Belgian chocolate maker strategically uses in his advertisements a centuries-old Japanese custom of gift-giving and attempts to remodel this practice considered "outdated."

Besides Western culture, Japanese pop culture, especially *kawaii*, has also influenced and shaped the visual presentation of food (plating) in Japan and has become a major instrument in promoting Japanese traditional food, both locally and overseas. As we have seen throughout the essay, traditional dishes and culinary practices like *bentō* ("lunch box"), *dango* ("dumplings") and even sushi, are now presented in a *kawaii* ("cute," "adorable") manner, in order to make them more appealing.

It is worth mentioning that, despite Japan's drive towards a high-level of modernization and digitalization, tradition continues to play a major role in the life of the Japanese and their culinary choices. When discussing the influence of foreign cultures in Japan, perhaps it is more appropriate to use the term "glocalization," because, as we have seen, "nothing, food included, gets into the Japanese world without becoming Japanified" (Richie 11). Thus, in order to become a part of the "festive foods," American-style burgers or other foreign specialties have to evoke and to reflect the Japanese sensibility and cultural symbolism. To conclude, food is not a mere indicator, showing a community's culinary preferences over a period of time, but also a symbol of pride, reflecting their identity, values and worldview.

Notes:

¹ *Los Angeles Times*, "Hello Kitty is not a cat, plus more reveals before her L.A. tour." (<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-hello-kitty-in-los-angeles-not-a-cat-20140826-column.html> - accessed April 6, 2020).

² Nippon, "Washoku Designated UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage," (<https://www.nippon.com/en/behind/100052/> - accessed April 6, 2020).

³ https://gudetama-tap.fandom.com/wiki/Moon_Viewing_Gudetama

⁴ See <https://www.mcd-holdings.co.jp/en/history/>

⁵ *Nikkei*, formally *The Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, is the world's largest financial newspaper.

Works Cited

- Aoyama, Tomoko. "Food and Gender in Contemporary Japanese Women's Literature." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 17 (1999): 111-136. Web. 2 Sept. 2020.
- Ashkenazi, Michael, and Jeanne Jacob. *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine: An Essay on Food and Culture*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon P, 2000. Web. 6 Sept. 2020.
- . *Food Culture in Japan*. London: Greenwood P, 2003. Web. 5 Sept. 2020.
- Buckley, Sandra. *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*. London: Routledge, 2002. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.
- Chwalkowski, Farrin. *Symbols in Arts, Religion and Culture: The Soul of Nature*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.
- Chandler, Adam. *Drive-Thru Dreams: A Journey Through the Heart of America's Fast-Food Kingdom*. New York: Flatiron, 2019. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.
- Danesi, Marcel. *The Semiotics of Love*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019. Print.
- Doi, Takeo. *The Anatomy of Dependence*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1981. Print.
- Frențiu, Rodica. "Argument for 'Glocalization': Japan for the World in the Japanese Gastronomical Advertisement." *Lingua (Language & Culture)* 14.1 (2015): 79-91. *CEEOL*. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.
- Frith, Katherine Toland. *Advertising in Asia: Communication, Culture, and Consumption*. Ames, IA: Iowa State UP, 1996. Print.

- Hofstede, Geert, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. *Cultures and Organizations: Software for the Mind*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010. Web. 5 Sept. 2020.
- Iwabuchi, Koichi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. London: Duke UP, 2002. Print.
- Kinsella, Sharon. "Cuties in Japan." *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*. Ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran. London: Curzon P, 1995. 220-254. Web. 1 Sept. 2020.
- Meigs, Anna. "Food as a Cultural Construction." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan, Penny Van Esterik and Alice Julier. New York: Routledge, 1997. 95-107. Web. 1 Sept. 2020.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. "Cherry Blossoms and Their Viewing: A Window onto Japanese Culture." *The Culture of Japan as Seen Through Its Leisure*. Ed. Sepp Linhart and Sabine Frühstück. New York: State U of New York P, 1998. 213-237. *eBook Collection*. Web. 1 Sept. 2020.
- Rath, Eric C. "The Magic of Japanese Rice Cakes." *The Routledge History of Food*. Ed. Carol Helstosky. New York: Routledge, 2015. 3-18. Web. 7 Sept. 2020.
- Richie, Donald. *A Taste of Japan: Food Fact and Fable: What the People Eat: Customs and Etiquette*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1992. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.
- Robertson, Roland. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." *Global Modernities*. Ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson. London: Sage, 1995. 25-44. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.
- Sarkar, Suman. *Customer-Driven Disruption: Five Strategies to Stay Ahead of the Curve*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2019. Web. 5 Sept. 2020.
- Stalker, Nancy K. *Japan: History and Culture from Classical to Cool*. Oakland, CA: U of California P, 2018. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.
- Yoshimoto, Banana. *Kitchen*. 1988. New York: Grove P, 1993. Web. 1 Sept. 2020.
- Yuko, and Noriko. *Bento: Over 70 Make-Ahead, Delicious Box Lunches*. New York: Race Pointing, 2018. Web. 10 Sept. 2020.